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OPINION

Audio Leaks and their Negative Impact on Pakistani Politics

Syed Eesar Mehdi*

The audio leaks have set off a negative impulse in Pakistani society which will have an adverse impact on democratic politics in the country for a long time to come. It is likely to give rise to pervasive cynicism and lack of public trust in the existing system that includes the army and may create the context for the rise of orthodox forces who lay emphasis on ethics and morality.



Audio leaks are coming one after another exposing Pakistani politicians and making politics in the country even more interesting by the day. The most recent among them is the one about former Prime Minister Imran Khan allegedly having salacious talk with two unidentified women. This comes in at a time when elections are round the corner.

The objective here, apparently, is to hurt the credibility of political leadership and weaken civilian institutions. It also seems, there is an

attempt to reaffirm the perception that all politicians are corrupt and selfish with no care for the interest of the public of Pakistan. Quite seemingly, the leaks are the handiwork of those who are afraid of the rising popularity of political leadership in general at one level and wary of possible return of Imran Khan to power on the other—the deep state of Pakistan. It is a fact that the so-called *khalai makhlook* (aliens) or the agencies are not comfortable with any political leader who has mass support and could challenge its predominance in Pakistani power architecture.

Syed Eesar Mehdi is Associate Research Fellow at International Centre for Peace Studies, New Delhi, India.

Some time ago, the agencies tried their best to tarnish the image of the Sharifs and bolster Imran's government. However, today, after Imran started defying the diktats of the army, the leaks are targeting Imran himself. Frankenstein has found the monster he created too difficult to handle.

The Leaks

All this began on 24 September 2022, when several audio clips, allegedly recorded in the Prime Minister's Office in Islamabad, were leaked online. The conversations were purportedly between PM Sharif and other senior officials. The recordings seemed to have been made during informal conversations in the PM's Office and involved discussions on importing industrial machinery from India for a project involving Maryam Nawaz's son-in-law, to which the PM said that such a move could leave him vulnerable to criticism from his political rivals.

Days after the tapes featuring Shehbaz Sharif, the sitting prime minister were leaked, another one came out featuring a controversial conversation, purportedly between Imran Khan and his former principal secretary, Azam Khan. This tape referred to the cypher that Khan had often talked about while alleging that his unceremonious ouster from the

PM post was facilitated by a 'foreign conspiracy'.

However, in the recently leaked audio tapes, the ex-prime minister Imran Khan is allegedly having sensual conversation over phone with two unidentified women. Now in the changed context, when Imran Khan has been blaming the previous army chief of having masterminded a conspiracy to unseat him from power, the "miltabishment" is supposedly doing it only to dent the image of Imran Khan in Pakistan.

The Same Old Story

It is common knowledge that the highest public offices in Pakistan always remain under close surveillance of the agencies. The houses of the president and the prime minister are always invariably bugged. This came to the fore when Asif Ali Zardari as president had told CIA director Leon Panetta how he used to walk into his office every morning saying, "Hello Ahmad", referring to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief Ahmed Shuja Pasha. "Ahmad knows everything I think and everything I say."¹

Similar views were expressed by Benazir Bhutto in her autobiography *Daughter of the East*, where she wrote that ISI not only kept tabs on

the Bhutto family when they were in the country but also during their stay abroad.² In a similar vein, Z. A. Bhutto's autobiography *If I Am Assassinated* expresses similar concerns that ISI was being used by the establishment as its political arm. Those in ISI were ordered to tap and bug politicians. He maintained that during Zia's tenure, ISI was instructed to unite all the opposition parties and form *Islami Jamhoori Ittehad* (IJI) in order to neutralise the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and stop it from regaining power.³ This clearly gives the impression that everything in Pakistan is controlled by ISI rather than the civilian government.

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid too agreed that the predominance of the military over civilian government was due to ISI's manipulation of the political dynamic within the country. He writes in his book *Descent Into Chaos* that the ISI has set up private organizations in order to reduce the gulf between its military leadership and the extremist fighters. He says that various private organizations are staffed by retired ISI officers and funded through the budget of Pakistan's Frontier Corps.⁴ Ahmed Rashid,

Descent Into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation

Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, New York: Viking, 2008, p. 221-2.

Rashid's account highlights the lack of oversight that the civilian government in Pakistan has over the ISI. Likewise, this signifies that ISI, even if it is led by army officers handpicked by each army chief, bulk of its personnel acts on its own and there is a relative autonomy in the way they plan and conduct their operations. Rashid also points to efforts by the ISI to perpetually delegitimize politicians and especially go after those who they think would become more popular and acquire greater gravitas in Pakistani politics.

Pakistani agencies also have a history of using women as 'seductive spies' to honey trap and blackmail susceptible politicians. Major Raja claimed in a video post that retired Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and General Faiz Hameed used top actors as baits to record scandalous videos of politicians and other influential people.⁵

Dangerous for democracy?

This time round, in the existing circumstances, the establishment has used 'audio and video leaks' as a tactic to soil the image of popular

politicians. There is a strong perception among the Pakistani public, duly fed by the army's propaganda machinery over the years, that the politicians are only interested in gaining power by hook or by crook, and to achieve that end they can go to any length. The "audio leak" scandal has somewhat reinforced this idea.

However, analysts in Pakistan are divided over this issue. Some would say, as has been interpreted above, that the leaks are an attempt to show politicians in a bad light and reinforce the perception that all politicians are corrupt, selfish and incompetent;⁶ while some others believe that those behind the audio leaks do not want any popular politician in Pakistan.⁷ Analyst Khan believes the audio leaks trend could be dangerous for Pakistani democracy as it would create more space for Islamist parties. He has further held that this won't stop until all politicians unite against non-democratic forces. Politicians should put their differences aside. Whether it is Khan or Sharif, the image of politicians is at stake.⁸

Delegitimation Tactic?

The basic motive behind defaming political leadership in Pakistan by the army and the security establishment is to

delegitimize them in the eyes of the general public and indirectly project the army as the most credible institution that can protect the interests of the nation. When Imran Khan was in power, army was willy-nilly leaking out the audios of the opposition leaders. Now, when Shahbaz Sharif is in power and the army is secretly leaking the audios of Imran Khan and at the same time selectively leaking audios of the Sharifs to also keep them in check.

The leaks are usually put out in such a manner that it deepens the ongoing tug-of-war between Imran Khan and the incumbent government. The goal behind this tactic is to vilify the political leadership and redeem the credibility of the army which was questioned by Imran Khan during his long marches in the way of the scandalous leaks by a recent report by the investigative news website Fact Focus which claimed that Gen Bajwa and his family had amassed assets worth USD 5.66 billion (12.7 billion Pakistani rupees) over the past six years during his tenure and acquired assets and businesses both within and outside Pakistan.

Short- and Long-term Impact

In the short term, the army's bid to tear down Imran Khan's image does

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not seem like succeeding much as a vast army of believing followers continue to believe him blindly and cheer him. They also trust him with his false narratives full of unfounded invectives against his political opponents and sections of the army he perceives as his real enemies. While Imran does not intend to antagonise the army expressly and has only taken the retired army chief to task, his propaganda tactic seems to soil the image of the army.

At a moment when such 'leaks' are becoming the norm in Pakistani politics, the net long term effect of all this on popular psyche has been

difficult to judge. Nevertheless, such leaks have set off a negative impulse in Pakistani society which will have an adverse impact on democratic politics in the country for a long time to come. It is likely to give rise to pervasive cynicism and lack of public trust in the existing system that includes the army. Such delegitimisation of the existing ruling elite of Pakistan may create the context for the rise of orthodox forces who lay emphasis on ethics and morality. Should we regard the unexpectedly improved performance of *Jamaat-i-Islami* (JI) in the recent local bodies elections in Karachi as a straw in the wind? ■

Foot Notes

1. Naila Inayat, "Audio leaks kick off 'happy hours' in Pakistan politics, everyone has stuff against everyone", *The Print*, 8 October, 2022.
2. Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter of the East*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988, p. 218-9.
3. Brigadier (retd) Syed A.I. Tirmazi, *Profiles of Intelligence*, Lahore: Combined Printers, 1995, p. 225.
4. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent Into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, New York: Viking, 2008, p. 221-2.

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5. "Sex and Spies: Has Pakistan army been using actors to honey trap politicians?", First Post, 04 January, 2023, <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/sex-and-spies-has-pakistan-army-been-using-actors-to-honey-trap-politicians-11925792.html>
6. S. Khan, "Pakistan: How the 'Audio Leaks' Scandal Has Discredited Politicians", *The Wire*, 3 October, 2022.
7. "Audio leaks of Pakistan government raise questions about cybersecurity", *ANI News*, 26 September, 2022.
8. S. Khan, "Pakistan: How the 'Audio Leaks' Scandal Has Discredited Politicians", *The Wire*, 3 October, 2022.

Note for readers and subscribers

We are happy to inform you that from January 2009 we have introduced the system of peer review of articles to ensure quality of publications and improve the scholarly value of our journal. We have a renowned group of scholars and academicians associated with our Centre and they are helping us in this process. We are grateful to them for their kind support and cooperation.

We would request our readers and subscribers to take note of these changes and we would, as ever, encourage them to send in research articles for publication to us. The manuscripts of research papers submitted for publication should be neatly typed in double space and the length of the papers should be ideally between 3,000-5000 words including the footnotes. They should contain an abstract and a short introduction of the author. The authors should use Harvard style for their references. The articles can be sent to us in an electronic format, (Ms Word 2003 format) also. For detailed guidelines they may send their queries to us in the following address.

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