



Did the US play a role in the overthrow of Pakistan's most popular leader?

This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.

Zain Raza (ZR): Thank you for tuning in today and welcome back to another episode of The Source. I'm your host, Zain Raza. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine February 2022, the former prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, took a neutral stance. Soon thereafter, he was ousted from government with a no confidence vote in parliament that many believe was orchestrated by the US government and the Pakistani military. To unpack all of this, I will talk to Professor Junaid Ahmad, who teaches law, religion and global politics. He's also the director of the Center of Study of Islam and Decolonity in Islamabad, Pakistan. Junaid, welcome to the show.

Junaid Ahmad (JA): It's my pleasure, thanks for having me Zain.

ZR: Before we look at how the United States recently interfered in Pakistani politics, I would like to first introduce Pakistan as a nation. To our viewers, can you introduce Pakistan, its economy, demographics, and therefore, to provide some context to the political system there?

JA: Right. Well, it's a very unfortunate history that was left by the British that had, of course, colonized at that time the whole of the Indian subcontinent. And Pakistan was established in 1947 after the partitioning of India. And there was at that point, two wings of Pakistan, separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory, West Pakistan and East Pakistan. And the relationship, to put it mildly, was not a good one. The West Pakistani elites really were in charge of the country. And the East Pakistanis really felt disenfranchised in terms of their language, their culture, but even in terms of development. And then it naturally led up to the 1971 war in which the elections took place, and the party from East Pakistan, the Awami League, won fair and square. But of course, the West Pakistani elites could not tolerate that.

And that was the war that ended in the independence of East Pakistan, the country that is now known as Bangladesh. The one thing that we need to know is that at least since the 1960s, the Pakistani military has played an overwhelming role in the political life of Pakistan. And so, of course, that half of the country's history has been under military rule. The sad part about it, of course, for our viewers, is that these civilian politicians that have come, particularly since the 1980s, have not inspired the people to really come out in defense of them either. So for ordinary people in Pakistan, it really did not make much difference whether it was (particularly I'm speaking of the late eighties and early nineties), whether it was military rule or whether it was civilian rule because of the massive corruption and repression of these civilian governments inside Pakistan. And I mean, that in some ways lays the context for a third party to come into this vacuum of just massive corruption.

And I must say that those two political parties, the civilian political parties, the major ones, were one, the Pakistan Muslim League of the Nawaz Sharif group, which dominates the largest province in Pakistan, which many people, many people correctly claim has an almost semi-neocolonial relationship with the other provinces. It is the dominant province, it is where the military is recruited from. And so in Punjab, they really control Pakistan and are a very wealthy and corrupt family. And they are the political party. And the other richest family also happens to be the main political party, the Pakistan People's Party, that is based in the province of Sindh in Pakistan, and that is of the Bhutto Zardari family. Of course, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a very popular leader in the 1970s, of course, made many mistakes, many, many mistakes. But (he) was very popular. And the party is certainly nothing like what it was in the 1970s. So the Pakistan People's Party itself now is the same type of a neoliberal party that has just gone along with global capitalism and so on and so forth. And so this is the context in which a party like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the Movement for Justice under Imran Khan emerges and becomes so popular.

ZR: You talked about the Pakistani military, which is considered the most powerful institution and enjoys many benefits such as education, land, recreation, health care. First, can you talk about the Pakistani military, where it gets its funding from? And how is it perceived by the population today?

JA: Right. So this is a very interesting situation. I mean, especially the last part of what you said, because the Pakistani military, of course, we also have to understand that let's not let the British off the hook here. The legacy of both, the bureaucracy and especially the military. Because the British, I mean they recruited Pakistani military soldiers and all of these from what they called the martial races from the Punjab and what's now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the Pashtun and population lives and which was most affected by this war on terror. And then in terms of drone strikes, massive displacement, including American pressure on Pakistan to launch operations in the Northwest.

And they are the majority of the Pakistani military, they remain today. So let's start from there, that's the original legacy. And the problem was that unlike in India in which you had

the Indian National Congress, a mass movement, the Pakistan Muslim League was barely, last minute, able to negotiate a deal in which to get a separate country. Even though to be fair the founder of the country, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, initially was just asking for autonomy within a larger British India. So in that context, in which there is no political class really, or feudal landlords and there's no political class, it's very easy for one institution, which is fairly coherent and powerful and disciplined, etc., to intervene and pretty much run the show. And so since that time, it has been able to rule either directly or even if it's not direct martial law, it can control the politicians, it can install which ones it wants, it can oust which ones it wants, etc. and so on. But as I go back again, and yes, the corruption is on both sides, so often there is this debate and again, Pakistani voices, there's no single Pakistani right wing voice, there's no single Pakistani left wing voice. I mean, you have to understand that Pakistan, the typical orientalist trope about the East is that everyone thinks the same. That everyone in China thinks the same. Everyone here thinks the same. So in my assessment, these two major political parties, the Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan People's Party, are family dynasties which just so happen to be the richest families in the country. And their whole purpose in entering politics, which especially, for example, the Sharif family, their business plan had nothing to do with politics, were introduced by the military dictator into politics by General Zia ul Haq. They become the richest family. Their whole purpose in coming into politics was to plunder and pillage the country and make as much money as possible, and that they have done so successfully. And so instead of this constant debate about civil military relations and the military which of course – an absolutely unacceptable level of the military's influence in Pakistani political life and the perks and privileges they give to themselves. Which of course, the civilian politicians give to themselves as well. But that's, of course, unacceptable.

But instead I've always argued, instead of seeing them as fundamentally antagonists of each other, they've been more partners in crime in Pakistan than serious antagonists of each other in terms of looting and plundering the country. And for the ordinary Pakistani, it has made no difference. As a final point, it is more about two things. And I think that that could really explain it. One is that, who gets more of the piece of the pie of Pakistan? You know, the military feels that these politicians are getting too much money, taking too much more of their share, of plundering the country. They start to charge them with corruption, etc., and then oust them. No civilian politician has served their full five year term and so on. So that's one aspect of it. And the second aspect of it, who can be in the better books? Who can curry favour more with Washington? This is an issue, we can get more into this. And this is one of the reasons why the common discourses that Haq was the puppet of the military; no, I fundamentally disagree with that I think it was more that these other political parties were constantly having their own secretive communication with Washington, saying that this military of ours, you know, can you do something about them? So the military really did want to punish the other two political parties. And they were taking a gamble with Imran Khan,

who they at least knew would not be engaged in this kind of double dealing with Washington and trying to undermine the military. So I'll leave it at that for now.

ZR: Explore the rise of Imran Khan. You've given us the whole context of the main political parties and the military apparatus. In 2018, Imran Khan's Pakistan Movement for Justice Party won the elections against the entire establishment that you talked about. Can you tell us why the establishment, which includes the United States, the Pakistani military and the major political parties failed and Imran Khan was able to rise above?

JA: Absolutely. Just very quickly, for viewers like those that are not familiar with Imran Khan's life long trajectory. Because he most famously led the Pakistani cricket, to the World Cup championship in 1992. Even though he had retired, they had called him back precisely for his leadership skills, not because he was necessarily the best player. They had a very talented team, but as a captain and in leadership skills, that was him. And he was kind of a very larger than life figure. And after that he really didn't know of what use he could be. And, of course, I think he did one of the most useful things, which was basically full scale philanthropy for Pakistan, going abroad, constantly raising funds from Pakistani diaspora and others, and within Pakistan as well. Built the first three (it used to be in Asia but now that I've checked it, in the world), first free cancer hospital in Pakistan, named after his late mother who died from cancer, Shaukat Khanum memorial hospital and now it has several branches. Other than that in education, schools, all that. So that's what he was making use of his time up until about '96, '97 etc., when he fundamentally understood – again, this is not a political mind from the beginning, nothing, nothing at all. But he's learning on the go. You know, he's learning on the go. Then he realizes, Okay, this is a situation, I can help these people here and there.

But fundamentally, this is systemic, this is structural, and that requires politics, that requires entering the field of politics. And that is when in '96 and '97 he founded his political party PTI, the Movement for Justice. And as I've explained the context and viewers should understand, in many of these Western what I call not democracies but plutocracies, you have these two parties. You know as well as I do then how hard it is for a third party to enter into a political spectrum, especially dominated by these incredibly entrenched parties that not only just buy off ordinary voters. We're talking about buying off judges, generals. So Khan introduces a third party at this late stage, despite some history and is immensely popular, immensely popular. So I often point this out to all the critics of Khan, it's a very simple question that kind of makes them think that, Okay well, that's a point. From 1997 to right now, even sitting in a wretched jail full of rats and mosquitoes, if Pakistan had a presidential system, one vote, one person, one vote, Imran Khan would win hands down. Now, unfortunately, there's a parliamentary system in which he has to collect a whole bunch of people in Pakistan. But I mean, that's not to say they're not good people, it's just that they've never been involved heavily in politics and that type of thing. And yes, they had the establishment ensured, but they took a gamble with Khan, they knew that Khan is an independent minded person. They did want to punish the other political parties for their

outright open scandals. Memogate was a scandal in which Pakistan's ambassador to the US under the Zardari regime was telling the United States to please, could you put sanctions on our military control? Our military because they want whatever. So there's that type and it's exposed. And you're going to imagine how the Pakistani military high command and especially the chief of army staff, which I must emphasize, is always the most powerful political person in the country. And so, they did want to punish those parties for that reason, for these reasons, because they're double dealing with Washington against the military. But with Khan it wasn't like, Okay, now we have our guy and this is our blue eyed boy, etc., that we're going to be able to control. It was a gamble, but it was a gamble they needed to take because they knew he was immensely popular, so there would be legitimacy.

It's not like they just grabbed someone out of the blue to put in power. So he was immensely popular, and that time was one to punish the political parties that were doing these double dealings with Washington and were trying to undermine the Pakistani military. And secondly, there was a tacit agreement on one particular issue, and that was: the war in Afghanistan needs to end, the occupation needs to end. This is, as our viewers may know, this was the longest war of the United States in its entire history. Extraordinarily. Now, of course, my comrades here will say actually the longest war has been against the indigenous people in the United States itself. But externally, this has been the longest war.

So on that one point, Imran Khan's main two platforms, why his party, and why he became so politically popular, particularly amongst the youth – but everyone, families and the elderly and so on – was two things: the massive pillaging of this country by the politicians that had come before him, that was the one thing. The massive corruption and the pillaging of the country, and the necessity of establishing some type of welfare state in Pakistan for the most marginalized and oppressed people in Pakistan. The rule of law, that these massive corruption cases, the National Accountability Bureau of Pakistan, is not touching these rich politicians. So the rule of law applies the same to the rich and to the poor, whatever. All of these things he's so immensely popular on. And the second thing, which again, we can get to the cipher leak, which is kind of now making everyone now realize, Okay, what exactly happened in Pakistan a year and a half ago, from the beginning of the war on terror, the scathing critique of this military approach to solving the problem, what happened after 9/11 and especially in Afghanistan.

And it was fundamentally two points that I think many of us share. It was one that, yes, this is an immoral war that will have a huge human toll, which in fact it did not only in Afghanistan, but its spillover effects into Pakistan as well, which then caused the Americans to pressure the Pakistani government to engage in military operations in its own country in areas it had never gone into what are known as FATA, Federally Administered Tribal Areas of the Northwest, which is kind of an oxymoron because they're quite autonomous, actually. And what that did was only fuel militancy. So these were the two points that, one, it was immoral and second, Khan was saying, this is only going to be counterproductive. It's going to fuel more terrorism. And that is exactly what happened. I have been teaching in Pakistan since

then, since 2006, etc., suicide bombings, everyone's been hearing this all across the world, etc., the most dangerous country on earth, etc.. Well, how did it become that way? You know, that was the question to be answered. And so, I mean, my students everywhere, these rallies of Khan. Initially Khan could just win with one seat the elections in parliament, he would just witness one seat etc.. But when they realized I mean, people realized that this is the only alternative and in no way is Khan or certainly his political party perfect or anything. But we need more space in the political arena so that the possibility even exists to push a more progressive, a more radical agenda that challenges the status quo. And that explains the rise of Imran Khan, who of course, is also charismatic. We don't want to deny that he's also very charismatic. The energy levels of a man who's carrying out rallies in every single city after his ouster, which we could get into. Yes, absolutely. I mean, after his ouster, he becomes even more popular. And at this point, even sitting in a jail, his political party commands about 70%, according to even Western polls of popularity in Pakistan.

ZR: You talked about the rise of Imran Khan. And now last year, in 2022, there was a constitutional crisis and Imran Khan became the first prime minister to be removed from office through a non-confidence motion, according to the investigative journalist outed called The Intercept, the United States pressured for his ouster. Can you talk about the role the US played and would you think his ouster would have still happened even without US pressure?

JA: Right. So I think that this is very important. I mean, it's very important, even though I also emphasize that the sole focus should not be on just Russia and Ukraine, although the diplomatic cable, what's called in Pakistan, the site that was held between the Under-Secretary of State, assistant Secretary of State, a man by the name of Donald Lew from the State Department, and the Pakistani ambassador who was summoned and basically was told that, Look, this visit by Imran Khan on the day of the special military operation of Russia into Ukraine on February 24th of 2022, in which Khan – of course, that meeting was long planned. Khan is going there because the economy of Pakistan is in dire straits. He's trying to get cheap gas and energy and wheat. And this is his purpose for going there. On the plane, he is getting off and hears about this invasion, is about to shake Putin's hand, and immediately calls are coming in: Condemn Putin right there. And then while he's there and I mean, you know, for all of the stereotypes that even the Westerners have, big, bad, evil Putin; yeah, would they want to do that? They're sitting in Moscow and condemn it right there. So then when he gets back, even after the trip, immediately, once again, the European capitals, they send him a letter saying: now you're back, condemn the invasion right away. To which Khan gives this speech. The chronology is very important. That letter was sent to Khan to do this right away. Khan the next day makes a speech and says that "do you think that we are your slaves, that anything that you say to us that we will just do and say? Yeah, we are friends of Russia. We are friends of the United States, we're friends of China, we're friends of Europe. We are not part of any alliance". This is his exact phrase. And at the end he says that "and by the way, we have been mentioning the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Has anyone ever bothered to listen to us and condemn that?". No, but again, it was what the assistant

Secretary of State Don Lew said that we are very uncomfortable with this aggressive neutrality that Imran Khan displayed. And the Pakistan government expressed their abstention in the vote that was in the United Nations condemning, which of course many other countries abstained as well, including close US-ally India. Nothing said to India about it, but of course, on Fox. So what I wanted to emphasize is that this leak at that time when Khan was ousted, I think that the US realized the timing was perfect.

Because we have to understand that the military, especially on foreign policy and national security issues, wants zero interference from the civilian politicians. They can okay loot and plunder the country, go do it about their business. But in terms of one example, let me give you Benazir Bhutto, the very famous female prime minister of Pakistan, daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, sadly assassinated in 2007, God bless her soul. During her time in the period '94-'96, there in the country, her husband that's corrupt as anything but his daughter, who later becomes president after the assassination – which then gives a lot of people – I mean, there were some thoughts and suspicions of who really was behind the assassination, because how can this, who everyone knows was thoroughly corrupt and I mean a gangster type president. But so they are doing this while the military is supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan to take power. And they do. And they win in '96. Does Benazir utter a word about it? Nothing. Nothing is being said. So this is a woman, human rights activist, etc.. And the military is supporting the Taliban. So this is what I wanted to explain, that the military is always controlling, that the problem they had with Khan is that no, Khan is saying that I'm the prime minister of the country. I am definitely going to have some say in what our foreign policy will be and that it will be an independent foreign policy. No one is going to put pressure on us. We will do it for our national interests, not for Washington's, not for Russia's, we're doing it in our own national interest and that they could not tolerate. His interference, who in the intelligence services or the chief, who they're going to be, all of these things, this the military high command top brass could not tolerate. And so the timing was perfect. The American national security state, this is the other important point, never forgave Khan for his consistent opposition to the war on terror and the war in Afghanistan. So they never forgave Khan.

Trump of course, we know is someone who really ignored anything from what the national security state told them. And so they had two meetings in which he just goes on and on in praise of Khan as this great cricketer and Khan is just sitting there in silence. And he says, Well I'm here to discuss the Kashmir issue and nothing else beyond that. And Trump just goes on and on about how much he likes Khan's personality and so on and so forth. But of course, we know the American national security state despises Trump. And so when the Biden administration comes into power, not a single engagement with Pakistan, probably with the generals, but not with Khan at all, so much so that even when the Afghan withdrawal was taking place, the withdrawal from Afghanistan in which Pakistan was facilitating the withdrawal of American soldiers, I would be chatting to these soldiers staying in Islamabad hotels. Not one single phone call to Imran Khan by the Biden administration, which is, of course, following the complete orders of the national security state in the US. So what I

wanted to say is about this leak: Khan at that point in April when he's ousted by this so-called, what I call lawfare, right. I mean, all of a sudden the European Union issued this condemnation, and Khan makes a speech the next day. The meeting happens between the Pakistani ambassador to the US and the assistant secretary of state on loop. And the threat is made, this is basically a threat that says that, look, we feel that this is actually just Khan's position and a dent has been created in our relationship and let's see in the next few days if Khan is still in power. If he is removed, all can be forgiven.

Look at the arrogance of this. These are diplomats speaking together; all can be forgiven. What has Pakistan done? So that was that, that happened the next day. And in that leak, in that conversation, there's talk of how to do this, a vote of no confidence motion, which was not even tabled yet. So this was all orchestrated, defections from Khan's own parties, images showing their visits to the US embassy, bought off, defecting, etc.. Still, Khan, I mean the vote of no confidence, he lost just barely, etc.. But all of these defections, 13 political parties, including the two major ones, had to come together with, of course, the backing, the full backing of the Chief of Army staff who also wanted Khan out, General Bajwa. And of course, Washington and all of the European NATO capitals. So it's Khan versus all of these forces. I mean, just think about that. Just think about that. All of these for ourselves. And still, I mean, I think he loses the vote of no confidence, just barely. I think by ten votes against all of these forces. And people can see this. People are not stupid, despite what many, sadly to say, even the progressives, some left wingers say. They can see what's going on here. So a 13 party coalition, including the two major political ones, the Pakistan People's Party, the Pakistan Muslim, they have to form a coalition to oust this guy and his party from power. And Khan, when he had a national security meeting saying this diplomatic cable was completely a violation of diplomatic protocol etc., Khan took the appropriate measures. It's not like he just went out right away, he said look at this. He sent it to the president. They had a National Security Council meeting. He sent it to the Chief Justice. He followed all the protocols of saying that, but of course, they had a different agenda. The agenda was to get this guy out of power. And he said that, Look, this is what the threat was. This is what the threat was. And of course, more than 80, maybe even 90% of the Pakistani population believed him.

Unfortunately, many of our closest friends and comrades and so on and so forth did not believe him. What they suspected is that, No, he's fabricating this. And of course, and then, of course, the military high command and everyone was trying their best to hide any paper trail of this. And of course, at that time I said that, Do you really think that the US government or the CIA leaves paper trails of what it's up to? This is a joke. Often we find out about these things years later, about what exactly happened. And so to expect, many people were saying, Oh, provide us the evidence of it. You know, so you understand what I'm saying? And so now, after more than a year, The Intercept gets its leak from a person in the military, the army itself, who leaked it out, which is not surprising. So for a year and a half, peaceful rallies. One thing that must be emphasized: Khan has been the most pacifist throughout this entire

war on terror years in his entire political career against any military solution. He has always argued that these require political solutions, not military solutions. And he himself then said that there should be no violence and all peaceful rallies in protest (for) a year and a half. You know, all of these Orientalist stereotypes about, Oh you let these Muslims that loose in here or Egypt, etc., they're going to be engaged in violence for over one year. Massive rallies of millions, not even a flower pot was broken. Think about that. And then all of a sudden, on May 9th, when completely orchestrated again by the military top brass and their collaborating PA political parties, basically, he's sitting in the Supreme Court. He's attending all the charges: he's going to all of the bogus 190 charges they put on him. And he keeps going to them, not afraid of anything. The windows of the court are broken, etc., he's abducted by rangers, military rangers. What the heck do they have to do with this? Abducted and put in a car, etc.. And of course, this broad 70/80% of the population of a country of 240 million? Yes, they are going to come out on the street in protest. But in terms of the violence and destruction and all of this type of thing, the attack on the for example, the Corps Commander of Lahore in which it was heavily fortified. Where are the guards? Where is the corps commander? It was entirely staged and orchestrated precisely to put all these types of terrorism charges on the political party, to decimate the political party, to force Soviet-style concessions by them that we no longer are in Imran Khan's political party, we're leaving politics, etc.. This is what this brutal military dictatorship has done again. But we must emphasize with the collaboration with the other two main political parties, that is what happened and that is now what has led to basically Imran Khan being thoroughly humiliated and the population being terrorised and given the message that if this can happen to the most popular political and public figure in the country's history – I mean, maybe history, but certainly over the past 20 years – it can happen to anyone and far worse.

ZR: Junaid Ahmad, very interesting. And there's a lot more to talk about but we have to leave it here. Thank you so much for joining us today.

JA: Zain, my pleasure. And I would love to be on again to discuss this further. So thank you very much.

ZR: And thank you for tuning in today. Please make sure to donate if you're watching our videos regularly. We don't take any money from governments, corporations and don't even allow advertisements. All of this to ensure that we remain independent and non-profit. We have 140,000 subscribers, only a few percent donate to us on a regular basis. Please take into consideration that there is an entire team working behind the scenes from camera, light, audio in the case of our German videos: translation, voiceover, correction. So if you want us to remain independent and continue with our independent and non-profit journalism, make sure to donate today. I'm your host Zain Raza, see you next time.

END