**[How to infect all with hope](https://www.dawn.com/news/1427747/how-to-infect-all-with-hope)**

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PAKISTAN’S new prime minister Imran Khan takes oath of office today and will enjoy the briefest of honeymoon periods as a raft of issues is screaming out for his immediate and urgent attention.

There have been countless discussions in print and electronic media on what ails the country’s economy and how the new government will have to hit the ground running to address a multitude of concerns in this area.

Other important issues have received scant attention. Among them the state of democracy in the Islamic Republic, particularly after allegations of pre-election engineering and then of manipulation on polling day itself to deny some their win and to boost the success of others.

Expectations from elected governments are high and the opposition lets no opportunity pass to demand that the conduct of such an administration should conform to the highest global standard possible.

But come the day these very opposition figures find themselves in power and they start to shed their avowed stances on one aspect of the democratic order and conduct or the other, with such chameleon-like alacrity that it is often difficult to recognise them.

Imran Khan says he is different — incorruptible and committed to reforming the system so that each arm of government works to serve the people rather than to please its political masters.

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In his post-election address, many agreed he sounded statesman-like in offering an olive branch to the opposition when he said he would happily facilitate a forensic examination of the election results and ballots in any constituency that the opposition disputed.

The words were barely out of his mouth to the accolades of his admirers and critics alike when Imran Khan’s lawyer stood up in court to vehemently oppose PML-N leader Saad Rafique’s plea for a recount in a Lahore constituency where the PTI chief had edged out the latter with a three-digit lead in the nearly 170,000 votes polled.

One hopes that this decision did not indicate the shape of things to come and that the new prime minister will live up to his word. That would be the only way to move away from the bitter aftermath of elections when the seeds of political instability are sown and allowed to cast a shadow over the entire five-year term of parliament and a government’s tenure.

That a sizable percentage of the country supports Khan and is devoted to him is not in doubt. The challenge for him is to carve out a space for himself among his detractors, particularly in the media, and to convince them through deeds that he is committed to free speech.

A free media is perhaps the only guarantee that the first-time prime minister keeps in touch with the sentiment on the street. This is crucial as the country continues to battle terrorism.

As he steps into office he’ll be made to realise the importance of his own security. That, in turn, would inevitably lead to measures that could see the country’s chief executive lose the sort of access he has enjoyed to the common man as an opposition leader. A free media will serve to keep him fully briefed about the public’s chief concerns at any point in time.

The PTI was the first political party in Pakistan to effectively use social media to tantalise the younger generation, the new voter. But in doing so, it also unwittingly or by design allowed the frustrations and bitterness among its middle-class, young supporters to bleed out, for example, on Twitter.

Where Khan targeted his political opponents with his ‘chor, daku’ (thieves and bandits) campaign, and his slogan not only started to gain traction among his support base but also helped widen it, many of his supporters were seen to take this as a cue to attack in a no-holds barred manner anyone who dared express a contrarian view to the PTI’s perceived truth.

Thus, many journalists and analysts with a disdain for corruption and mismanagement, with whom Khan’s slogan would normally have resonated, were alienated as some PTI supporters hounded them for, say, raising the issue of civilian supremacy as a matter of principle second to none. The party will have to rethink its social media strategy now that it is in power.

Whether Khan came riding a wave of popular support alone or was propelled to office by a mix of electoral support and ‘engineering’, he is now the prime minister of Pakistan. The demands of his office will mean at some point he will end up stepping on the toes of those uber-powerful forces that have backed him till now.

In such a situation, he will realise that the rhetoric that brought him to office may not be enough to sustain him in power. Without doubt, he is committed to clean, effective governance. If he can deliver on that promise, his stock will soar.

At the same time, he will need to build a democratic consensus behind his project that will necessitate the inclusion of the opposition and a vibrant media. Such a consensus need only be on the fundamentals of a democratic order that will leave each political party free to implement its own manifesto.

Imran Khan may be well-meaning and may have good intentions. I need not remind anyone about the path that is paved with good intentions. He will need to demonstrate he is his own man.

One way would be to order an end to all attempts to browbeat and oppress the media as such tactics have raised serious doubts about the well-being of the democratic order in Pakistan at home and abroad.

This would be a brilliant way to start his term in office and such a step would also mean that the optimism and hope that is so far restricted to his supporters will expand and energise the wider populace.

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