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EXCLUSIVE

The Sports Star and Tabloid Fixture Staring Down Pakistan's Army

Imran Khan tells The Wall Street Journal from jail that he's battling for democracy

By *Saeed Shah* [Following](#)

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan—In August, Pakistani officials approached the party of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan with an urgent request: Postpone a rally planned for the following day in the capital, Islamabad, for fear of clashes with another protest.

Azam Swati, a former senator in Khan's party, drove through the night to the jail housing Khan. Seated across a glass separation wall, the two men spoke for almost two hours. Khan called off the rally.

"Asim Munir, this country is now a tinderbox," said Khan, who believes his jail meetings are bugged, addressing Pakistan's army chief, according to Swati. "But I will not be the one to light the fire."

Imprisoned over a year ago, Khan, a cricket star turned politician—or "Prisoner 804" as many call him—is locked in a confrontation with the military, which has controlled the country's politics for decades. From jail, he still makes decisions big and small for the party he built. Since prison rules allow him to meet his legal team, he has appointed lawyers to many of the party's top positions.

The army's falling out with Khan, which led to his dismissal as prime minister in 2022 and then imprisonment, has pushed the nuclear-armed country of 240 million into political and economic turmoil.

Since being ousted from power, he has galvanized popular anger with the heavy-handed role the army—which staged coups in the past—has in the country's affairs.



An AI-crafted speech of Imran Khan on television; police stand guard outside the jail housing Khan; Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party rallies on the outskirts of Islamabad.

AKHTAR SOOMRO/ REUTERS; AAMIR QURESHI/ AFP/ GETTY IMAGES; FAROOQ NAEEM/AFP/ GETTY IMAGES

Khan told The Wall Street Journal in an interview from jail that he would fight on.

“The people of Pakistan, including those typically disengaged from politics, recognized the injustice,” the 71-year-old said of his ousting, in written responses to questions.

The army says it doesn't interfere in politics.

“The Pakistan army is a national army, and it has no political agenda,” military spokesman Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry told reporters this month.

The mantle of pro-democracy dissident is an unlikely finale for Pakistan's golden boy. The former captain of the national cricket team was feted for his sports prowess, and his romantic ties and nightclub outings in London were fixtures in British tabloids. Then the loss of his mother invigorated his faith and propelled him toward politics.

Khan's candidates took the most seats in this year's election, despite handicaps put on his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party's campaign and widespread allegations of rigging by the

authorities, which the government and military deny.

“The people and I won” the election, Khan said, adding that no part of society “is truly free in Pakistan at the moment.”

The face-off between Khan and the military establishment is set to intensify.

Tens of thousands of Khan’s supporters gathered at a party rally in the eastern city of Lahore on Saturday.

In recent weeks, courts have suspended or overturned convictions for corruption and leaking state secrets handed down to Khan. However, Khan, who denies any wrongdoing, remains in jail on other charges.

Meanwhile, the coalition government formed by Khan’s opponents with support from the military, headed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, has struggled to establish legitimacy. The administration is seeking constitutional changes that could blunt the power of the courts.

“The nation teeters on the brink of moral and financial bankruptcy, and its people, disillusioned, see no hope in the current imposed government,” said Khan.

Pakistan’s defense minister said Khan could face a secret military trial for orchestrating protests last year that erupted at military installations. Some charges could carry the death penalty.

“His aim was an insurrection within the army and total chaos,” said Khawaja Muhammad Asif, the defense minister.

Cricket star, tabloid fodder

After making a debut as a teenager on Pakistan’s national cricket team, he was admitted to Oxford University with the help of a cricket-obsessed history professor there, though Khan conceded in a later documentary that his grades “were not that brilliant.”

He became one of the all-time greats in a sport followed by billions.

Khan’s strength was tenacity, said Osman Samiuddin, a cricket writer based in London. “He would not back down against a better team,” said Samiuddin.

In the 1992 World Cup, with his team flagging, Khan rallied the players in a now-famous dressing room speech, urging them to “fight like cornered tigers.” Pakistan went on to win the tournament.

He is now calling upon those competitive instincts in his clash with the military, said Aleema Khanum, a younger sister. “This is a game of pressure,” she said.

For years, Khan lived a freewheeling life in London, a familiar face in the city’s nightclubs. He didn’t drink alcohol or smoke, instead ordering a glass of milk, friends said.

In 1995, he married 21-year-old British heiress Jemima Goldsmith. She converted to Islam and they settled in Pakistan. Princess Diana stayed with them on a private visit to Pakistan the following year.



Imran Khan, his wife Jemima Khan and Diana, Princess of Wales, in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1996. PHOTO: ANWAR HUSSEIN/GETTY IMAGES

The death of his mother from cancer years earlier drew him closer to the mystical form of Islam she had followed—and gradually led him to leave behind what he called a “pleasure-seeking existence” in his 2011 autobiography.

Later, after entering politics, his religiosity played to the conservatism of Pakistan’s new urban middle class, offering a vision of an Islamic welfare state that takes care of the poor.

His first marriage ended in 2004, with Jemima Khan moving back to London with the couple’s two sons.

After a short-lived second marriage, Khan quietly wed his spiritual guide in 2018. A conservative Muslim who was married and was the mother of five when they met, she wore a full veil in public. Months later, he was elected prime minister.



Khan in Pakistan in January 1997. PHOTO: CHIP HIRES/ GAMMA-RAPHO/ GETTY IMAGES

Khan was initially allied with the army—his opponents say it was the military that helped him become prime minister, something both deny. But relations soured, as happened with previous prime ministers. It was in part due to Khan's push for a foreign policy more independent of the U.S., he says. Washington has for decades had deep ties with the Pakistani military, more recently to combat terrorism.

As part of that effort, Khan was in Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Khan says there was also friction over a key security official whom he insisted stay in a post longer than the military wanted.

The army declined to comment.

Military pressure peeled off some of Khan's allies in parliament and brought together the opposition, which mounted a no-confidence vote that ousted him in April 2022, according to politicians involved from both sides.

Then, in November 2022, Khan was preparing to address a crowd from a makeshift stage on the back of a truck, as a religious song played.

Suddenly gunfire broke out.

Faisal Javed, a senator for Khan's party who was with him, said that they both fell to the floor when the shooting began. Khan was shot in the legs.

Khan accused senior army officers of being behind an assassination attempt. The authorities have said that the gunman, caught at the scene, was a lone religious fanatic.



Khan being discharged from a hospital after treatment for gunshot wounds from an assassination attempt in 2022. PHOTO: MUHAMMED SEMIH UGURLU/ ANADOLU AGENCY/ GETTY IMAGES

Later the same month, Sharif, who became interim prime minister after Khan was ousted, picked Munir as the new army chief. As prime minister, Khan had fired Munir as chief of the country's spy agency and has branded him "king of the jungle."

'Prisoner 804'

The army has long characterized its mission as a jihad, or holy war, protecting a nation with a religious foundation—a role that Khan has co-opted.

"Imran Khan has managed to capture the slogans of piety and patriotism which always used to be under the custody of the establishment," said Niaz Murtaza, a Pakistani newspaper columnist.

One of Khan's several convictions earlier this year appeared to be an attempt to undermine his standing as a devout Muslim. After probing the details of his wife's menstrual cycles in a case that many Pakistanis felt was a violation of privacy, a judge ruled that their marriage violated Islamic tenets because three menstrual cycles hadn't passed since her divorce from her previous husband. The seven-year sentence was later overturned but his wife too remains in jail.

When Khan was arrested in May 2023, supporters took out their anger on the army, vandalizing monuments to fallen soldiers, gutting a fort and ransacking the official home of a general—making off with strawberries from his freezer and a peacock from the garden.

Some 10,000 were arrested, along with many leaders of Khan's party. Khan blames infiltrators for the violence.



Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf supporters outside the Parliament House building in Islamabad in 2022.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The crackdown meant that candidates of Khan's party had to campaign for the election in the shadows, often holding events online. With the help of artificial intelligence, the jailed Khan even gave an election speech through a virtual avatar.

Khan's tech-savvy party has tapped into Pakistan's widespread smartphone use to reach rural areas and the working class, said Umair Javed, an assistant professor of sociology at the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

The authorities have responded by blocking social-media platform X after supporters of Khan levied allegations of election rigging there. The army chief calls critics of the military on social media "digital terrorists."

"There can be no compromise or deal with the planners and architects of this dark chapter in our history," Munir said in May, marking the first anniversary of the protests.

Khan's spirits remain high, visitors say.

He is allowed an exercise bike, a bar to do chin-ups, and a resistance band in his windowless cell. Reading takes up much of his day, particularly the Quran. A recent request was Leo Tolstoy's novel about a Chechen rebel, Hadji Murat, who meets a grim end.

A biography of Iqbal, an early 20th-century poet and political thinker whom Khan has long admired, and whose ideas helped lead to the creation of Muslim-majority Pakistan, sits in a pile of books in his cell. During a brief release from jail last year, Khan tweeted a line from a poem by Iqbal: "A Muslim is a servant unto God alone; he does not bow down to any Pharaoh or Tyrant."



Khan addresses supporters during a protest in Islamabad in 2014. PHOTO: REUTERS

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