

Radioactive

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

AQ Khan, the father of Pakistan's atomic bomb and the worst nuclear proliferator in history, is launching a new political movement. His goal? No less than to become Pakistan's Nelson Mandela.

In contemporary history, few men are as controversial as Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan. Celebrated at home as the "father" of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, he saw his international reputation tarnished after it emerged that he handed over crucial nuclear technology to Iran, Libya, and North Korea. The uranium enrichment centrifuges spinning at Iran's giant Natanz facility near Isfahan and the Fordow plant buried deep under a mountain near Qom are based on a design Khan brought to Pakistan from the Netherlands in the 1970s. For his proliferation sins, he was personally sanctioned by the United States in 2009.

Even now, mere mention of his name in some official circles in Washington leads to invective that makes the often vicious rhetoric of the current presidential campaign seem tame by comparison.

The latest developments in Pakistan, then, will likely have some U.S. officials reaching for their blood-pressure medication: AQ Khan is becoming a political force in his country, and is trying to become a player in the national assembly elections due to take place in April 2013. He recently launched the Movement for the Protection of Pakistan, or in Urdu, Tehreek Tahaffuze Pakistan (TTP). He responded by email to questions posed to him by Foreign Policy about his political ambitions and whether he has any lingering regrets about supplying nuclear know-how to some of the world's worst rogue states.

"Pakistan is in an extremely precarious and dangerous condition...it has gone to the dogs thanks to our most incompetent and corrupt rulers and their Western patrons," he responded when asked his reason for launching the party. "I can't simply sit back and see it destroyed. I feel that I must do something to try to save the situation, to make people aware of the importance and the sanctity of their votes and to use their vote judiciously and wisely in the next elections."

Despite reports that the TTP is an actual political party, AQ Khan appears to conceive of it as a broad-based movement whose goal is to direct Pakistanis to worthy candidates. Nevertheless, while Khan did not mention the two principal political parties -- the ruling Pakistan People's Party and the opposition Pakistan Muslim League -- by name, it is clear that he has little time for the career politicians who make up their ranks. He told me that he wants his movement to appeal to "the young generation, the educated, honest and competent government employees, businessmen (and women), lawyers, to mobilise and prepare for the coming elections. They must be aware of the importance of selecting good, competent, qualified bureaucrats and technocrats to stand as independent candidates."

Many Pakistanis who have been educated abroad and traveled widely, like Khan, can appear very worldly. But Khan, whom I interviewed twice for the *Financial Times* in the 1990s, always struck me as less cosmopolitan than others. He is also prone to some degree of political naivete. "A team put together by me will go from city to city to interview and investigate the antecedents of aspiring candidates and select them for the coming elections. We will then wholeheartedly support them," he wrote, by way of explanation for how the movement would expand. "In the very short time of our existence, we already have more than two million volunteers."

Despite those eye-popping claims, Khan's definition of success is limited. He lamented that small parties "are blackmailing and determining national policy" in the national assembly. "We could play a restraining and positive role, blocking all anti-state policies and activities," he said. "If we can achieve this, and I am very hopeful of being able to do so, then it will be a big success."

In the several books about Khan's proliferation activities, there are often allusions to his large ego. In my previous conversations with him, I always noticed he had a strong sense of self -- but I also found that he could be surprisingly modest. As for his own political ambitions, he appears to envision himself as a sort of moral guide who would transcend the trench warfare of everyday politics.

"As far as the non-political role [of perhaps being president of Pakistan] is concerned, if the majority of the people think I can help them in that way, I would not shrink from what I would consider as a duty to Pakistan," he responded. "We are quite clear about my role. I am just a guide -- some sort of Lee Kwan [sic] Yew, the former PM of Singapore, Mahathir [of Malaysia] or, hopefully, Mandela. I will only advise on good governance."

The most powerful force in Pakistan is the military, which historically has either ruled the country or, after retreating to its barracks, manipulated the politicians. Challenged on his prescription for this recurring problem, Khan avoided picking a direct fight with the generals. "The army has been used by corrupt politicians, just as was happening in Turkey," he wrote in his email. "If promotions were made purely on a seniority basis and personal likes and dislikes are not allowed to play a role, then [the military] would never dare to indulge in politics."

Khan's downfall came in 2004, when he was placed under house arrest by then President Pervez Musharraf's government for his proliferation activities, under heavy U.S. pressure. His confinement persisted for several years, during which he burned with resentment -- having been persuaded, in return for the promise of freedom, to confess on television that he acted alone. He has since said, and told me again last week, "Whatever I did, I did in good faith and upon instructions from authorities."

It's a controversial view that many in Washington simply don't believe. But I find it plausible. In writing articles on this subject over many years, and assisting the *Washington Post* on its reporting, a story emerges of how military dictator Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, according to Khan, green-lighted the original cooperation with Iran. The late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto also backed a deal with Muammar al-Qaddafi -- apparently as a way of saying "thank you" to the Libyan dictator, who had supported the Bhutto family after Zia had overthrown Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The cooperation with North Korea continued a long-standing military supply relationship: Pyongyang

developed an interest in Pakistan's uranium enrichment technology while setting up a plant in Pakistan to produce the Nodong missile, a much-needed delivery mechanism for Islamabad's newly tested atomic bombs, in the late 1990s.

Given evidence suggesting the Pakistani military's involvement in terrorist attacks in the Afghan capital of Kabul and the Indian city of Mumbai, as well as strong suspicions that it gave Osama bin Laden sanctuary in Abbottabad, it is no conspiracy theory to suggest that successive Pakistani governments knew what Khan was doing. But heaping blame on him for nuclear proliferation has been useful for Islamabad as well as Washington. He remains under some restrictions: "I can go anywhere, meet anybody (except foreigners), can address meetings, functions, convocations, bar associations, etc. and can give phone interviews to TV and radio stations provided only that these are within the country and are not about secret nuclear issues," he wrote.

In a test of how those limitations on his interactions with foreigners factored into this interview, I asked Khan about a recent accusation he had made against Musharraf, in which he accused the former military dictator of handing over uranium enrichment centrifuges to the United States. He didn't mince words: "Musharraf gave all our highly classified and secret information to the USA, the UK, Japan, the IAEA [the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency], etc. and sent invaluable centrifuge samples to the USA and the IAEA. He even gave them centrifuge drawings worth billions of dollars just to gain their patronage. For that he is a traitor."

Apart from this, however, Khan gave standard, boiler plate answers about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, about which the international community has voiced concern, particularly after an attack on an important air base last month. "Pakistan's nuclear assets are as safe as President Obama's black box. Nobody can even steal a screw from them," he responded. "A real danger can arise only if there is a spineless military dictator or a stooge Army Chief who can order them or their successors to override the system. The world should worry about their own problems, not about ours."

Khan puts on a brave face, saying that the criticism does not bother him, although he admitted it is a concern to his wife. "I don't care what Western leaders think about me," he responded when asked to respond to claims that he was a rogue agent. "Nobody in Pakistan doubts my integrity, honesty, sincerity or patriotism. It is this that I care about. I am not going to live or die in their countries, hence I don't care. Pakistani historians will remember me by the nickname they have given me: "Mohsin-e-Pakistan" (Saviour of Pakistan)."

Is there anything at all that he regrets about his long and controversial career? If so, as he enters Pakistan's political arena, AQ Khan doesn't let on.

"I did not do anything wrong, hence no regrets. I simply did as I was asked to do...There are many double standards in the world. What is good for me may be bad for you. What is just for you may be a crime for me."

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. His latest study is [Nuclear Iran: A Glossary of Terms \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/nuclear-iran-a-glossary-of-terms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/nuclear-iran-a-glossary-of-terms), coauthored with former IAEA deputy director-general Olli Heinonen. ❖

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