

Cricketer Imran Khan's party: A dead end for opposition to US war in Pakistan

Sampath Perera
1 December 2011

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice or PTI), the conservative-nationalist party of former cricketer Imran Khan, has gained popularity in recent months. It poses as an alternative to the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the main opposition party of Nawaz Sharif, the Pakistan Muslim League – N, criticizing the US-led war in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In recent years, US-Pakistan relations have rapidly fallen into crisis amid Washington's increasingly aggressive stance against the Pakistani government. The US has escalated deadly drone attacks in Pakistan, particularly near its border with Afghanistan—where a NATO raid killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers Saturday. US officials accuse Pakistani intelligence of having links to Islamist militant groups and demand increased Pakistani military operations against militants inside Pakistan itself.

At a recent public rally in Lahore, Khan denounced Pakistan's relation to the US as “slavery” and criticized the Pakistani government's attacks on tribal areas of Pakistan at Washington's request: “Our leaders owned this war on terror for the sake of dollars.” He condemned the PPP-led government for relying on US aid. He said a PTI government “will not allow the military to attack its people, the PTI believes in talks with the tribals.”

Despite his popularity as a star cricket player, Khan's party did not win considerable support after its founding in 1996. He gained some popularity for a fundraising campaign for a cancer hospital and his criticisms of Pakistan's pro-Western political establishment and its rampant corruption.

Khan has long been identified with the Pakistani military, having backed the 1999 coup by General Pervez Musharraf, whose military regime then began its collaboration with the US “war on terror” after the

September 11, 2001 attacks. Khan claimed that in 2002 Musharraf even offered him the prime ministership.

Khan later came into conflict with the Musharraf regime, as popular opposition to Pakistan's participation in the Afghan war mounted. Khan criticized the Musharraf regime during student protests in November 2007 and was arrested. Working with the US, the PPP participated in the elections under Musharraf's rule and then formed a coalition government that initially included the PML-N. The PPP-led government continued to support the US war in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Khan's popularity rose mainly after the US commando raid this May that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, blatantly violating the country's sovereignty. The popularity ratings of President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani were only 11 and 37 per cent respectively, while Khan's were 68 per cent. His popularity was above that of PML-N head Sharif, military head General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, and Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, a former rallying point for bourgeois opposition to the military.

This record of acquiescence to US bullying by the PPP and PML-N left room for Khan's PTI to posture as the rallying point for mounting opposition to US policy.

After Saturday's cross-border attack from Afghanistan on two Pakistani military posts killing 24 soldiers, Khan said, “Time has come for the government to pull out of this inhuman conflict and initiate a purposeful dialogue to bring peace to the country and the region.”

Khan's criticisms lack any principled opposition to the neo-colonial war of occupation in Afghanistan, however.

He said the PTI would support a “respectable” US withdrawal from Afghanistan. “We will help you in a respectable withdrawal of your troops from Afghanistan, but we will not launch a military operation in Pakistan for you,” he said. In other words, he prefers to limit but not cease collaboration with the pyromaniacs in Washington.

The PTI claims to view China as the “cornerstone” for its foreign policy. Khan travelled to China after the Lahore rally to meet with Chinese government officials.

There are many indications that the PTI is being used as a vehicle to give a political face-lift to the sagging fortunes of the PPP and the Pakistani military. The *Sunday Times* has reported that Khan was introduced to the US ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, in the presence of Pakistani intelligence chief Shuja Pasha. The Pakistani military rushed to deny the report, terming it “baseless and concocted.”

On November 27, former Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi announced he would join the PTI, after resigning from the PPP. The *Times of India* quoted Qureshi as explaining his decision by observing that “the winds of change in the political system have started blowing.”

Qureshi’s maneuver is deeply cynical, however, as he served from 2008 until this year as the diplomatic point man for the PP’s increased support for the unpopular AfPak war. He is now seeking to obscure this fact by jumping ship from the PPP to the PTI.

What has left room for Khan and his PTI to appeal to opposition to war is the absence of any principled opposition to imperialist war from the left. Pseudo-Marxist groups like The Struggle and the Labour Party of Pakistan have either cultivated illusions in the PPP or remained uncritical of the war, while confining working class struggles to the most narrow trade union framework.

The Struggle has sought to subordinate the working class to the PPP for decades. Writing on the PPP’s founding anniversary, the struggle’s leader Lal Khan, hailed the PPP’s founding document as a “programme of revolutionary socialism.” While the “present regime has brought in unprecedented price hikes, poverty and misery,” he writes, “only the PPP can meet people’s aspirations.”

“The main battle of the class war in Pakistan will be

fought in the PPP, provided it does not collapse as a tradition of the masses in the coming period,” he wrote. This amounts to promoting illusions that the PPP—an openly capitalist party that has been formally in power throughout the Obama administration’s escalation of the Afghan war into Pakistan—can be turned into a workers’ party.

The Pabloite Pakistan Labour Party props up the trade unions and has built connections with various bourgeois and Islamist parties. It also entered into an alliance with the PTI and various other nationalist formations to boycott the 2008 elections.

These “left” parties have not waged any struggle to mobilize workers independently of the bourgeois parties in opposition to the war. By taking the path of class collaboration, they have provided a cover for the crimes being committed or prepared by the ruling class.

At a time of deep popular opposition to the US war, this sentiment finds no organized expression on the left of the political establishment. This is the vacuum Khan is seeking to exploit, so as to promote his own political ambitions and block the development of politically independent, working class opposition to the war.

Apart from its limited criticisms of the war, the PTI seeks to continue the economic policies of the PPP, which has slashed jobs and social spending for the masses to promote a pro-business economic climate. Khan says Pakistan needs “some austerity” and pledges “business-friendly” policies to encourage “the private sector to grow and create greater wealth” and end “dependence on foreign aid.”

Khan is a proponent of “Islamic values,” a mechanism long used by the ruling class to promote communalist and conservative politics. His refusal to oppose reactionary blasphemy laws must be taken by workers as a warning that he would not hesitate to use such draconian laws against them, seeking to divide the working class across religious lines.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact