**Me captain,you team: Very vain,very effective | The Indian Express**

Me captain,you team: Very vain,very effective. Summary. That's Imran Khan. Out to slay the 'circus ke sher' (of Nawaz Sharif),solve Pakistan's problems: thrash the thieves,get a driving licence,shoot down the drones,spook the West into giving you a visa. All you need is his bat,the magic wand that's,curiously,cast a spell. That’s Imran Khan. Out to slay the ‘circus ke sher’ (of Nawaz Sharif),solve Pakistan’s problems: thrash the thieves,get a driving licence,shoot down the drones,spook the West into giving you a visa. All you need is his bat,the magic wand that’s,curiously,cast a spell. If you wanted to be so boringly accurate,wounded tiger is a description that will fit Imran Khan,now that he runs his campaign from his mobile phone,his battered trunk all bruised and bandaged. But he may not like that. Because tiger is now identified with the opposition. Or rather,more fitting,given the way he has run his campaign,with his enemy. In so many years,in fact,decades of covering electoral politics,I have never seen a more rude and vain campaign. What matters,however,is that it is working for him. Main tumhara captain,aur tum meri team, he often tells his crowds. Now,when did you last hear that? Come election time,and your politician becomes the very epitome of humility and grace before the voter. Not a tiger,but a bheegi billi. Instead of the Me captain,you my team exhortation,he is more likely to say you are the masters of my destiny,and me forever your humble servant. Not Imran. His detractors dismiss him as an incurable case of I disease. But he doesnt bother. And his voters love it. All the metaphors and messages he uses are rude,macho and disdainful of all opposition. Main circus ke sheron ko maarne aaya hoon (I am here to kill the circus lions), he says,and the crowds cheer. Then he swings a cricket bat (his election symbol),like a pehelwan flaunts his mace in an akhara,and announces his plan to publicly whip the 500 biggest looters of Pakistan a day after the election. Crowds cheer again. Then he promises to shoot down the first American drone that enters Pakistani airspace once he becomes prime minister. Cheers get louder. And you cannot but shiver looking at the number of people in the crowd also swinging cricket bats they have brought along. IMRAN has developed a most original style of campaigning. He delivers one message and pauses. And loud background music breaks out,some kind of martial and shaadi-band bhangra-pop hybrid. Crowds sway with the music and,as it pauses,wait for Imran to resume. He never mentions India,rarely criticises the army,targets America and the Sharifs,and makes a real statement of courage by not hiding behind bulletproof glass shields. If anything,security at his meetings is ridiculously poor. His detractors say he obviously has nobody to fear,as he is the favoured candidate of both the army and the fundamentalists. But the chaos at his meetings is an experience. At his meeting in Nishtar Colony on Lahores Ferozepur Road an area that would resemble,say,interior West Patel Nagar in Delhi scores and scores of people fight their way to his stage,jostling and pushing while climbing a swaying,creaking steel ladder. The accident,which subsequently nearly crippled him,was waiting to happen. For him,each rally is like a celebration after a World Cup victory. The hero on his crazed fans shoulders,each day and moment when the hero can do no wrong,say nothing wrong. So,in one breath he questions the masculinity of the Sharifs,and in the other,asks the brothers to put their hands on their hearts and say that theyve been faithful to their wives. As for himself,he says,of course,that he never strayed even once,the moment he was married. Of course,the music breaks out again,and the crowds go delirious savouring,perhaps,the thought of what he was up to before that,and after. Anybody can see the hype,the overstatement and the over-promising and sheer bragging. While you do have some calm moments,like him promising equality and safety to my Hindu,Sikh and Christian brothers in his speech at R-Block in Lahores Model Town (the constituency has a large minority,mainly Christian,vote),it is generally the crassest,angriest,most personalised campaign,almost with shades of soft fascism,with exhortations to thrash the thieves and looters,to the swinging of bats. Whether he wins or not,Imran may be unleashing a monster on Pakistans back-streets. The bat can be an effective symbol of empowerment and Imrans advertising makes full use of it. You see common Pakistanis in familiar day-to-day situations of harassment and helplessness,and all problems vanish or are solved the moment one of them shows a bat with PTI written on it. A driving licence is given,traffic stops at zebra strips the moment a young woman plants a PTI bat in front of it. So far so good. But what bowled me over was the one where a Pakistani walks into an embassy (presumably Western),plants his bat menacingly,and is immediately handed back his passport,its pages prominently stamped VISA GRANTED in capital letters. Yes,the PTI bat is expected to strike terror not just in the hearts of bad guys in Pakistan,but also among arrogant,evil Western powers. Imran mixes contradictory philosophies and ideas with convenient ease. He supports the fundamentalist view of Ahmediyas as apostates,speaks glowingly of Shariah law and quotes Allama Iqbal in the same vein. YOU would normally think all this would put off the liberal upper crust,particularly the English-speaking,foreign-educated youth among them. The surprise is,it doesnt. On the contrary,they love him. At a dinner in a Japanese restaurant,we meet a small group of the brightest young Pakistanis,among them some Ivy Leaguers,who adore Imran. They say,in fact,that within their set,it would be uncool not to support Imran. For most of them,PPP would have been the default option in the past. But Asif Ali Zardari is not BB (or Bibi,as Benazir Bhutto is usually called) and her party is now a mere discredited rabble. The Sharifs are corrupt,old-fashioned and a force of political status quo. In any case,they are much too political. Imran,on the other hand,is idealistic and patriotic in a non-ideological,even apolitical,way. Rivals quibble with Imrans youth leader claims. He is,after all,only a year younger than Nawaz,and four years older than Zardari. But who is checking birth certificates? To an extent,you can compare this with the sentiment you saw among the Indian upper and middle classes at the peak of the Anna movement. It was able to ride the anti-politician movement,but only briefly. Because politics in India is much too deep-rooted and durable,and a vast majority of its people far too political,seasoned through so many elections. Thats why Annas wave fizzled out and,rather than disillusion the masses further from politics,has somehow seen voting percentages rise phenomenally across the country,in a surprising reaffirmation of the political system. There are dangers in such instant theorising. But perhaps,in Pakistan,politics is not yet as deep as well as ideologically divisive,and so a new and charismatic apolitical politician draws such trust and admiration. Particularly among the educated youth and women. Or contrarily,you can see Imran as Narendra Modi in a country much less diverse than India. ONE of Imrans strengths,you are told,is that he allows plenty of internal democracy within his party. That is one of the reasons,says my old friend,and for long a PPP loyalist,Shafqat Mehmood,now PTIs candidate in the National Assemblys constituency number 126,which includes the most exclusive Lahore neighbourhood,like Gulberg. Shafqat started as a freelance columnist,made some fame,and then joined BB as her information secretary. Now,he says,the PPP is finished. So finished,he says,that he doesnt even know who the PPP candidate against him is. Kaun haiga,tainu pata hai? (who is it,do you know?), he asks a campaign manager in mock curiosity. The difference between Imran and the Bhutto-Zardaris,he says,is that you can disagree with him openly. Then what happens, I ask. He listens to you, says Shafqat. But does he sometimes accept your point of view, I ask again. Not necessarily, says Shafqat,but no harm comes to you because you dared to disagree. There are,therefore,limits to internal democracy within PTI,but it is there,and that is unusual,and a positive in Pakistan. The party has had internal elections,for example. And Imran has discarded many familiar electables in favour of fresh and unknown candidates. He is asking you to vote for him,forget the candidates. Shafqat,however,has other concerns. One thing he must do on coming to power, he says,half-seriously,is to ban the use of roses in election campaigns. Why? Because wherever you go,they greet you with rose garlands that are constantly being sprinkled with water so they stay fresh. It makes a mess of your shirts. And then they shower you with those wretched rose petals that get stuck in your hair and ruins it. Shafqat takes us along to watch one of his corner meetings in K-Block,Gulberg,and hes besieged with what else,but rose garlands,on arrival. And then the wretched petals. When we leave,hes still working to dislodge them with the finger of one hand,while holding his coiffure in place with the other. At least,now we know why he is complaining. SURPRISE of surprises,for someone running such a sharp campaign,Imran has chosen Faiz Ahmed Faizs famous hum dekhenge (we shall see) as his partys anthem. Faiz was a communist,and the gentlest,most cultured and soft-spoken one at that. His immortal composition was both a tribute and exhortation to the people of god (khalq-e-khuda),which is both you and I (jo main bhi hun aur tum bhi ho) to throw away the yoke of dictatorship. He would surely have baulked at the thought of his most stirring political composition being used with the metaphor of a menacingly swinging bat where hum dekhenge begins to sound more like main tere ko dekh loonga (I shall sort you out). Faiz,whose own indifference to partisan politics was summed up in his jo aaye,so aaye,hum dil khushaada rakhte hain (let anybody come to power,we have a big heart),would have taken one deep,worried puff of his cigarette and asked,hello,just whose side am I on? But how did this happen,I ask his daughter Salima Hashmi,dean at the school of visual arts at Beaconhouse National University,who runs a pretty art gallery in her old Model Town home,mainly to help new artists display,and by a remarkable quirk of fate,has also been nominated health minister in the caretaker Punjab cabinet and is feeling rotten about a Pakhtun child who died of measles. All the parties had asked her for the rights to hum dekhenge,she said,and asked her to name the price. She said she wouldnt give it for anybodys millions,but offer it free if the Communist Party wanted it. But Pakistan hasnt had a communist party for very long,and thats a tale I save up for a bit later. In this case,it just so happened that this silly nephew of mine joined the PTI and told them they could start using the composition. It was too late for her to do anything about it. And now the story about Pakistans communists from a very spirited May Day evening in Lahore,1990. It was another of those periods when India and Pakistan seemed headed for war,and Benazir had taken the rhetoric to another level by promising to chop Jagmohan,then governor of Kashmir,into jag-jag,mo-mo,han-han,and Prime Minister V.P. Singh had asked tauntingly if those who talked of a thousand-year war could even last a thousand hours. I was in Pakistan,then,pursuing that story. In the morning,I,so utterly a reactionary,was drawn into attending my first May Day rally,albeit a kalam-mazdoor (intellectuals) gathering,at Pak Tea House,a liberal creative hangout. In the evening,some of us gravitated to dinner in a home by the canal,where the star was Eqbal Ahmad sahib,the nicest,warmest and most fun revolutionary ever. He had fought,by the way,with the Algerians and Palestinians,and was indicted for an attempted abduction of Henry Kissinger; the court later admitted it was a mistrial. After polishing off a lot of Black Label,it seemed,by 2 am,that we had resolved most of our problems,particularly Kashmir. As I was leaving,he first held my hand and said,young man,I am told you are a very good reporter with a great understanding of Pakistan politics,so let me give you a word of caution. Tell me,sir, I asked. You see,the view you heard here was the view of Pakistans left. I dont want you to make the mistake of thinking this is the view of anybody who matters in Pakistan. Why do you say so,sir? I asked. Because Pakistan has only nine communists left and all of them are here at this dinner, he said. And soon,beta,when Ill be gone,there will be eight left. He died several years later,in 1999,and was buried in Islamabad,and Salima Hashmi remembers it was a rare funeral in Pakistans history,where women stood shoulder-to-shoulder with men. I remind Salima of that conversation. And she laughs,more in delight than in regret. She is a most illustrious literary leftists daughter,after all. And is happy to live by his brilliantly renunciatory view of his own life: kuchch ishq kiya,kuchch kaam kiya. Now,that doesnt need translation.