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Of a cricketer, politician, gentleman

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DURING my nearly-one-month stint in Pakistan, amid the seething tension, the sad state of refugee centres and the violence pervading the country and its western neighbour, there was a brief respite from the hard news when I had the opportunity to meet a legend.

He has been described as "charismatic and dashing" but as I sat in his office with an ordinary table with chairs neatly arranged and books ranging from religion, social issues to sports, a new description crept into my head - humble.

Imran Khan, former Pakistani cricket captain and leader of the Tehrik-e-Insaaf, shook my hands vigorously and led me to a chair in the corner of the room.

Imran was inspirational as a leader and showed why he was one of the finest all-round cricketers in the world when he led Pakistan to victory in the World Cup. In September 1992, shortly before his 40th birthday, Imran announced his retirement from cricket. He went into social work and put his foot into the political cauldron.

During the interview, Imran spoke candidly on a wide range of subjects. He often quoted from the Quran and was passionate about helping people, stressing that politics was about serving society and not about filling one's pockets.

Imran said he had never thought of entering politics during his cricketing days and had twice turned down offers to join the Cabinet.

But his experience of collecting funds, where he had direct interaction with the poorest enabled him to learn of their grievances and inspired him to do something to help them.

Imran said a revolution was needed to save Pakistan. Corrupt regimes had been running it far too long. Also, he wanted to serve the people who had given him fame and respect.

In April 1996, Imran launched Tehrik-e-Insaaf and in February 1997 contested the general election.

Although his party failed to win a seat, Imran feels that four years later Tehrik-e-Insaaf is ready to win the next general election - scheduled to be called by President Pervez Musharraf before October next year.

"There is a need for the Pakistani people to make up their own minds and vote according to their conscience and this change is slowly but surely creeping into every nook and corner. The urban voters are also becoming more aware of the need to have a transparent and honest government," he said.

He is an admirer of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whom he has not met. But he has read books and documents on the many policies the Prime Minister has implemented to push Malaysia forward.

"Two decades ago, Pakistan was way ahead of your country. Today Malaysia has become one of the most progressive Muslim nations in the world and the credit goes to Dr Mahathir's successful policies and programmes," he said.

He was also full of praise for the Malaysian people who set racial and religious prejudices aside, and said Pakistanis could learn much from the Malaysian experience.

We discussed his cricketing prowess including how he is one of only four cricketers to score 3,000 runs and take 300 wickets in Test cricket. His eyes lit up as he reminisced about his playing days.

He admits missing the days at the crease but insists that God has a new agenda for him which includes helping Pakistan and its people to move forward.

Imran's commitment to his cause and his people is in line with the honesty and conviction with which he played cricket and his genuine desire to serve his people is bound to attract voters as much as it did fans.

Having thrilled cricketing fans all over the world with his masterful strokeplay, lightning fast bowling and captaincy, he stands poised to take on the more responsible role of bringing his country out of poverty and sectarian strife in the same way that he welded a hugely talented but fractious bunch of players into one of the great teams of the Eighties.