

Beyond the Headlines: How Language Shaped the Debate over ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan

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When a public controversy erupts, people often assume they are arguing about facts. More often, they are arguing about what those facts mean.

The recent removal of Karim Khan as Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) illustrates this perfectly. At first glance, the story appears straightforward: an international prosecutor was accused of sexual misconduct, investigated, and ultimately removed from office by the Court's member states. Yet almost immediately the controversy became about much more than the allegations themselves. It evolved into a debate over due process, institutional legitimacy, international politics, and even the words used to describe what had happened.

Understanding the case therefore requires looking not only at the legal proceedings but also at the language surrounding them.

A Court at the Center of Global Politics

The International Criminal Court investigates and prosecutes individuals accused of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and aggression. Because its work frequently involves powerful governments and politically sensitive conflicts, nearly every major decision it makes attracts intense international scrutiny.

Karim Khan's tenure was no exception. Before the disciplinary proceedings reached their conclusion, he had sought arrest warrants against senior Israeli officials and Hamas leaders in connection with the Gaza conflict. Those actions generated fierce political reactions, including sanctions imposed by the United States against Khan and other ICC officials. By the time allegations of sexual misconduct against Khan became public, the Court was already operating under extraordinary political pressure.

That background did not determine the outcome of the disciplinary process, but it ensured that every subsequent event would be interpreted through competing political lenses.

Why Supporters Believed Removal Was Necessary

Those supporting Khan's removal argued that the central issue was institutional accountability.

Following a lengthy investigation, the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services concluded that Khan had committed serious misconduct. The ICC's governing Bureau subsequently determined that he had engaged in a serious breach of duty and referred the matter to the Assembly of States Parties, the body composed of the Court's member governments.

The complainant later appeared publicly, maintaining that she had experienced months of grooming, coercion, and ultimately non-consensual sexual conduct.

Supporters of removal argued that whatever procedural disagreements existed, confidence within the Office of the Prosecutor had been irreparably damaged. Even if legal questions remained contested, they contended that an institution entrusted with administering international justice could not function effectively while its chief prosecutor faced such allegations and such profound internal divisions.

From this perspective, removing Khan was not simply punishment for alleged misconduct. It was an attempt to preserve the credibility of the institution itself.

Why Critics Opposed the Decision

Critics viewed the case very differently.

Their principal concern was not necessarily whether misconduct had occurred but whether Khan had received a fair process.

His lawyers argued that an independent judicial panel had reached conclusions more favorable to Khan than those ultimately adopted by the ICC Bureau. They also objected to procedural changes made during the disciplinary process, including changes to the voting procedure and the limited opportunity afforded Khan's legal team to participate in the final stages of the proceedings.

Other critics focused on timing. Because the disciplinary proceedings coincided with Khan's pursuit of politically explosive arrest warrants against Israeli officials—and with sanctions imposed on the ICC by the United States—they questioned whether geopolitical considerations had become intertwined with an internal disciplinary matter.

Importantly, several civil society organizations did not claim that Khan was innocent. Instead, they argued that even a justified disciplinary process must remain visibly independent from political influence if the Court is to retain international legitimacy.

Two Stories About the Same Event

This is where the controversy becomes especially revealing.

People observing exactly the same sequence of events often described them in dramatically different ways.

One narrative portrayed the episode as a long-overdue exercise in institutional accountability. Under this interpretation, the ICC demonstrated that no official, however senior, stands above ethical standards.

The competing narrative portrayed the proceedings as an example of political interference overwhelming procedural fairness. According to this interpretation, the disciplinary process became entangled with larger geopolitical struggles surrounding the Court's investigations.

Neither story simply presented facts. Each organized those facts into a broader explanation of what had happened.

The Power of Words

This is also why the language surrounding the controversy matters.

Consider the word *political*. Throughout the debate, virtually everyone used it—but almost never in the same way.

Supporters of Khan described the disciplinary proceedings as "political," suggesting that governments had allowed external interests to influence the outcome.

Supporters of the removal used the same word differently. They argued that critics were attempting to politicize what should have remained an ordinary disciplinary process.

The word therefore functioned less as a neutral description than as a way of challenging the legitimacy of the opposing side.

The same pattern appeared elsewhere.

Some commentators described the proceedings as a "witch hunt" or a "stitch-up," implying fabrication or conspiracy. Others spoke of accountability, professional responsibility, and institutional integrity. These competing vocabularies encouraged readers to interpret uncertain facts through familiar cultural narratives—either abuse of institutional power or politically motivated persecution.

Even headlines subtly guided interpretation.

A prosecutor might be described as having been *removed*, *dismissed*, *ousted*, or *fired*. Each verb refers to the same event, yet each carries different emotional and political overtones. "Removed" sounds procedural. "Ousted" suggests force and conflict. "Fired" evokes ordinary employment

disputes. Small linguistic choices shape readers' impressions before they reach the first paragraph.

Names matter as well.

Throughout much of the reporting, Khan remained "Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan," reinforcing his institutional status even while allegations were discussed. The complainant, by contrast, was initially described only as "a junior staff member" or "a colleague" before later appearing publicly under a pseudonym. These differences reflected legitimate concerns about privacy but also influenced how readers perceived authority, vulnerability, and credibility.

Even numbers acquired symbolic meaning.

Reports emphasized vote totals, the number of supporting states, or the number of organizations signing public statements. Such figures suggested democratic legitimacy or broad consensus, even though numerical support alone could not resolve the underlying questions of misconduct or procedural fairness.

More Than One Controversy

Ultimately, the dispute over Karim Khan became several controversies at once.

It was a disciplinary proceeding concerning allegations of misconduct.

It was a debate over procedural fairness.

It was an argument about the independence of an international institution operating under intense geopolitical pressure.

And it became a struggle over language itself.

The same evidence generated remarkably different conclusions because people interpreted that evidence through different narratives, different metaphors, and different assumptions about what the International Criminal Court represents.

Why This Matters

The Khan controversy offers a broader lesson that extends well beyond international law.

In today's information environment, public disputes are rarely decided by facts alone. Facts matter profoundly, but they are almost always encountered through stories, metaphors, headlines, and symbols that help people decide what those facts mean.

Recognizing those interpretive frameworks does not tell us who is right. It does something equally important: it helps us understand why intelligent and well-informed people can examine the same events yet arrive at fundamentally different conclusions.

The controversy surrounding Karim Khan therefore deserves attention not only as an episode in the history of the International Criminal Court but also as a reminder that language is never merely a vehicle for describing political and legal conflict. It is one of the places where those conflicts are fought.