

Bodies in the *Air*

by

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The first plan should have worked. All it had needed was for one old woman to die at the right time. If she'd just popped off on schedule then maybe the country wouldn't be falling apart right now.

Where to begin? I feel like one of those analysts on television who insist on taking you back a few regimes to try and explain why everything is broken in the current one. Does it start with Sadiq Amin's recent removal from the Prime Minister's office? Or the election that carried him there in the first place? Does it begin even earlier, with his latest marriage?

We can start with the removal I suppose. Amin is out of power and angrier than ever. His people are salivating at the bit to occupy the streets indefinitely. Every day he blocks a new road and shouts about conspiracies, pointing fingers in dangerous directions. The rupee is in freefall. Business is good.

People need money moved, papers forged, and eyes looking the other way as they board planes and cross borders. They need to get the hell out of here and I'm the one to make it happen. Anything for a fee, that's my motto. I'm on call to men at three different airports when Safdar Lawa barges into my office. He dumps a file full of Whatsapp screenshot printouts onto my desk, forcing me to hang up two lines and put the third one on hold.

Lawa has been saddled with an insane task. Amin is becoming a problem his superiors are finding difficult to contain. He is opening can upon can of worms, working lies into half-baked truths that his savvy media teams then spread far and wide, destroying reputations built over decades.

Everything has been tried to make him less popular. Disinformation campaigns, leaked phone calls, corruption allegations, murder FIRs, and blasphemy charges. Nothing works. Recordings are dismissed as deep-fakes, paper trails fall apart, and snitches repent last minute.

“His father-in-law is using black magic to make sure no one can touch him. What was he before marrying Pir Mansoor Shah’s daughter? Nothing. A celebrity playing politics, giving speeches, fudging interviews, and collecting charity. He is under a serious spell and I have been ordered to find a way to break it.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to consult a Pir or Baba yourself?” I ask.

“We have. All the Babas and Alims we’ve consulted agree about the spell and tell us it’s a strong one. They say there is only one way to break it; Amin needs to be in the same room as a dead body.”

Babus and their WhatsApp forwards will sink this country one day. If they haven’t already.

I am standing in line outside Sadiq Amin’s opulent residence, leaning against a wheelchair, and trying to time poison. Lawa talked absolute nonsense but he is not offering money for this task, he’s promising prime residential and commercial real estate. And I can’t say I haven’t heard the rumours. Sadiq Amin cannot be in the same room as a dead body. Ever since his first successful election, he’s never been to a funeral. Never visited the home of dead or dying supporters. Never toured a hospital

after a national disaster. I still remember the speculation when he was nowhere to be seen at the final prayers for Muneer Ahmed Bandial, his closest confidante and one of his party's founding members. His team cited security concerns but the stories were already flying from group chat to group chat.

The old woman in the chair is drooling ropes of saliva into her lap. The boy pretending to be her grandson has gone in search of someone he can bully into letting us cut the line. Armed with photoshopped pictures of his 'Daddi Jaan' in a polling booth, he is claiming to already be in contact with someone who will let us in. I'm simply a chair-pushing relative. Nothing specific. Don't want to stand out.

When my people brought me the old woman in from the NGO-run shelter home where she had been left to rot, the cardiologist on my payroll did some tests. He gave me the name of a generic blood-pressure drug that would, within an hour or so, send her little heart into overdrive, and her soul to God. I just need to make sure someone sees her alive first.

Most of the thousands who show up every day to offer support to their ousted leader are not allowed in Sadiq Amin's presence. The man is not always at home and when he is, his media team scouts the eager fans and picks a handful that would look good shaking his hands on camera. My vegetative septuagenarian has a good chance in her new shalwar kameez and expensive shawl. But a little grease on the wheels never hurts. Our boy works for the social media team that runs coordinated attacks on Amin's critics online and would probably sell his own mother for a few lakhs in foreign currency. He should know the right people.

He soon appears with a woman holding a clipboard, who seems delighted with my aged offering. We are rushed past the lines of eager devotees, past layers of security, reporters, servants, and staff, and finally, into a small anteroom.

“Daddi Jaan had a stroke immediately after news of the VONC broke.” the kid is really committed, chattering away to the other chosen few in the room with us; schoolboys, a singer of small renown, and a group of middle-aged women in party colours. I make a show of gently forcing ‘Dadi Jaan’ to sip from a small juice box, making sure she swallows the capsule hidden in the straw.

Now we wait.

The minutes tick past. Our old woman slowly leans forward. Her eyes close. I push her back in her seat and use an inflatable neck cushion to help her stay somewhat upright. I check her pulse and feel nothing. A pair of dark glasses perched on her nose and you really can’t tell that she’s no longer with us.

All of a sudden the clipboard woman rushes in.

“Quickly!” she cries, “We only have 5 minutes!”

The boy jumps up and forces open a path for me. I’m holding one of the old woman’s cold claws, angling it so it looks like she is holding mine, as I push the wheelchair through a few more rooms and passages. Finally, we’re ushered into a space so brightly lit that it’s almost impossible to keep my eyes open.

Amin sits on a throne-like chair. He too is wearing dark glasses but he is not dead. People mill around the room carrying papers, speaking on phones, and talking amongst themselves. Clipboard positions us and the nearest reporters begin to swarm, clicking at their cameras, calling out to us to smile, to stand, to sit, to turn this way, turn that way. I know the job is done. Even if these photos are not publicized, I'll simply call one of the channels and get the proof Lawa will ask for.

Amin is in the same room with a dead body. The spell is broken.

Without warning, our dead body suddenly jerks forward. The glasses fall off. Her rheumy eyes are wide open. The old woman is *not* dead. She raises a bony hand and lays it on Sadiq Amin's head. He seems surprised but leans forward. The cameras go wild.

Lawa is not happy. My cardiologist is not happy either. I've had his car, a newish Prius, picked up by my people and have let him know that his dodgy advice just cost me a lot of money.

I'm annoyed but I haven't given up. If there is a spell, then it seems to have a few fail-safes built in. The old woman is still alive, if you care, and back at that dump. The medication has been more restorative than fatal.

Plan B needs more work and I have at least three bodies in the air this time. I ask Lawa to reach out to Amin's inner circle and make them convince him to visit that hospital of his. Another photo opp, this time with sick little children. It takes a month of work and then a heavily televised visit by the current prime minister (Sadiq's

bitterest rival) to the city's largest burn centre to get him to finally consider it. I have some people among the nursing and cleaning staff and everything they tell me when the visit is finally confirmed, seems to indicate that Amin at least does believe that there is a spell.

A ward in the hospital furthest from the morgue is emptied of real patients and the entire building is purged of anyone in critical condition. Children have been brought in to lie in the beds for about 30 minutes as Amin walks through with TV crews. The visit has caused enough pandemonium (bribery has helped, I'll be honest) for me to bring in my corpses, and the fake staff who will be handling them.

Imagine this. Our former PM rushes into the ward with the cameras and poses with sickly infant after sickly infant while I wheel a dead man through the double doors behind him. I have hospital staff with me, one of whom will be holding a saline bag connected to our 'patient'.

"Taking him for an X-ray."

Radiology is close by so that will be the excuse for anyone asking (no one will ask if my men know their business) but we plan on moving too fast to be stopped. I am determined to build up speed and then barrel the wheeled bed into his entire entourage if I must. At the other end of the building, the second corpse with more saline bags and a concerned relative holding a dead hand is being wheeled towards the same ward from roughly the opposite direction. It is timed to find him just as he's leaving the fake ward. We should be able to trap Amin into a dead man's sandwich of sorts. Corpse #1 at one end and Corpse #2 at the other. No escape.

Corpse #3 will be waiting in the parking lot where I know the ex-PM's car will be left running, waiting for him to leave. A little fail-safe of my own. My people will be paramedics removing another 'patient' to rush into the emergency. The guards who are supposed to redirect their ambulance away from the cordoned-off area have been paid well.

This should work.

It doesn't.

Amin is more of a nervous wreck than I imagined. The man barely spends 5 minutes taking photos with the little kids. Later one news outlet even broadcasts footage of him shoving a ward boy out of the way in his hurry to get the visit over with. Despite my fervour, I am too slow with corpse #1, barely catching a glimpse of the tail end of his group as they speed off through the hallways.

Corpse #2 should have slowed him down but it is found out before it even gets to the right floor. Some over-eager attending notices that its colour is not right when the gurney has to slow in a crowded corridor. She calls for a code blue or red or whatever it is they say in real hospitals when they try to resuscitate someone. My people do a good job of pretending to be shocked that their charge is dead and slip away in the ensuing confusion.

Corpse #3... the spell. I'm starting to believe in that damned spell. My paramedics spot the hullabaloo that heralds Amin's exit into the parking lot. They quickly pull out the collapsible stretcher and prepare to rush him. Something happens to the mechanism of the stretcher's front legs as bolts pop off and our body is tipped

onto the floor. One of my men is clipped quite badly in the ear by flying stretcher parts. I think the other one should have just picked the dead man up in a fireman's hold and run in any way but Amin's security spots something amiss and the cowards bundle everything up back into the ambulance and drive off.

I am almost out of ideas.

Three corpses should have been enough.

Lawa is furious. He's called in too many favours to arrange the hospital visit, and his superiors are now refusing to take his calls.

I realise I have underestimated the seriousness of the situation when, a few days later, a lone gunman shoots at Amin and his people as they arrive at court to attend a hearing for one of the many cases he has been tangled up in.

That's one way to get a body close to him I suppose, but it's messy, because if you miss then the assassination attempt catapults him to even greater heights of popularity.

The gunman doesn't miss but he doesn't kill anyone either. Flesh wounds and grazes.

I reluctantly decide to try one last time. I don't like the idea I've come up with because it is going to require a significant chunk of the payment I'm expecting for this

job. Still, the next time Amin announces a press conference, I am ready. Or rather my final weapon is.

Abdul Jabbar is a reporter at one of the country's oldest Urdu language newspapers and his employers have not paid him for the last three months. His household is one of the many to which I send monthly rations. I think I've had someone pay his son's college fees once or twice. When I whistle he comes running.

I offer his family an end to their reliance on charity and dwindling credit. He simply needs to attend Amin's presser, wait for an opportune moment, and rush towards the man after swallowing a small pill (a more reliable pill this time). My story is that Amin is going to reveal some information to the press that certain people will do anything to keep in the dark. I tell him that the pill will give him a small heart attack, possibly making him pass out and causing enough disruption to bring the event to a halt. Amin's security, more paranoid than ever after the shooting, will have no choice but to force a cancellation and throw everyone out.

Jabbar looks pale. I tell him that this is a risky proposition but if I see him doing what I ask on live TV his wife will inherit a very valuable plaza from an unknown and distant relative. He might never be able to work again but he will not really have to. I tell him he can think about it until a conference is actually announced. He only takes 24 hours to decide.

A few days later Lawa is sitting next to me as we watch Jabbar stagger towards Amin on television, interrupting his response to a question about graft allegations. I feel my guest let out a long sigh as our reporter collapses mere feet from our target,

his arm tangling in the cables of the microphones the former PM has been speaking into.

“He’s definitely dead?” asks Safdar, wiping his brow.

“Cyanide works fast,” I respond.

He walks away from the television to make a call and I keep watching as the live feed is interrupted by a frantic reporter yelling about the scene we have just witnessed. The files I have been promised are spread out on the table. Jabbar’s family will get the most valuable item in the lot but the rest are satisfactory. Also, it doesn’t hurt that this has shored up my reputation for perseverance and reliability amongst the people Lawa is reporting to.

Things happen so quickly after this that the death of a newspaper reporter barely merits a ticker on some of the smaller news channels. The next day several dozen rangers in riot gear storm Sadiq Amin’s residence and drag him into a police vehicle in front of dozens of cameras. At Abdul Jabbar’s funeral, it occurs to me that I ought to have made some provision for his parents as well since it is unlikely his wife would wish to share her new wealth. As I leave I ask one of my men to keep me apprised of how they get on.

Coverage of Sadiq Amin’s arrest and subsequent indictment is unrelenting and as the media circus around the case grows more and more frenzied, I turn my mind to other things. The news now plays on mute but I make sure one of the younger boys

watches diligently to let me know if anything big happens. The usual stream of drivel on my Whatsapp groups picks up a notch with endless clips of YouTube journalists dissecting every piece of news, statement, and conspiracy theory until I cannot take it any longer.

I want to take a break from my phone for a few days. Let my people handle the day-to-day.

A week later after the arrest, my men drag Abdul Jabbar, alive and well, into my office. As he brings his hands together in a mute appeal for mercy from the floor, I feel as though the room is receding around me. The sense of accomplishment I've been feeling evaporates and I wonder how I could have been duped like this. There *had* been a body covered in a sheet, I'd read a Fateha for it. I had spoken on the phone to the coroner *myself* when he wanted to bargain for more money to write the words 'Heart Attack' in his report.

I should call Lawa, even if it's too late. My eye catches the television screen as I look for my phone. It shows silent fire raging in buildings, very important buildings, and it shows people running quietly in and out of the frame, waving flags.

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