**A Charismatic Narcissist Leader?**

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When you thought everything good, bad, and ugly had been said about and by Pakistan’s Imran Khan, he is referred to as “a charismatic narcissist” in The Economist in an article ‘Pakistan is at risk of default’ (February 11, 2023). The same first appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline “Broken and broke” on February 7, 2023.

In the middle of the article, a paragraph begins: “Imran Khan, a charismatic narcissist who was ousted as prime minister last April, has spent the past year agitating to bring down the government of Shehbaz Sharif, who replaced him. Even if he fails (and the army, which often stage-manages Pakistan’s political dramas, is not with him) Mr Khan remains popular and well-placed for an election due by October.”

Calling a public figure who was a former prime minister of a country and is a very popular leader who can draw large crowds to his events “a charismatic narcissist” should be very alarming for the voters who could be going to the polls in October. Pulling thousands out despite the situation in the country that is inching closer and closer to several dangerous precipices on the political and financial cliffs.

Surely his large number of followers will not agree that their leader is a charismatic narcissist. At a time when the country that has only $3.5 billion in reserves, owes more than $9 billion in principal, and has to pay interest payments soon; has high inflation that recently exceeded 25% and a currency that plummeted to a historic low in value, Imran Khan has great power over his followers, who loyally agree with him and go to extremes to justify his words and actions. So why would The Economist call him a charismatic narcissist? And more importantly what is a charismatic narcissist?

To understand what the term charismatic narcissist means, we need to turn to experts to help explain what the terms narcissism and charisma mean and what is a charismatic narcissist.

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Suzanne Degges-White – PhD, LCPC, LPC, LMHC, NCC, professor and chair of the Counseling and Higher Education department at Northern Illinois University – explains the terms charisma and narcissism in her blog for Psychology Today.

“Narcissism is an interesting construct as it is built around an individual’s self-held belief in his or her own elite status. Narcissists do not consciously doubt their superiority to other people, and they have no trouble acknowledging what they believe are their superlative qualities to others.” Suzanne writes in her ‘Narcissist or Charismatic Leader: How to Spot the Difference’.

She writes, ‘Narcissists are preternaturally obsessed with themselves’ and that “narcissism includes having an inflated sense of importance to others as well as experiencing a sense of entitlement.”

Suzanne further writes that “If there is a front of the line, narcissists have no doubt that this is where they belong. If there’s a better table, narcissists will scheme to be seated at the place they feel is their due. They don’t feel the need to “prove” their worth as they have no awareness that others might doubt their worth.”

She elaborates that narcissists are ‘unable to withstand failure and refuse to take personal responsibility when projects fall apart.”

On the hand, writing on charismatic individuals Suzanne writes, “Some charismatic individuals radiate a highly charged, but unforced, sex appeal…. Charismatic individuals draw your attention without even necessarily trying to do so. Charisma also involves a strong level of self-regard and pride in oneself and one’s ideas.”

Unlike narcissists, ‘charismatic leaders don’t like failure any more than the rest of us, but they can respond constructively while building up the team’s new focus.” Suzanne adds.

So how do narcissists succeed at work?

Amy Morin’s article ‘5 reasons narcissists are successful at work – and what you can learn from them’ published in Business Insider (April 2022) could help us understand this.

Amy Morin is a psychotherapist, host of the Mentally Strong People podcast, an internationally bestselling author whose books have been translated into more than 40 languages and a lecturer at Northeastern University.

Writing about how narcissists manage to succeed Amy writes that ‘they embellish their accomplishments’. She writes that a narcissist will never downplay their success. “Instead, they’ll typically overstate their achievements and exaggerate the role they play in the company’s overall success.”

Amy writes they ‘take big risks’ and some of them pay off and “even when others warn them that their tactics aren’t likely to work out, they remain steadfast in their position. They’re so intent on gaining attention for their good work they’ll do whatever it takes to succeed.”

The most important and relevant to our discussion is that narcissists are “good political actors”.

“A narcissist won’t waste their time mentoring a junior-level employee or talking to colleagues unless it’s going to somehow advance their own career. At work, narcissists know who to take advantage of and who to flatter.” Amy writes. She adds, “By nature, narcissists lack empathy, so they’re not invested in supporting others or caring how other people feel.” She further adds, “Rejection doesn’t make them question themselves. Instead, they’ll question the person who rejected them. They’re more likely to think, “That person doesn’t recognize talent when they see it” rather than, “I’m not the best candidate for the job.”

On the topic of a narcissist, Harvard Business Review conducted a study titled ”Don’t Go Chasing Narcissists: A Relational-Based and Multiverse Perspective on Leader Narcissism and Follower Engagement Using a Machine Learning Approach”

The credentials of the group of researchers in this study are stellar. Dritjon Gruda, PhD is an Assistant Professor in Organizational Behavior at Maynooth University, Ireland; Dimitra Karanatsiou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, Paul Hanges, PhD is a full professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA, Jennifer Golbeck, University of Maryland, College Park, USA, and Athena Vakali, University of Maryland, College Park, USA.

The study defines narcissists as “people whose decisions and goals are driven by unrelenting arrogance and self-absorption and such individuals lack empathy, have fragile self-esteem, and are hostile to others who threaten their positive self-regard (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006).”

“Narcissistic individuals often engage in self-enhancing and self-promoting behaviour, which can result in initially being perceived as charming (Spain et al., 2014).”

However, even if some people think Imran Khan fits the description of a charismatic narcissist, surely there are other leaders who can be ‘diagnosed’ with other mental and personality problems. And to ensure that Imran Khan and his followers are not offended it would only be fair that anyone who wants to lead the country goes under mental and physical checks but also moral and ethical checks to determine whether they are capable of holding important offices in the government.

Does Pakistan need to conduct a National Political Mental Health check of people vying for positions in the government that can affect the lives and well-being of millions in the country?

It might be interesting to evaluate the skills, abilities and capabilities of people who want to take over important posts that will impact the lives of millions of citizens.

Fortunately, Pakistan’s constitution provides a precedent of ‘physical and mental incapacity’ to remove the president if needed based. According to Article 47 (1) ‘Removal [or impeachment] of President’: “the president may…be removed from office on the ground of physical or mental incapacity or impeached on a charge of violating the Constitution or gross misconduct”.

And like all other constitutions of the world, Pakistan’s Constitution is the most important guidebook to running a country, and who is best suited to do this. It provides baselines for everything like the rights of citizens; how to form a government and who can be president and prime etc.

So it wouldn’t hurt to make an amendment in the Constitution, especially where it lays out how the president, prime minister, cabinet etc. are to perform when in government. It would be helpful to include articles in the constitution where it talks about the office of the prime minister, ministers and other people responsible for running the country properly. It should order these personalities to undergo certain tests to determine their fitness to run a country and make decisions that impact the lives of millions of people. Mental health should be top of the list, it is an important topic that needs to be taken seriously.

Instead of using mental capacity – or lack of it – as a weapon to end someone’s tenure, it should be used as a tool to allow voters to select the best people for the jobs to run the country based on the results of mental, physical, moral and ethical fitness tests.

The constitution should be amended to make such tests mandatory for all those seeking the august positions right from the top – the president, prime minister, ministers, secretaries etc. – to undergo these evaluations before being allowed to take the reins of the country. It would just be like when one has to declare their assets before contesting but better. Voters have been given an important responsibility to choose the right people for the most important jobs that will affect their future. So they should be able to go beyond political manifestos that only tell them about the political promises and not those making these promises are reliable and capable mentally and morally of fulfilling them.

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