

FEATURED

Who is Shakir Khan? The former Lodi City Councilman has been the focus of controversy since his arrest four weeks ago on voter fraud charges. He agreed to an interview with the News-Sentinel recently to talk about his life, family, and career in politics.

By Steve Mann/Special to the News-Sentinel
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Shakir Khan, City of Lodi city council candidate for District 4, at a gathering during election night in Lodi Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2022
Bea Ahbeck/News-Sentinel

When Shakir Khan immigrated to Lodi from Pakistan 23 years ago, he spoke no English. He and his family moved into a one-bedroom apartment on Lodi's eastside. His father stayed behind to tend the family farm before traveling to America several years later.

Khan began school at Washington Elementary on Lockeford Street, but he says he was bullied there by other kids because he didn't speak English. The experience was painful enough that he was moved to Needham School, where he says there were more Pakistani kids. He says he fit in better there. His teacher was Charlotte Fye, the same teacher his son Rehan would have 22 years later.

Khan says he became fluent in English after only seven months in America. Today he says he speaks a total of five languages: English, Pashto, Urdu, Hindko, and Punjabi.

Shakir, who goes by the nickname "Shak," was born 33 years ago in the village of Shinka, a rural area about an hour's drive from the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. His family farmed potatoes, tobacco and various row crops.

He married his wife Bibi in 2009. The couple has three children, Rehan, 10; Emaan, 4; and Azan, 2. They live in a modest home on Central Avenue. Shak says he makes his living from owning three apartment buildings and the old Roundhouse bar on East Lodi Avenue, a property he recently finished remodeling. He says the Roundhouse will become a grocery store sometime in the future. Khan says the Pakistani community sticks together, helping each other out in starting businesses or buying investment properties.

"The Pakistani community in Lodi is very close to each other when it comes to supporting one another," he says.

Khan says he owned three tobacco shops in Stockton from 2015–2018. During that same time, Khan says he worked as a contractor for the U.S. military at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, translating classified communications for U.S. Special Forces.

As a young man growing up in Lodi, Khan says he became concerned that the local Pakistani community, mostly located on the city's eastside, was under-represented at City Hall. He also noticed that members of his community weren't politically active. Indeed, many Pakistani people he knew had never voted in their life.

He also witnessed many of his neighbors, fed up with the way California was heading politically and socially, were moving to other states. That struck Khan as the wrong approach.

"Instead of moving out, what can I do to improve things?" Khan pondered to himself. He also thought it was time for younger people to take charge. "Give the new generation a chance," he says.

While being mostly indifferent to politics, Khan has strong opinions about current events. He says homelessness is a national problem, adding the state and federal government focus too much on other countries. As for federal government generosity, Khan says, "Nothing should be given for free," and as for awarding reparations to particular ethnic or racial groups? "That's ridiculous," he says.

"We are on our way to becoming a communist country," he says.

Khan also says there should be changes made in Lodi city government. "The city needs to do more to involve the community," says Khan. "We were elected by people to listen to people." To that point, Khan says ethnic groups in town are not being heard.

"People on the eastside (of Lodi) feel they're being ignored," says Khan.

"The staff always provides the opposite feedback to council members and the projects get left behind," he says. What's more, Khan says, "People in the public works department think the same as 30 years ago. The outside environment has changed."

When Lodi was forced to change to district elections several years ago, that was the catalyst that prompted Khan to get involved in local politics. He filed to run for Lodi City Council In 2020, and he won by 282 votes, defeating three opponents, including the incumbent.

To many it was a surprising victory because a week before Election Day Khan was arrested by the San Joaquin County Sheriff, accused of owning and operating an illegal gambling casino in Stockton, money laundering, tax evasion, and Economic Employment Development (EDD) fraud.

It would take at least a year for the district attorney to press charges. In the meantime, Khan would be sworn in and serve two relatively productive years representing District 4.

Khan says he's accomplished a lot since he was elected, ticking off achievements such as new sidewalks on the eastside, improved code enforcement, new street lights, improvements to street sweeping, and securing \$25,000 in community block grant funds for the Lodi Boys and Girls Club.

"As a council we got along really good," says Khan.

But then in February Khan would once again be arrested by the sheriff, this time for alleged voter fraud. Deputies took Khan into custody at his home, in front of his family and neighbors. Khan says the media was also there to capture it all on video.

Later that day Lodi Mayor Mikey Hothi would pay Khan a visit at the county jail facility. During his visit, Hothi would suggest to Khan, dressed in an orange jail jumpsuit, that he resign from the city council. The meeting and conversation were witnessed by a deputy sheriff and recorded by his body camera.

Khan agreed to sign the hand-written letter, which Hothi immediately filed with the city clerk. However, Khan says he called Hothi shortly afterwards to tell him he changed his mind and wanted to rescind the letter. He maintains that he signed the resignation under duress and intends to file suit to invalidate it.

Two weeks ago, Khan organized a march to City Hall from his property on Lodi Avenue to protest what he calls his forced resignation. About 50 of his friends and family, many of them carrying signs and banners, crowded Carnegie Forum during a city council meeting to protest the resignation. Khan took to the podium during public comments and gave an impassioned speech before an overflow crowd of well-wishers and several members of the press, declaring his innocence and pledging to challenge his resignation in court.

Khan takes particular exception to how he's been treated by the sheriff. He says he didn't know the mayor was at the jail to ask for his resignation, and he says he wasn't given an opportunity to speak to his family or attorney before deciding to sign the paper. Khan also says the sheriff shouldn't have gone to the homes of his constituents to ask them how they voted.

"What was done to me was wrong," says Khan emphatically.

He also says his family remains distressed after seeing him being arrested, handcuffed, and placed into the back of a patrol car. "It was tough for me. It was sad for me," Khan says softly. He says his wife cries and is still upset about what happened. "My son is still going through trauma," he says.

For all his legal battles, and the ones that lie ahead, Khan says he's spent about \$100,000 in legal fees. And he acknowledges it's only the beginning.

Khan says he will run again if his legal challenge fails. "I will run 10 times, if I have to," he says.

While it remains to be seen how his legal troubles will play out, he says, “I’m proud of what I’ve done for the community. I’ve made an impact.”

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