**The Khan paradox**

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Imran Khan’s transition from a cricketer to a leading political figure was a significant turn. With the PTI’s core tenets revolving around anti-corruption and socio-economic justice, Khan effectively portrayed himself as an agent of change.His populist approach attracted a massive following, especially among the youth, who saw in him the promise of a ‘Naya Pakistan’. His brand of politics is characterized by staunch nationalism, progressive socio-economic policies, and a pledge to combat corruption.

However, from 2012 to 2022, the people of Pakistan in general, and his voters in particular, were displeased with the PTI government and Khan’s approach, which was primarily focused on the elimination of his opponents, rather than improving his governance.Fast forward, especially since the vote of no-confidence (VoNC) that led to an in-house change of government, Khan has captured the imagination of the people, who were attracted to him due to his narrative, as well as due to poor performance of PDM government, especially on the economic front. Immediately after his arrest on May 9 in a case involving a multimillion-dollar scam, his supporters attacked and vandalized many military installations, including the desecration of martyrs. What led to this?

Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri’s article, ‘Anatomy of a protest’ (published in these pages on May 21) presents a thought-provoking analysis of protests and their underlying dynamics. In line with this opinion piece, this article aims to provide a comprehensive review and analysis, especially on the ‘shared psychosis theory.’ The shared psychosis theory, also known as folie a deux, posits that individuals can adopt delusions or irrational beliefs through close association with someone who already has a psychotic disorder. In the context of politics, this theory suggests that political leaders such as Khan can influence the beliefs and perceptions of their followers, potentially leading to shared delusions or distorted views.The shared psychosis theory becomes particularly interesting when applied to the context of Khan’s political career. His promise of radical change has created an impassioned and devoted following. His anti-corruption narrative, commitment to justice, and dream of a ‘Naya Pakistan’ have become deeply ingrained in the psyche of his followers.

His rhetoric is powerful and infectious, causing his followers to identify closely with his values and vision. His narrative has become their narrative; his vision, their vision. This phenomenon can be closely compared to the concept of shared psychosis. The shared psychosis theory could also potentially explain the polarizing views of Khan among the Pakistani populace. His followers passionately defend his policies and decisions, attributing any failure to external elements or ‘the corrupt system’ he is trying to reform.

Recent political dynamics paint a complex picture of Khan’s leadership, particularly highlighting his narcissistic politics and an exclusionist approach that have been sources of contention in Pakistan’s current political climate.Narcissism, at its core, is characterized by an excessive self-focus, a grandiose view of one’s own abilities, and a persistent need for admiration. These traits appear to manifest in Khan’s political practices, and such a style of leadership often leads to an echo chamber where dissent is silenced, and only those agreeing with the leader’s perspective find favor.

Alongside narcissism, Khan adopts an exclusionist political approach. Exclusionism in politics refers to a strategy or practice that purposely sidelines certain groups or individuals from political processes or decision-making. This, in essence, goes against the principle of inclusive politics. Moreover, Khan’s propensity to publicly call out leaders by name could be seen as a manifestation of both his reported narcissism and exclusionism. By doing so, he belittles and marginalizes those with differing perspectives while promoting his own viewpoint as superior. Such behaviour might reflect an aspect of militant politics, given the confrontational and combative nature of such tactics.

Khan’s speeches often reveal a distinct narrative that showcases a clear ‘Us versus Them’ schema, which he skillfully employs in his anti-Islamophobia arguments. However, a closer look suggests that Khan could be using this serious issue not just as a means to fight for justice but also as a tool for political influence and personal benefit.In the world of politics, the ability to construct and communicate a compelling narrative can be a powerful weapon. Khan seems to be adept at this, using strategies such as generalization, victimization, polarization, and counterfactual to accentuate the division in Pakistani society. The incidents of May 9 are attributable to Khan’s extreme narrative, which he has recklessly pushed beyond elastic limits, as seen from the perspective of Pakistan.

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