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Campaign travel

Jet, Set, Go!

Now, the country's top politicians opt to fly, and the carrier of choice is Princely Jets

● FAROOQ TIRMIZI
KARACHI

Imagine you are Imran Khan or Nawaz Sharif. You are the face of your party, running a nationwide campaign, and seeking to become the next prime minister of Pakistan. You need to attend multiple rallies every day in different parts of the country, and still be back home in Lahore or Islamabad at night to at-

tend strategy meetings with your closest advisers. How do you possibly manage all of it without dying of exhaustion? Simple: you call Princely Jets.

If the Pakistani political campaign was invented by Pakistan Peoples Party founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto for the 1970 election, it is being reinvented by the leaders of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz in 2013. And the Karachi-based Princely Jets, a private aviation company owned by the Akbar Group, finds itself in the unexpected position of CAMPAIGN TRAVEL, PAGE 9



COST-EFFECTIVE LUXURY: The interior of the Bombardier Challenger 604, a plane owned by Princely Jets, and used frequently for campaign travel by several leading politicians, including the Sharif brothers, Imran Khan, and others. PHOTO: BOMBARDIER

Jet, Set, Go!

CAMPAIGN TRAVEL, FROM PAGE 1 benefiting from the change in political travel patterns.

With a shorter campaign schedule than any other election in Pakistani history, the 2013 campaign is putting an enormous physical strain on the top political leaders who lead their respective parties' bid for the prime minister's house. In competitive districts, particularly in Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, the parties want to bring out their big guns, resulting in Imran Khan and the Sharif brothers' schedules being packed with several rallies in different districts.

Given the poor road network in many parts of the country, in addition to the security risk that many of the top political leadership face, travel by private helicopter or private plane ends up being the most convenient option.

Sources say that PTI chairman Imran Khan is more prone to use helicopters, since many of his campaign events are in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and other parts of the country that do not have landing strips that might be able to accommodate a plane. PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif is more prone to using planes, since he frequently travels to larger towns in Punjab that have air-

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Aviation expert

strips, or even airports.

“Helicopters are infrastructure-neutral,” said one aviation expert. “They can fly to places where conventional aircraft simply cannot go.”

The time savings can be quite significant. In the plains of Sindh and central Punjab, one hour of helicopter flying time would cover a distance that would take a car about six hours to traverse. In the more mountainous regions of northern Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, a helicopter can cover 11 hours worth of driving time in one hour.

And while private planes and helicopters can be expensive, they do not appear to be completely unaffordable. Sources say that the parties who use Princely Jets' services pay commercial rates, in advance, which come to between \$4,000 and \$6,000 per flight hour.

That may sound like a lot, but it appears to be less expensive than travelling with large entourages. A typical

road caravan can include over 30 vehicles, including police personnel who are taken off their regular duty to provide security for politicians. By contrast, the politicians' airborne entourages are restricted by the 10-seat capacity of the planes and 5-seat capacities of the helicopters.

Princely Jets, meanwhile, appears to be a politically neutral company. Aviation industry sources familiar with the company's operations say that it has provided services to leaders from across the political spectrum. While the PTI and PML-N are currently its biggest users, previous clients include former President Musharraf, former prime minister Shaukat Aziz, President Asif Ali Zardari, and even former British foreign secretary David Miliband, who did his “Lunch with the FT” interview with the *Financial Times* onboard a Princely Jets Bombardier Challenger 604.

Sources in the aviation business say that political parties do not seem to mind having the same service provider. “A seat on a Princely Jets plane is probably the only one politicians are willing to share,” said one aviation industry expert, who declined to be identified.