

Fall 2019 Speaker Series

Indian Ocean World Centre

Speaker: Zahra Sabri
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4:30 pm, Peterson Hall, Room 116

The Rise of Imran Khan: Religion, State, and Society in Today's Pakistan



It is a curious fact about Pakistan today that many of the people whose life experiences are furthest removed from the world inhabited by groups like the Taliban have been least enthusiastic about armed action taken against such groups, tending to favour pacifist policies, if not passivist ones. For many analysts and commentators, this apparent contradiction came to a head in the rise to political prominence of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice) and in the person of its founder and chairman Imran Khan, a former international cricketing champion. After having spent nearly two decades in the political wilderness, Khan's emergence as an important contender, and then a victor, in recent elections reveals some interesting trends about the direction in which a now significant segment of Pakistani society appears to be evolving, and also problematises certain typically employed categories of analysis. Is Khan, given his background and lifestyle, a 'liberal', or is he, given his views and policies, a 'fundamentalist'? This question was asked time and again as Khan became a popular target for satirists in Pakistan's English media (who called him 'Taliban Khan'), while remaining a source of endless fascination for the foreign press. Moreover, with what brush should we tar his followers, especially those who fall into the more youthful group often touted as his trump card – the 'youth vote'? Rather than employ apparently paradoxical categories of traditional political analysis, it is much more fruitful to see Imran Khan as representing a new kind of ideal, modern citizen aimed for by Pakistan's elite education system.