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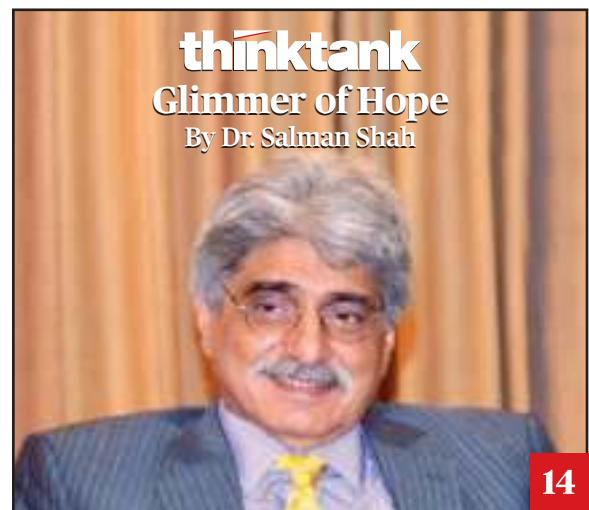
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**Opposition's Great Dilemma**

By Amir Zia



**Opposition's Great Dilemma**

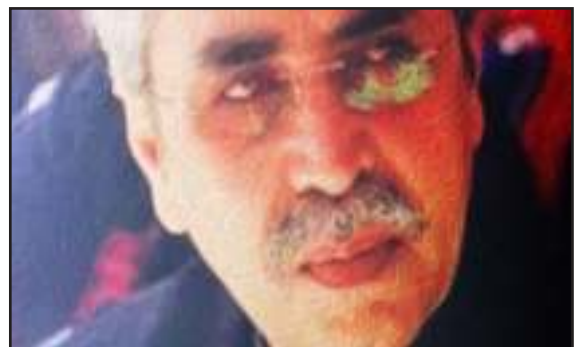
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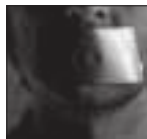
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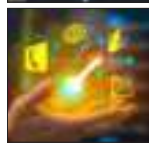
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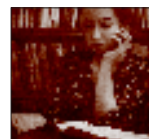
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# A Deafening Silence



Ibrahim Sajid Malick  
Editor, *Narratives*

Since 1947, the people of Occupied Jammu & Kashmir have fought for their liberation from India's oppressive rule with fantastic tenacity and perseverance. Since Hindu extremist Narendra Modi became India's premier in May 2014, the oppression of the people of Kashmir escalated to a horrendous level. At the policy level, Prime Minister Modi scrapped even the symbolic autonomous status of Kashmir and proclaimed it as an integral part of India, violating the United Nations (UN) resolutions and bilateral agreements with Pakistan. He also revoked the autonomy of Jammu & Kashmir granted by India's constitution in Article 370, dissolved its state government, and put it under the direct rule of New Delhi. This change effectively ended the constitutional relationship between Kashmir and the Indian Union. The people of Kashmir have responded to these heinous acts with peaceful protests, for the most part. However, the Indian security forces have responded to these protests with excessive and indiscriminate force, killing, wounding and arresting scores of Kashmiris as they resorted to the worst human rights abuses. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has issued several reports documenting these violations.

In addition to the policy level oppression, India has also escalated its military aggression in the occupied region. Under Modi's rule, the occupying Indian forces routinely fire on unarmed civilians, including women and children.

The people of Kashmir have borne the brunt of India's aggression, but they are not alone. Pakistan stands by its Kashmiri brethren, highlighting their case at all international forums as well as responding to the Indian aggression on its territory in kind. In February 2019, the Pakistan Air Force shot down two Indian fighter jets that violated Pakistani airspace.

The escalating violence in Kashmir is a direct result of India's refusal to recognize the legitimate rights and aspirations of the Kashmiri people. Countless checkpoints in Srinagar and other towns mean even short distances might take hours to traverse. Since 2020, security activities have been stepped up, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the previous two years have been the deadliest in Kashmir's history. According to a Human Rights Watch study issued in July 2021, about 100 military operations were conducted in Indian-occupied Kashmir, resulting in the deaths of numerous Kashmiris.

The people of Kashmir have a right to self-determination, as recognized by the United Nations. The UN Security Council has passed resolutions affirming this right on several occasions. India must end its brutal occupation and allow the people of Kashmir to exercise their fundamental rights.

India's secularism has been a sham from its inception. Still, Modi's RSS has broken all records regarding minorities' mistreatment. The Indian ruling elite is so absorbed with Muslim prejudice and widespread discrimination towards other minorities that they fail to comprehend its lethal long-term ramifications. The Indian government is oblivious to the fact that driving minorities into a corner and spewing vitriol at them would backfire and come back to haunt them.

The current situation in India is reminiscent of the period preceding World War II when Nazi Germany began its campaign to eliminate Jews and other minorities. The rise of Modi's RSS-Hindutva fascism is not an accident – it was hiding behind the secular camouflage.

Modi's oppression of the Kashmiri people is unmistakably a war crime that has progressed beyond the realm of human rights breaches. These are being perpetrated against the people of Kashmir by the Indian occupying military and militias as part of a larger plan to change the basic nature of the state by changing its demography. India must be held accountable for its crimes. The international community must pressure India to respect the human rights of the people of Kashmir and peacefully resolve this conflict, which remains a threat to regional peace. But the silence, indifference and double standards of the international community are glaring.

# ZEROING IN



**The Narratives' editorial team takes a look at three stories that made the headlines...**



# Trading with the Enemy

*Adviser to the Prime Minister Abdul Razak Dawood's statement on opening trade with India stands in conflict with Imran Khan's position that there won't be any normal relations with New Delhi until it scraps its Aug. 5, 2019 legislation on occupied Kashmir*



*Is Minister for Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood attempting to sabotage the PTI government's pro-Kashmir policy from within?*

**T**here is a tiny but highly influential lobby in Pakistan, which never misses an opportunity to advocate the resumption of trade ties with India even at the cost of the country's core national interests, including undermining the Kashmir cause once for all. This lobby includes some business barons, select media tycoons, the so-called rights activists, especially those working for the Western-funded NGOs, and even several top leaders of mainstream political parties. The tentacles of this lobby are present even in the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). On February 20 in Lahore, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood, in an interaction with the media, declared that "trade with India is the need of the hour."

"As far as the ministry of commerce is concerned, its position is to trade with India. And my stance is that we should trade with India, and it should be opened now," Dawood was quoted as saying by the English-language daily *Dawn*.

Ironically, the position of the Ministry of Commerce and Adviser Commerce stands directly in conflict with Prime Minister Imran Khan's declared policy that there won't be business as usual with India until New Delhi revokes its August 5, 2019 measures, which violate U.N. resolutions on Kashmir and bilateral agreements between the two countries.

New Delhi unilaterally scrapped the symbolic autonomous status of the occupied Kashmir in August 2019 and made

it part of its 'union territory.' Since then, India has launched concerted efforts to change the demographics of this Muslim-majority region and carried out the worst kind of human rights abuses and state terrorism.

Against this backdrop, downgrading diplomatic and trade relations with India was the bare-minimum Islamabad could have done, along with offering some lip-service to the cause. Under these circumstances, Prime Minister Imran Khan's stance of "no talks and no trade with India" not just reflects the sentiment of the vast majority of Pakistanis but was necessary to keep the issue alive.

Yet, Dawood – who himself is a lead-

*Dawood openly signalled to the enemy that there are fissures within the government ranks over the issue, implying that sooner or later Pakistan would practically accept the one-sided assimilation of Kashmir in the Indian union territory.*

ing businessman – challenged Prime Minister Imran Khan's principled position on Kashmir and openly signalled to the enemy that there are fissures within the government ranks over the issue, implying that sooner or later Pakistan would practically accept the one-sided assimilation of Kashmir into the Indian union territory. From Pakistan's point of view, Abdul Razak Dawood's statement is highly irresponsible and dangerous. It encourages New Delhi to continue with its policy of repression in the occupied Himalayan region without any cost.

And this is not the first time that this adviser to the Prime Minister has tried to damage Pakistan's interest through his words and actions. In September 2018, soon after the PTI government came to power, The *Financial Times* quoted Dawood saying that Pakistan was mulling over a review of the CPEC agreement with China. The report had said that Dawood believed that all CPEC-related projects must be halted for a year. Dawood's statement created an uproar even within the government circles, and he was forced to issue a rebuttal. But Dawood's negative remarks against the CPEC were nothing short of an attempt to wreck relations between the two time-tested allies.

Again in March 2021, the then Finance Minister Hammad Azhar had announced that the Economic Coordination Committee had allowed the import of cotton and sugar from India. Mercifully, the proposal was shot down in the cabinet. It was later revealed that Razak Dawood



*Trade normalisation with India will throw Kashmiris under the bus.*

misled young Azhar about the issue, saying that he had a nod from the prime minister.

One can say that there is a method to Abdul Razak Dawood's madness as he knows that he is representing the deep-rooted commercial, business and political interests of the influential lobby, which has been long trying to transform Pakistan into a state ready to accept Indian hegemony in the region by compromising on its national interests – from Kashmir to the country's nuclear programme.

No wonder, a few days before this highly controversial statement made by Razak, another leading businessman, Mian Muhammad Mansha, also advocated opening trade with India.

One can see that the members of the lobby are acting in tandem. It is only the public pressure that is preventing this lobby from launching an all-out pro-India advocacy campaign. However, they are testing waters for now by issuing such statements. Unfortunately, their test bal-

***Abdul Razak Dawood's statement is highly irresponsible and dangerous. It encourages New Delhi to continue with its policy of repression in the occupied Himalayan region without any cost.***

loons are largely being ignored by most media outlets, which are focused on domestic politics. But this indifference of the media, political leadership and even the state institutions towards the activities of this lobby is a dangerous sign and further

damaging the Kashmir cause for which Islamabad has failed to take any practical or meaningful steps.

Prime Minister Imran Khan and his team – no matter how overwhelmed they are because of the challenges and compulsions of domestic politics – need to take stock of the situation and act against dissenters in the PTI ranks, who are challenging the government policy and deliberately trying to damage the Kashmir cause.

The government and the state institutions should be transparent that the country's long-term core interest cannot be compromised because of today's weaknesses. Pakistan has to stand by Kashmir at any cost – come what may. The Razak Dawoods and Mian Manshas of this world, their patrons and allies in the media, cannot be allowed to damage the country for their narrow self-serving interests.

Abdul Razak Dawood's statement should be condemned – more so because it has come when the Hindu extremist government is aggressively squeezing space for Muslims in occupied Kashmir and those living in India. From the occupied Kashmir to every Indian state and city, Muslims face discrimination at every level – from educational institutions to the employment market. They are being hounded, humiliated, tortured and even killed on the flimsiest charges, from slaughtering a cow – which is considered sacred by many practicing Hindus – to marrying a Hindu woman. The latest controversy surrounding the wearing of the Hijab is taking the hostilities against Muslims to the next level.

Prime Minister Imran Khan needs to issue a strong message on Kashmir, assuring the Kashmiris and Pakistanis that there has been no one-sided concession or flexibility, which was the hallmark of the former government of Nawaz Sharif. In the future, the Prime Minister should also take action against those cabinet members who do not share the nation's aspirations and his vision on Kashmir. Let's hope that Prime Minister Imran Khan does not let the nation down on this front and continue to expose Indian fascism and advocate the Kashmir cause at every possible level. If Pakistan is sincere in winning international support on this issue, it must walk the talk. New Delhi must first revoke its Aug. 5, 2019 legislation on occupied Kashmir to restore regular ties. ■



*In its latest anti-Muslim initiative, the BJP is cracking down on Muslim students who wear the Hijab.*



# Balochistan's Terrorism Challenge

*Balochistan's political elite has failed to take the ownership of the national narrative to counter propaganda by terrorists*

**O**ver the last one year or so, there has been a marked change in the pattern of terrorist attacks in Balochistan. If earlier, the fringe sub-nationalist terrorist groups targeted non-local workers and labourers, in recent weeks and months, they are mounting attacks mainly on the security forces, particularly in far-flung border areas of the country's southwestern province.

The latest example of these changing tactics was witnessed on February 2 when the terrorist stormed the security forces camps in Panjgur and Naushki. The security forces killed 20 terrorists after the attacks, in which nine security personnel embraced martyrdom.

The timing of these attacks coincided with Prime Minister Imran Khan's planned visit to China on February 3 to attend the Winter Olympics in Beijing where he had to hold important top level meetings with the Chinese leadership, including President Xi Jinping. As Islamabad and Beijing aimed to push forward the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the terrorists wanted to threaten the Chinese to stay away from Balochistan, which is also the objective of India and other hostile nations.

Such terrorist acts, though challenging, failed to derail the CPEC in the past and are unlikely to stall them in future as both Pakistan and China stand committed to this mega initiative. Now, most of these attacks are carried out in areas close to the borders of either Iran or Afghanistan, where mobility is relatively easier for the terrorists.

However, against this backdrop, the shift in the pattern of attacks appears strategic and crucial to the narrative building of the terrorist groups, particularly on the social media, where many an-



*Funeral service for the soldiers martyred in the terrorist attack on an army check post in Panjgur district on February 2, 2022.*

ti-Pakistan voices – from the vast Indian propaganda machine to the tiny segment of the westernised liberal Pakistanis – in one way or the other lend their support to the insurgents.

The situation becomes a little more complicated due to the lack of ownership of the state narrative by the political parties operating in Balochistan. The mainstream national parties, including the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan People's Party, lack the clout in provincial politics. They mainly depend on select tribal chiefs and elders for their symbolic presence in the province. However, this symbolic presence expands or evaporates with the change of loyalties of these influential local politicians. Among the national parties, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl is an exception with its solid vote bank in select Pashtun-dominated districts.

For two reasons the nationalist and provincial parties, including the ruling Balochistan Awami Party, appear to lack focus and commitment in building a narrative against the violent sub-nationalist groups. The number one reason is that the leaders of these parties are too parochial and remain focused on constituency or at the most provincial-level politics. The second reason is that many of their politicians are afraid to openly criticize terrorist groups and their tribal patrons because of the threat to their lives. For example, several local leaders and workers of the pro-federation National Party were killed by terrorists in recent years.

Then there are other parties, including the Balochistan National Party-

Mengal, which by design or default indirectly supports the narratives of the terrorist groups rather than outrightly rejecting and condemning their acts.

The state is represented overwhelmingly by the security forces, which try to fill in the vacuum as the political parties and the elected representatives fail not just to provide a national vision but also address the basic problems in their constituencies despite the injection of hefty amounts of development funds, the bulk of which unfortunately get misappropriated. This, in turn, fans more discontent and deprivation among the people.

The political establishment has failed to take measures to create job opportunities for the educated youth of Balochistan, where in recent years, several impressive high education institutions have been established. This fuels discontent and makes it easier for the anti-Pakistan element to misguide the youth.

Balochistan also does not find much space on the mainstream national media because it hardly has any commercial stake there. As a result, the problems, issues and aspirations of the people of Balochistan hardly get space on the national media which superfluously focuses on this province only when there is some trouble, natural calamity or terrorist attack.

While the security forces are focused on hunting down terrorists, the most crucial elements of bringing peace in Balochistan appears to be missing; integrating the province in the national narrative, creating job opportunities for the youth and carrying out development work. ■



# America's War on Books

*Over the past several years, there has been a new surge in parents, activists and lawmakers demanding that certain books be removed from school curriculums*

**I**t's been a rough few months for books in the United States of America. Parents, activists, lawmakers have been demanding that certain books be removed from school curriculums and libraries from coast to coast. These challenges have traditionally been confined to school-board meetings, but they have exploded into the political sphere in recent months. So what's behind this new wave of book censorship? Let's take a closer look.

Over the past several years, there has been a new surge in parents, activists and lawmakers demanding that certain books be removed from school curriculums. In some cases, this is because the book contains explicit content or profanity; other times, it's because the book challenges certain religious or political beliefs.

Whether it's removing the Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* from a Tennessee school district's eighth-grade curriculum or classics like *The Handmaid's Tale* from library shelves, incidents of grassroots pressure on schools to control the materials children can access appear to be increasing in frequency and intensity.

There has also been an effort to restrict what may be taught in schools, including prohibitions aimed at critical race theory, which investigates the role of laws and other institutions in racial inequality. There have also been restrictions on sex education. In 2019, lawmakers in South Carolina passed a bill prohibiting the discussion of alternative sexual lifestyles or gender identities unless it's part of an abstinence-only curriculum. There were similar attempts at legislation in Texas and North Dakota last year, although these eventually failed.

According to those wanting to remove some of the textbooks from class-



*Parents and elementary school students in Pennsylvania protest against book bans, October, 2021.*

rooms, some of the texts include inappropriate content for youngsters. Opponents argue that taking books out of classrooms violates the rights of parents and pupils who wish to read them. They believe that exposing children to a wide range of literature will help them learn about themselves and the world around them.

Many people have pointed out that some of the books being challenged have been at the centre of controversy for decades. For example, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was first published in 1885 and has been contested hundreds of times since then. In this case, parents and activists claim it contains racist language and should be censored. But the question remains, is it a step in the right direction to censor or rewrite a work which has assumed the status of a classic. And let's not forget that every book is a reflection of the time and age when it gets written. The ideas which are seen politically incorrect today, maybe were the acceptable norm at that time and attitudes which are acceptable today remained a taboo at that time. Therefore, censoring or scrapping a book of the past or judging it by applying today's moral, political, and rights standards in itself remains a highly flawed approach.

On a local level, the endeavour takes the form of parent and activist-led initiatives to remove books from school

shelves and curricula. On the state level, there has been a push to ban "critical race theory," which limit teachers' speech and "educational transparency" rules, which sometimes go as far as putting teachers on publicly accessible webcams.

But why is this happening now? There are a few possible explanations.

First, social media has given people a louder and more visible voice than ever before. This makes it easier for challengers to organise and galvanise support for their cause, which is compounding polarization and constant friction in many societies. Additionally, there's been a rise in the far-right activism, which itself is a reaction to the aggressive propagandist approach and assertiveness of the liberal order, which is trying to impose and dictate its political and economic systems and values on every society, including the traditional ones, without taking into account their objective conditions. A staunch belief in traditional values characterizes the movement of the far-right, and it's been on the rise since the 2016 presidential election.

Finally, there's also been a general erosion of trust in institutions. This includes schools, but it also extends to the government and the liberal media. People are increasingly sceptical of what they're being told, which has created a vacuum for extremist ideas. ■



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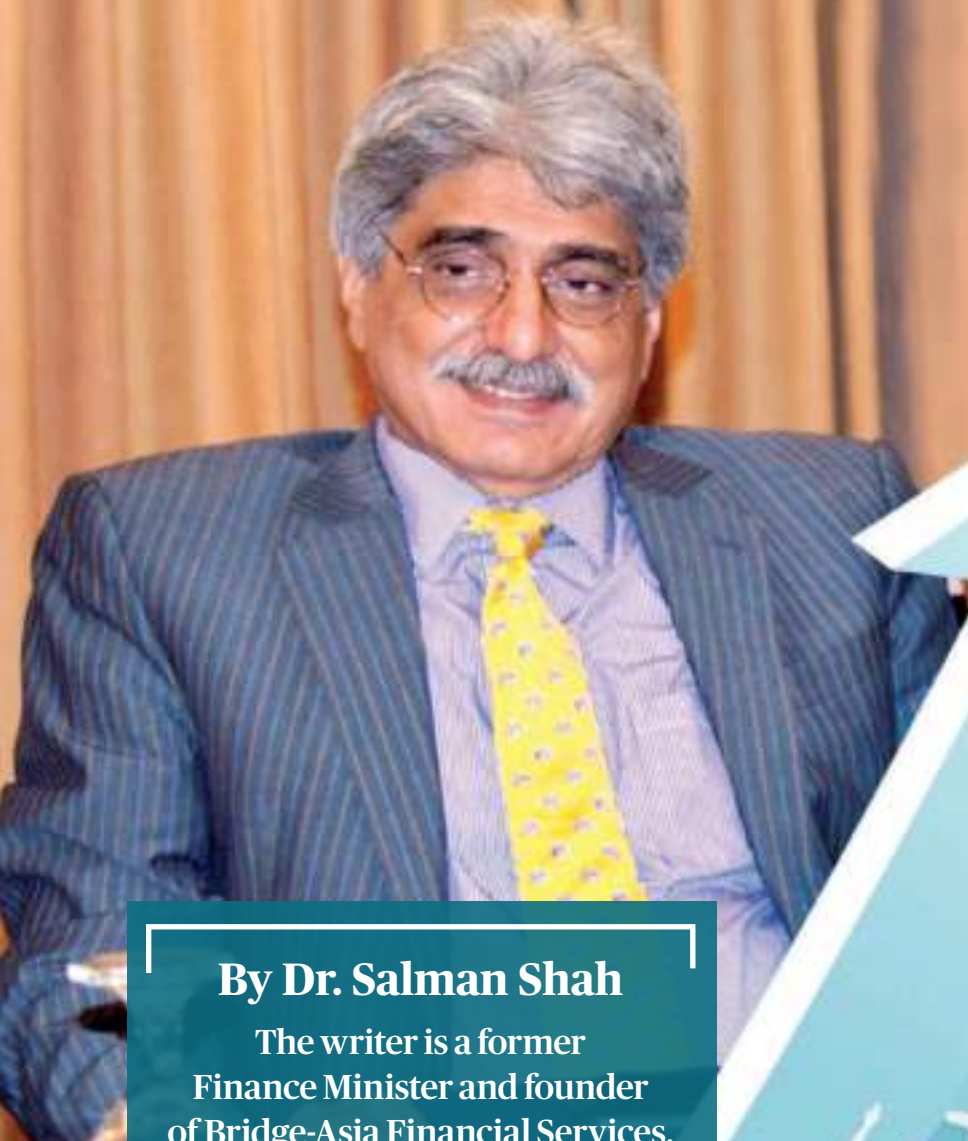


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## On the Road to Recovery



### By Dr. Salman Shah

The writer is a former Finance Minister and founder of Bridge-Asia Financial Services. Currently, he serves as an advisor to the Chief Minister of Punjab on Economic Affairs and Planning & Development.





# Glimmer of Hope

The PTI government's economic performance provides hope for Pakistan's economic future, despite opposition attempts to cast doubt on the progress

**O**n Jan. 13, 2022, the National Assembly passed the Finance (Supplementary) Bill 2021 – generally known as the 'mini-budget' – amidst scenes reminiscent of a Pakistani street brawl. The importance of the bill could not be underestimated as it was a prerequisite for bringing the 22nd IMF programme back on track. Failure to pass the bill would have led to the derailment of the IMF programme with consequential damages that could have plunged the economy into a deep abyss. The treasury benches hailed it as a victory of the ongoing reform programme to turnaround a bankrupt economy, while the opposition benches declared it as a surrender and the darkest day in the history of Pakistan. The vote reflected the sharp political polarisation in the country, which is now generating enormous economic uncertainty at the expense of the people.

In the power politics of the country, the opposition argues that the government is responsible for bankrupting the country in its three and a half years in office, and hence it needs to be replaced immediately to save Pakistan from further damage. The opposition has pinned all hopes on painting the PTI government as incompetent and convincing the distressed people that it should be removed through long marches and enticing the government's supporters to switch sides in the parliament, triggering its collapse. Notwithstanding the economic chaos such shenanigans would generate, the opposition claims that it has better economic managers at its disposal and would negotiate a better deal with the IMF.

This is not the first IMF programme in the history of Pakistan. In fact, we are the most frequent users of the IMF's services in the world. The tragicomedy of the political economy of Pakistan is that the most vocal and vociferous condemnation of the IMF programme in the parliamentary debate comes from the leaders of the two parties which subjected Pakistan to the most numerous IMF programmes



**Contrary to popular perception, much of Pakistan's external liabilities were accumulated under the PPP and PML-N administrations.**

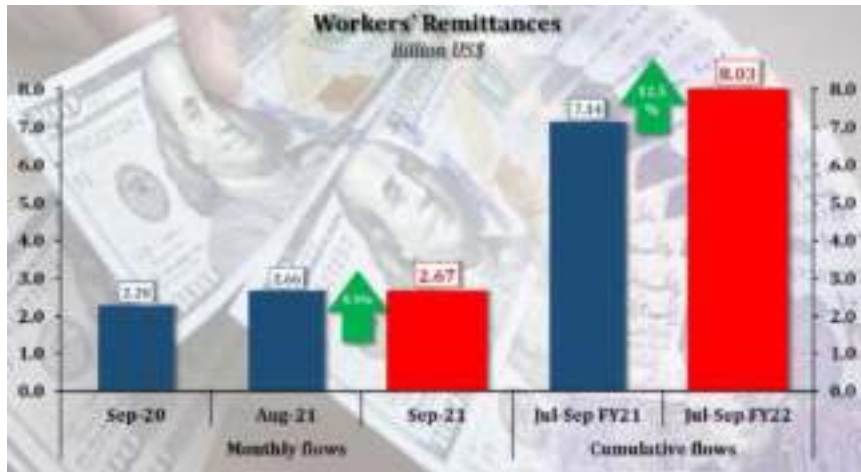
in recent history. The PPP has done the honours six times, and the PML-N has the distinction of doing four agreements, with the latest one in 2016. The various IMF article IV consultation reports, are a documented history of all the actions that were agreed by respective governments over the years but were never implemented. The genesis of the current programme also lies in the failure of the 2016 programme.

*The new government, at its inception, inherited a full blown balance of payments crisis, embedded in a classic external debt trap wherein it had to borrow more in foreign currency to not only repay the loan instalments, but also to pay the interest incurred on those loans.*

For the record, it is instructive to note that within a few months after the ending of the last programme in September 2016, the IMF was sounding the alarm bells and cautioning the government to take actions to stop the rapid deterioration in critical economic indicators. These warnings were clearly reflected in the July 2017, Article IV, IMF consultation report that inter-alia included the following critical observations:

1. Exhorted the PML-N government to safeguard the macroeconomic gains of the completed programme through continued implementation of sound policies, and to continue with structural reforms to achieve higher and more inclusive growth.
2. Warned that foreign exchange reserves have declined since the end of the EFF-supported programme and remain below comfortable levels.
3. Cautioned that on the structural front, progress in electricity sector reforms has been mixed with a renewed build-up in circular debt.
4. Pointed out that massive financial losses of ailing public sector enterprises (PSEs) have continued.
5. Highlighted that private investment and exports remain too low to support higher private sector-led growth and catalyse needed job creation.
6. Cautioned that lower-than-expected export growth or remittances over the medium-term could increase risks





*Rising foreign remittances have buoyed Pakistan's economy over the last two years.*

associated with rising repayment obligations and profit repatriation from the energy investments and other CPEC-related projects

7. Warned that greater exchange rate flexibility was needed to rebuild external buffers, which were below adequate levels, and strengthen Pakistan's competitiveness, which had been affected by real effective exchange appreciation.

8. Advised that maintaining fiscal discipline, limiting government borrowing from the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) and ensuring its full operational independence, will be important pre-conditions that need to be in place for effectively controlling inflation.

The PML-N government in 2017 was in no mood to listen to any sane advice and freed from the discipline of an IMF programme, went on a spending and bor-

*The genesis of the current IMF programme lies in the failure of the 2016 programme, under the PML-N.*

rowing binge in preparation of the next elections.

By the time the new PTI government was inducted in August 2018, Pakistan's external debt had accumulated to over \$85 billion, needing a recurring external debt servicing of over \$12 billion a year accompanied with an annual current account deficit of over \$19 billion, repre-

senting a combined gross financing gap of over \$30 billion a year. With only \$8 billion in the foreign currency reserves, and no financing arrangements in place, the country was facing an imminent default. Pakistan was losing reserves at the rate of \$100 million a day and would have run out of reserves in a matter of few weeks unless credible new financing arrangements were not established.

Thus, the new government, at its inception, inherited a full blown balance of payments crisis from the PML-N, embedded in a classic external debt trap wherein it had to borrow more in foreign currency to not only repay the loan instalments, but also to pay the interest incurred on those loans.

This meant that Pakistan's external debt would continue to increase due to the legacy of the previous stock, draining needed resources away from investment in the economy. This would happen when the new government would be undertaking painful economic reforms to transform the fossilised systems of an import-dependent, bankrupt economy; a transformation that would eventually create a sustainable export-led economy but, in the interim, put enormous burden on the people in the shape of devaluation, supply side disruptions, inflation, tax increases and austerity. The new government from its inception, would have to pay a high political cost for the sins of the previous governments.

In the 42 months since the advent of the PTI government, it has faced and effectively managed three unprecedented mega crisis:

- Pakistan's worst balance of payment crisis, that it inherited in 2018.
- The outbreak of a 'once in a century pandemic' in early 2020.
- Since August 2021, massive price surges in global energy and commodity markets due to disruptions in production and logistics supply chains caused by the pandemic.

Multiple crises, one after another, have truly tested the mettle of the new government. It has gone about tackling the emanating challenges, unfazed, with grit and determination. In spite of the heavy odds and extremely vicious opposition narrative, it has successfully stayed off bankruptcy. This involved the timely arranging \$10 billion of foreign currency financing from friendly countries and



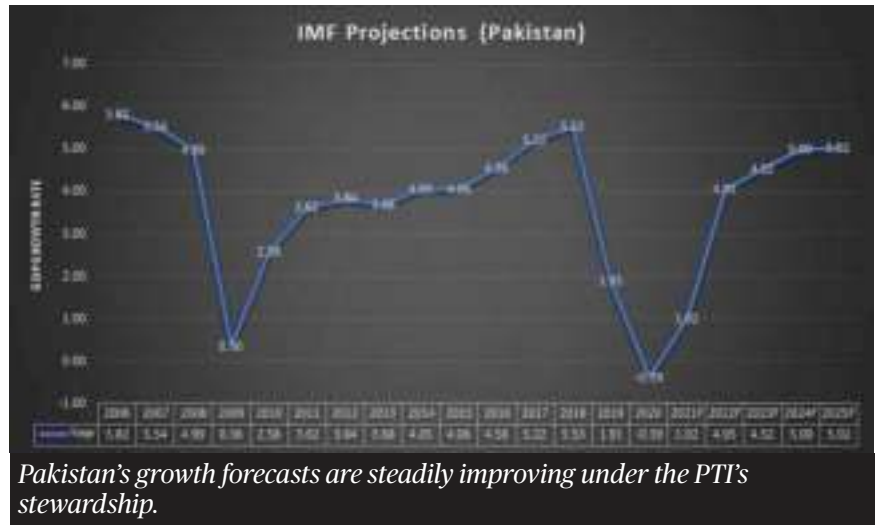
*The PTI government is credited with bringing Pakistan's current account into surplus, unlike its predecessors.*



signing an IMF programme that unlocked \$38 billion worth of financial inflows over the three-year period. These two critical financing actions enabled Pakistan to avoid defaulting on its obligations. As a precursor to concluding an IMF agreement, unpopular policies of implementing a market-based exchange rate system, keeping real interest rates mildly positive and adjusting electricity prices to reflect the full cost of delivery of power were initiated early on. The current account deficit which sparked the balance of payment crisis in 2018, came down sharply and by middle 2020 had turned into a surplus.

The pundits were predicting the value of the dollar to cross Rs. 200 by year end 2018, but this has not happened. Instead, the government has been able to stabilise the economy and weathered the onslaught of 10-13 percent yearly inflation albeit igniting popular discontent. However, the government managed to keep the headline inflation well below Pakistan's highest yearly inflation rate of 20 percent, witnessed during the PPP regime in 2010. All efforts were made to prevent the full impact of international prices percolating into domestic food prices. To protect the most vulnerable, the government funded the biggest expansion in the social safety net Ehsaas Programme, it focused on supporting and enhancing the eco-system for promoting employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for the low-income groups under the Kamyab Pakistan programme, implemented a free health insurance scheme for all families, and provided targeted subsidies for provision of food rations to the poor, all designed to cushion some of the inflationary impact.

While the rest of the world was resorting to massive lockdowns and bringing economic activity to a standstill, the Prime Minister insisted from the start that the economy will not be allowed to shut down as its impact on the poorer segments of the society would be devastating. The multiple initiatives comprising the SBP's special financing to keep the production supply chains functional, disbursement of Rs. 1.2 trillion targeted financial support for the vulnerable, creating a system for organized pandemic monitoring and coordinated vaccination, coupled with smart lockdowns, proved to be highly successful. Neither were our health systems overwhelmed nor did our



economy suffer massive disruptions. In addition, focused strategies to enhance sectorial productivity and investments, including job creating development-driven budgetary allocations, helped create stability and normality.

Leading world bodies acknowledged that we were amongst the top countries which achieved total economic normalcy following the breakout of the virus. The GDP growth that declined by 1 percent in 2019-20, has bounced back in 2020-21, registering a healthy recovery in agriculture, manufacturing, and services combining to yield a respectable overall 5.5 percent GDP growth. Agriculture growth of 3.5 percent, industrial growth of 7.8 percent and services growth of 5.7 percent is heartening and bodes well for the future.

It is evident that Pakistan is slowly but surely moving out of the economic quagmire of the last few years and is now well positioned for making big strides in its quest for rapid and sustainable economic growth. There are at least 10 indicators that support this optimism.

1. With the parliamentary endorsement of the IMF conditions, economic uncertainty regarding our debt refinancing and access to the international capital markets has been considerably reduced, which is an important factor for improving the overall investment climate in the country.

2. All sectors of the economy including agriculture, manufacturing, and services are buoyant.

3. The IT startups, for the first time, are attracting noticeable foreign investment.

4. Our corporate sector is cash rich

and in FY 20-21 has shown all time high production, sales, and profits.

5. Exports are increasing at a rapid pace and have exceeded all previous levels.

6. Foreign remittances continue to grow and have crossed the \$30 billion a year milestone.

7. Demand for private sector credit is strong and fresh financing has crossed the trillion-rupee mark.

8. Bank balance sheets are strong and are flush with liquidity.

9. Investment under the CPEC is transitioning towards business-to-business ventures and is expected to ignite foreign direct investment that may exceed all the previous records.

10. The leadership of the country is single-mindedly focused on geo-economics and is willing to pay the political costs of taking tough economic decisions and undertaking governance reforms that have been left unattended in the past.

While light at the end of the tunnel is clearly visible with economic deterioration having been reversed and economic incentives correctly realigned, the government is fully cognizant of the need to quickly generate sustainable export-led growth of 7 to 8 percent a year enabling Pakistan to come out of the external debt trap, and create job opportunities for our enormous youth bulge. To achieve this objective, long neglected structural reforms have to be effectively implemented. Prime Minister Imran Khan is personally monitoring the progress of around a dozen economic transformation initiatives to correct the deep-rooted institutional



*The opposition's reckless protests threaten to derail Pakistan's hard-won economic stability.*

and sectorial challenges that negatively affect public and private investment, national productivity, and competitiveness of the economy. These initiatives are critical but extremely challenging, as they are up against entrenched bureaucratic controls, archaic processes, obsolete skill sets, risk aversion, fear of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), and general resistance to change. Successful implementation will determine whether Pakistan will be able to break into the desired higher growth trajectory.

Notable major initiatives in various phases of implementation include reforming the energy sector to overcome legacy issues and create a system that provides competitive, affordable and reliable energy for all, with independence from imported fuels. Furthermore, fixing the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) to make it a tech savvy, professional and investment friendly entity that provides the needed tax revenues transparently, equitably and with ease of compliance and avoidance of taxpayer harassment, and a revamped Privatization Commission has been tasked with accelerating the privatization of state-owned enterprises and stopping the profuse financial bleeding they impose on the federal budget.

The various sectorial ministries are implementing plans, including transforming agriculture into a modern, profitable and globally competitive economic

*Barring another black swan event or further escalation of global oil prices, Pakistan's best days are here to stay.*

sector, deregulating the manufacturing sector and eliminating the 'NOC Raj,' which is crippling our productive sectors, facilitating development of the private sector, and removing the constraints on the development of the small and medium enterprises. To boost the knowledge economy, a special technology park authority has been created and tasked with attracting investment to put Pakistan on the global map of information and computer technology with emphasis on enhancing national artificial intelligence capability.

In the trade area, Pakistan is rapidly completing the building blocks for becoming a regional trade hub by connecting Central Asia, Western China, and Afghanistan to our ports on the Arabian Sea. Trade liberalization, Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), and framework agreements for investments are being put in place for efficient and smooth transac-

tions. At the provincial level in Punjab, a spatial strategy, approved by the cabinet, is being implemented to create international competitive advantage for Punjab through divisional and district development plans dovetailed with master planning in each division, district, and city of Punjab. These plans realign development expenditures and arrangements for each area, to strengthen their respective value chains in agriculture, manufacturing, and services sector. The focus of master planning is to turn our cities into engines of growth by transforming them into internationally competitive cities.

The banking sector, under the leadership of the State Bank of Pakistan, is opening up inclusive financing in new areas such as mortgage finance, agriculture finance, and SME finance. The State Bank of Pakistan's Roshan Digital Accounts are facilitating investment by overseas Pakistanis in a big way. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is expected to jump manifold due to the launch of phase-II of CPEC; Chinese corporate sector investment is expected to boom. The Board of Investment has been tasked with populating Special Economic Zones at a rapid pace. All impediments in the way of FDI are being proactively reduced.

By the grace of God, Pakistan is now on the road to recovery and growth. The issuance of global Sukuk Bonds within days of the revival of the IMF programme was well received in the international markets. Heavily oversubscribed, it is already trading at a premium. This indicates the confidence of the international financial markets in the emerging story of Pakistan; its potential and the commitment of its leadership to reform. Barring another black swan event or further escalation of global oil prices, Pakistan's best days are here to stay. The beginnings of the long-awaited investment surge is taking shape, the stock market is poised to see the return of the foreign portfolio investor, successful completion of a few large ticket privatization transactions catalysing FDI towards new highs. For the first time in 40 years, we are enjoying relative peace on the borders and peace within. If we are able to persistently build on this momentum, the sixth largest and the most youthful country in the world can rapidly progress on the road of development, lift its masses out of poverty, and join the ranks of the prosperous. ■





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# The **Big**? Question

*Against the advice of Pakistan's top economists and the opposition parties, the government yielded to the IMF pressure and got the highly controversial SBP Autonomy Bill 2021 passed from both the houses of the Parliament. This month's 'Big Question' is...*



**Is the new  
SBP law good for  
Pakistan?**

*Narratives asked three top experts – former finance minister and senior PML-N leader Miftah Ismail, former advisor Ministry of Finance and Dean NUST Dr. Ashfaq H. Khan and senior economist Shahid Hasan Siddiqui – to give their views on this month's Big Question.*

# Yielding to IMF

**Miftah Ismail**  
Former Finance Minister

**B**eing a mainstream political party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has remained in favour of the independence of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP). Various past governments, including that of President Pervez Musharraf, had introduced reforms to strengthen the autonomy of the central bank. Yet, we believe that there is always room for further improvement.

However, what the PTI government has done in the name of SBP autonomy is something off the beaten track. The federal government has not done law-making for the independence of the central bank through the SBP autonomy Bill 2021, but went extra miles to empower an individual – the SBP governor. In fact, the government has given dictatorial powers to the SBP governor.

Now the governor enjoys more powers than even the elected ministers. No minister can appoint a 17-grade officer, but the SBP Governor has been empowered to pick his own deputy governors, and the federal government has no option but to appoint his nominees.

The incumbent governor (Reza Baqir) is already known for his solo-flights and not doing any consultations with the Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin. Even with the former finance minister his attitude was the same. Despite this known fact, the latest amendment in the SBP Act has dissolved the coordination board between the fiscal policy and monetary policy and instead called for establishing close liaison between the governor and finance minister through “mutual agreement,” which is impractical.

Mr. Tarin had opposed the dissolution of the coordination board in the prolonged talks with the IMF aimed at the resumption of the \$6 billion loan programme. But the SBP Governor got the coordination board dissolved using the IMF as he had wanted.

Now the central bank’s role has been reduced mainly to controlling inflation, while the objectives of playing a role in the development and economic growth of the country are gone. Export refinance will no longer be conducted by the SBP, but a separate bank would be established for this purpose.

The kind of law making the government has done has reduced the role of the government officials at the SBP Board of Directors to next to nil. However, the influence of the IMF over the central bank has been further strengthened.

The State Bank of Pakistan is the bank of the nation. However, the government cannot take loans from its own central bank. This is something deceptive. This amendment is against Pakistan’s national interest.

The new legislation has withdrawn the day-to-day powers of the execution of the policy from the board of directors – which

*The SBP Governor got the coordination board dissolved using the IMF as he had wanted.*

comprises the government officials – and placed it in the hands of the executive committee which includes the SBP governor, deputy governors and executive directors. Everyone in the committee would be at the mercy of the governor, as he has his hand-picked men as its members.

How can his appointees go against him? The quorum of the committee would stand completed with only two persons, including the governor himself, and one executive director. This means the individual governor is now more powerful than the entire institution of the State Bank.

Another damaging amendment pertains to empowering the SBP to give confidential data to foreign institutions. So far the practice has been that the government used to give such data to foreign institutions under the Financial Action Task Force (FAFT) obligation and as a prove that the nation is working in compliance with the anti-money laundering (AML) and countering financing of terrorism (CFT) laws. The foreign institutions used to seek such data through foreign offices and the finance ministry shared it only after consulting with the law ministry. There was no one man show at all in the past. Now this has all changed.

The new law empowers the central bank to decide salaries of its officials with the governor sitting at the top of the hierarchy.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz has said on the record that it will initiate the process of undoing this dangerous amendment immediately after coming to power. We will introduce suitable amendments to unwind the recent amendments like the scrapping of the coordination board, sharing of confidential data with foreign institutions and barring the government from acquiring loans from the central bank.

We will restore the lost sanctity of the central bank and withdraw the draconian and dictatorial powers given to the SBP governor. ■





# A Dangerous Amendment

**Dr. Ashfaque H. Khan**

Dean and Professor, NUST

**T**he father of the nation Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah while addressing the inaugural ceremony of the central bank on July 1, 1948 said that “the opening of the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) symbolizes the sovereignty of our state in the financial sphere...” But now we have sold this “financial sovereignty” for a mere \$1 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) tranche following the Senate’s approval of the so-called SBP Autonomy Bill 2021.

The IMF dictated Bill has transformed the SBP into a state within the state. Now, the central bank is working under the influence of the international lending institutions. The Act has given powers to the central bank governor to share sensitive information of domestic banks’ account holders with anyone, including the global financial players. These new rules of the greater game are set to damage domestic economic activities, create serious financial constraints, and keep the nation dependent on the IMF. The Act would ensure that the fiscal deficit remains wide and unmanageable, while the local and foreign debt continue to rise. It would also make the nation dependent on commercial banks and increase the cost of borrowing and budgeting as it has barred the government from borrowing from the SBP. The Act reads “the Bank shall not extend any direct credits to or guarantee any obligations of the government, or any government-owned entity or any other public entity.”

This is a dangerous amendment. Pakistan remains a fiscal deficit country. Most of the time, it needs financing to bridge its revenue-expenditure gap. Accordingly, the nation has to rely on the private sector banks to finance public sector development programmes, defence and social spending. Borrowing from the central bank was cheaper than taking loans from the commercial banks. The private sector banks could exploit the situation and increase the cost of lending.

The amendments also empower the central bank to avoid sharing its profit of around Rs. 1 trillion with the government. This will increase the fiscal deficit which will turn the government into a desperate borrower and the commercial banks will exploit this fiscal vulnerability. The new laws demand the creation of an Executive Committee at the SBP. Governor and deputy governors would have absolute powers to veto a decision taken by the government appointees at the Board of Directors. In other words, the Executive Committee has made the Board redundant.

The law has dissolved the board, which coordinated between fiscal policy and monetary policy. The dissolution of the coordination board would badly impact decision-making. In a developing country like Pakistan, all the state organs and key ministries must work in unison. Working in silos will further damage the



*Reza Baqir – who is an IMF man – must not have his services extended after his term ends in April 2022.*

economy. Previously, it was said that monetary policy was subservient to fiscal policy, but the dissolution of the Board has now made the fiscal policy hostage to the monetary policy. The demolished board – in which the decision-making was a collective exercise – comprised government officials from the planning commission, commerce and finance ministries, and the SBP.

The new laws prevent the government and its various arms – the Parliament, the Intelligence Bureau, the National Accountability Bureau and the FIA – from questioning the SBP officials, including the governor and deputy governors. The biggest flaw of the Bill is that no government, including the incumbent and the future ones, could undo these draconian laws without the will of the central bank – read the IMF. The Bill reads: “The Bank (SBP) shall be consulted prior to the introduction of any bill by the Federal Government in the Parliament, which may have a bearing on the functions of the Bank.”

Will the central bank, operating under the IMF’s umbrella, allow anyone to cut its hands by scrapping these amendments? The answer is “no.” This is the level of the so-called autonomy given to the present SBP governor, which is lethal for Pakistan’s economy. The Bill not only changes the working of the SBP, but has made its Governor all-powerful. With such powers vested in one individual, friction between the Finance Ministry and the SBP is natural, which is a bad omen for the country.

Pakistan must do two things to undo this black law. Firstly, the SBP Governor Reza Baqir – who is an IMF man – must not have his services extended after his term ends in April 2022.

Secondly, we cannot unwind the amendments, while living under the IMF programme. So there must not be any 23rd IMF programme, which appears on the cards. These two steps could save Quaid-e-Azam’s Pakistan and fulfil his dream of the country’s financial sovereignty. ■



# Risking our Sovereignty

**Shahid Hasan Siddiqui**  
Senior Economist

**T**he passing of the SBP Autonomy Bill 2021 through both the houses; the National Assembly and the Senate has not strengthened the central bank's independence, but made it an arm of the external forces, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United States.

The central bank is no more an organ of the state of Pakistan now. The new amendments introduced in the SBP Act have put Pakistan's sovereignty and security at risk under the greater game of the United States.

We must fear that history may repeat itself. In 1965, when Pakistan and India went to war, and Islamabad asked oil marketing companies – all of which were operating in the private sector at that time – to import oil to fulfil the forces' demand, they all refused to do so. These companies put their interest over and above the national interest. Their refusal to import the oil had put Pakistan under pressure from the very start of the war.

However, Iran was a close friend of Pakistan in those days. It supplied oil to Pakistan. Later on, the government established the state-owned Pakistan State Oil (PSO) to avoid this kind of situation in future.

This time around, the commercial banks may do what the private sector oil marketing companies did in 1965 if a war is imposed on Pakistan. The new amendments have barred the government from taking loans from the central bank. Now the governments will have nowhere else to turn to for loans but the commercial banks.

Leading commercial banks, including the top two: Habib Bank Limited (HBL) and United Bank Limited (UBL), are owned by foreign investors. They might not straight forwardly deny giving the required loan in those hours of high need, but, at least, delay it by 10-15 days in the name of taking permission from their board of directors. So what will happen? Will we be establishing the state-owned central bank again at the end of a war?

Pakistan is already fighting a hybrid war. And now the enemies are attacking us by targeting and weakening our economy. The dissolution of the coordination board – that used to coordinate between the state's fiscal policy board and the central bank's monetary policy board to create harmony between the two policies – may end up messing up with the fiscal and monetary policies.

The coordination board was to make sure that both the fiscal and monetary policy boards were on the same page while formulating their respective policies. They were either making economic expansionary policies or contractionary policies, but not conflicting policies which may happen now and lead us towards



*The central bank is no longer an organ of the state of Pakistan.*

economic disaster.

There was no need for the amendments introduced in the name of the so-called SBP Bill. The State Bank of Pakistan had already been given autonomy and independence needed for its transparent operations. There was no government interference in the central bank's affairs. The SBP formulated the monetary policy and regulated the commercial banks without involvement of anyone from outside the

central bank.

If the government really wanted to further strengthen the central bank's independence then it should have framed laws to improve its accountability processes and procedures. However, the latest amendments have weakened the accountability procedures to the level where no one can hold the top level SBP officials accountable. They are now over and above the country's laws.

If the central bank was not independent then how did the incumbent governor mess up the domestic economy by unnecessarily increasing the policy rate to 13.25 percent in 2019 and then cutting it beyond requirements to 7 percent during peak COVID-19 times – March-June 2020. His measures again put the domestic economy at high risk. The high import bill, the massive trade deficit, soaring inflation and the rupee depreciation; all hit historically high levels in the first seven-month (July-January) of the current fiscal year.

We have lost the central bank which Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah inaugurated in July 1948 that symbolized the "financial sovereignty" of the country.

Fifteen years ago from today, the then SBP governor said he was fully independent and as independent as any western central bank was while dealing with their respective governments. However, the IMF forced us to accept its dictation. ■

# *Balance Sheet*

## Finding a Formula





# Learning from Vietnam

Does Pakistan have a formula for development like Vietnam or is it merely fumbling along?



**By Ali Mahmood**

*The writer is a businessman and the author of three books including Muslims: The Real History.*



*The twin pillars of Vietnam's independence: Vo Ngyuen Giap (background left) and Ho Chi Minh (background right). They defeated both the French and the Americans to lead Vietnam to independence.*

**V**ietnam is a country of 100 million people with a GDP (Gross Domestic Product) worth \$262 billion, a per capita GDP of \$2700, and exports worth \$264 billion. Vietnam is clearly more prosperous than Pakistan with its population of 225 million people, GDP of \$278 billion, a per capita income of \$1200, and exports worth \$23 billion.

Great Britain, India's colonial master, won the Second World War, but exhausted by five hard years of a war for survival, decided to withdraw from the Empire, with its policy of divide and quit. Vietnam was a colony, ruled by the French, who were determined to hold onto their empire. When Germany conquered France, ending French imperial ambitions, Japan took over Vietnam. In 1945, the US dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, defeated Japan and ended her empire in the Far East. At the Potsdam Conference of 1945, it was decided that South Vietnam would surrender to Admiral Mountbatten of Great Britain, and North Vietnam would surrender to Chiang Kai-shek of China. Chiang Kai-shek

was defeated and driven into exile by Mao and his Communists in 1949. From 1946 till 1954 the communist Viet Minh, led by their great leader Ho Chi Minh and their brilliant general Vo Nguyen Giap, fought the First Indochina War and defeated the French. The US was determined not to allow Communism to sweep over the countries of the Far East and they backed South Vietnam, starting the Second Indochina War. Finally in 1975, after the death of 58,000 American soldiers (and over 2 million Vietnamese), the US withdrew and the communists took Saigon, unifying North and South Vietnam into one nation. Though Ho Chi Minh was dead by that time, the Communists renamed Saigon as Ho Chi Minh City in memory of the man who had led and inspired their nation.

Ho Chi Minh is one of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century. Born in 1890, he was 4 feet 11 inches tall and weighed less than 100 lbs. His father was a Confucian scholar. In 1911, Ho left for France as a dishwasher on a ship. He worked on ships for six years, travelling the world. He lived in exile from his home country for 30 years, working as a kitchen help, pastry cook, journalist and revolutionary. He founded a revolutionary news-

paper and was condemned to death in French Indochina. In 1941, after the conquest of France by Germany, he returned to the jungles of Vietnam, without followers, guns, or money, to fight the French and then the Japanese. He lived an underground life with many aliases to hide his real identity. To the peasants of Vietnam, he was Uncle Ho, the kind, gentle, and loving elder; to his powerful enemies around the world, he was the astute, resolute, and tireless fighter for Vietnam's independence. Ho loved reading, gardening, and feeding his fish. When America escalated their inhumane bombing of Vietnam, Ho simply advised them, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win." Uncle Ho spoke English, French, Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese, Russian, and could hold a conversation in the universal language, Esperanto. He was a guerrilla fighter, writer, poet, teacher, revolutionary, politician, leader and international statesman. He achieved the impossible by defeating France, Japan, America, and South Vietnam. Ho died in 1969, at the age of 79.

The Viet Minh, North Vietnam's army, was led by Vo Nguyen Giap, a military ge-







*Family planning has allowed Vietnamese women to fully participate in Vietnam's economic miracle.*

nus with no formal military training, who transformed a tiny band of guerrillas comprising 31 men and three women armed with flintlock rifles, into an army that defeated both France and the US. Giap was a student of Law from Hanoi University, who taught himself the art of war. He was fascinated by Napoleon's tactics and could draw all of Napoleon's battle plans from memory. He was known as the Red Napoleon. He was also an avid student of Mao's theories of guerrilla warfare. When Hanoi fell to the Viet Minh in 1945 and Ho proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Giap was appointed Defence Minister. In 1954, Giap defeated the French army in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, where his guerrillas trapped the French in a valley and massacred them with fire from the surrounding hills. The

French were replaced by the US, who waged a fierce and bloody war against North Vietnam till they were finally de-

*In 1975, the per capita GDP of Vietnam was \$80 (half of Pakistan's per capita GDP in 1975 of \$164). Today, in 2021, Vietnam's per capita GDP is \$2700 – more than double Pakistan's \$1285.*



*A strong emphasis on education has laid the foundation of Vietnam's rapid development.*

feated in 1975, when the Tet Offensive was launched on 40 cities simultaneously and, in Saigon, a suicide squad invaded the US embassy. Defeat in the Tet Offensive led to the withdrawal of US forces. In 1976, five years after Pakistan was split by the secession of Bangladesh, North and South Vietnam were united and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was born.

Giap was independent-minded. He was an outstanding military genius who believed "People should not be overawed by the power of modern weapons. It is the value of human beings that, in the end, will decide victory." Giap was the first general to defeat the forces of the US in a war.

While Ho favoured the simple peasant life, Giap was fond of luxury, wore crisp uniforms, lived in a grand French colonial mansion, and carried on a scandalous affair with a beautiful nightclub dancer. He was sidelined and retired from his post as Minister of Defence in 1981, retired from the politburo in 1982, but remained Deputy PM till 1991, with the charge of Science and Technology along with Population Control. Perhaps it is a coincidence that these portfolios have been important success stories in modern Vietnam, and the Two-Child Policy contributed to Vietnam's economic growth. Giap died on October 4, 2013, at the age of 102.

The economic recovery of Vietnam was no less remarkable than its military struggle. In 1975, the per capita GDP of Vietnam was \$80 (half of Pakistan's per capita GDP in 1975 of \$164). Today, in 2021, Vietnam's per capita GDP is \$2700 – more than double Pakistan's \$1285. This was despite the massive reconstruction required after the US bombing, which in the 10 years (1965-1975) saw 7.5 million tons of bombs dropped on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (double the amount dropped on Europe and Asia in the Second World War), pound for pound, the largest aerial bombardment in history. Around 270 million cluster bombs were dropped on Vietnam, 210 million more than dropped on Iraq in 1991, 1998, and 2006 combined.

Massive bombing not only killed and displaced millions, it resulted in total destruction of infrastructure, roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and factories. The destruction included 65 percent of all oil storage capacity, 59 percent of all power plants, 55 percent of the bridges, and the ports and water supply. Vietnam had a

lot of catching up to do before worrying about growth.

After the war, when a united Vietnam achieved its independence, the economy did not do well. The US embargo (1975-1994) made recovery difficult, if not impossible. Bureaucratic mismanagement, Communism, extinction of the entrepreneur class, and military adventurism in Cambodia, kept the economy stagnant. But in the mid-1980s, the Doi Moi reforms turned the Soviet model economy into a Socialist Oriented Market Economy and growth started. Between 1985 and 2021, the per capita GDP moved from a low of \$230 to a high of \$2,700 (10 times), whereas Pakistan's per capita GDP rose from \$337 in 1985 to \$1200 in 2021 (4 times).

Vietnam invested heavily in education, raising the skills of its workforce. It also recognised the dangers of excessive population growth, and imposed a two-child policy, which led to greater female participation in the workforce. Investment in infrastructure, which had been destroyed in decades of war, and also in the new technology of internet, helped economic growth. Pro-business policies and reduction of bureaucratic red tape improved global competitiveness and the ease of doing business. Contracts were enforced and electricity and credit were readily available. Manufacturing increased, and incentivisation of agriculture led to a growth in high value crops, and also increased productivity in the major crops of rice and coffee. Tourism boomed as the number of tourists increased from 10 million in 2016 to 18 million in 2019. Privatisation eliminated the bleeding white elephant SOEs (state-owned enterprises), reducing the 12,000 SOEs to 600.

Vietnam's greatest success was in its exports. By 2020, Vietnam's exports had reached \$264 billion (over 100 percent of her GDP). In comparison, Pakistan's exports were stagnant at \$23 billion (less than 10 percent of her GDP). Vietnam's population is 100 million – roughly half of Pakistan's population amounting to 225 million. Vietnam's high volume export of clothing and shoes have been overtaken by its export of mobile phones, computers, and electronic products as international companies move to a China Plus One policy of diversification to avoid complete dependence on China. Apple, Samsung, and Nike have set up sizeable operations in



Saigon pre- and post-independence.

*Pakistan's journey has been a joy-ride when compared to Vietnam's hard history. If Vietnam has succeeded despite all that it has suffered, then surely there is hope for Pakistan.*

Vietnam. The greatest export success story is Samsung, which has invested \$17 billion, employs over 200,000 workers, has two of its largest factories in Vietnam, and has sales revenues of \$58 billion, contributing a quarter of Vietnam's total exports. Vietnam's cheap, skilled, and productive labour force attracts multinationals and raises the inflow of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment). After the end of the US embargo, and its gaining membership of the WTO (World Trade Organisation), Vietnam has made best use of Free Trade Agreements to promote its trade and maximise its exports.

Pakistan, on the other hand, has labour with low education levels, resulting in low-productivity. Corruption, bureaucracy, political instability, law and order, weak property rights, delays in courts, and weak enforcement of contracts, discourage investors from abroad, resulting in dismal levels of FDI. Pakistan enters

into Free Trade Agreements, but does not take them as seriously. Its two most important FTAs are with South Asia (meaningless with the hostile Pak-India relationship) and with China, where the first FTA had to be replaced by a second FTA, since the terms were considered too one-sided, favouring China and being unfair to Pakistan. Samsung has, this year, started production of smart phones in Pakistan to initially supply the large domestic market.

Pakistan's journey has been a joy-ride when compared to Vietnam's hard history. If Vietnam has succeeded despite all that it has suffered, then surely there is hope for Pakistan, but the first step is recognising what has gone wrong, before we can hope to put it right. Pakistani leaders could learn a lesson from Vietnam's Communist Party leaders, who apologised to the nation for mismanagement of the economy in 2012, after SOEs went bankrupt and inflation surged. The 200 percent hyperinflation of 1982 and the high inflation of 81 percent in 1991 have been controlled and reduced to three percent.

The formula of success for all developing nations are the same – education and technology, population control, productivity of the workforce, good governance, efficient institutions, law and order, political stability, a trustworthy legal system which respects both human and property rights and speedily gives justice and, most importantly, leaders who are bold, skilled, and dedicated.

Does Pakistanis have the values and attitudes that build successful nations? Are those that govern Pakistan ready to put the welfare of the nation above personal careers and wealth? ■





# The newsmaker

## Imran vs the Rest





# Opposition's Great Dilemma

Has the die been cast in favour of the opposition parties - the PML-N and the PPP - and Imran Khan and his PTI really on their last leg?



By Amir Zia

*The writer is a senior journalist and managing editor, Narratives.*



*Bilawal trying to mobilise the jiyalas.*

**T**he opposition parties and many of their cheerleaders in the media want Pakistanis to believe that Prime Minister Imran Khan's days in power are numbered and his ouster is now just a matter of time. They are also playing up the prime minister's alleged differences with the military establishment amidst claims that their select few leaders have already got a nod from the powerful quarters to give the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government the proverbial last push.

As the opposition parties threaten to bring a no-confidence motion against the prime minister, Pakistan remains caught in the web of conspiracy theories, which all give one message – the country would soon slide back to the same old 'golden era' when the Sharifs, the Zardaris and the tried and tested set of dynastic politicians used to rule the roost as undisputed kings and masters of this nation of more than 220 million people. And this time around with the blessings of the military, while Imran Khan and his slogans of change would be remembered just as an aberration in Pakistani politics rather than a trend here to stay.

But is this really the case? Has the die been cast in favour of the opposition parties – the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) – and are Imran Khan and his PTI

on their last leg? Going by the opposition, its allied mainstream media and their organised network of propagandists on social media, this appears to be the perception. However, the devil lies in the details.

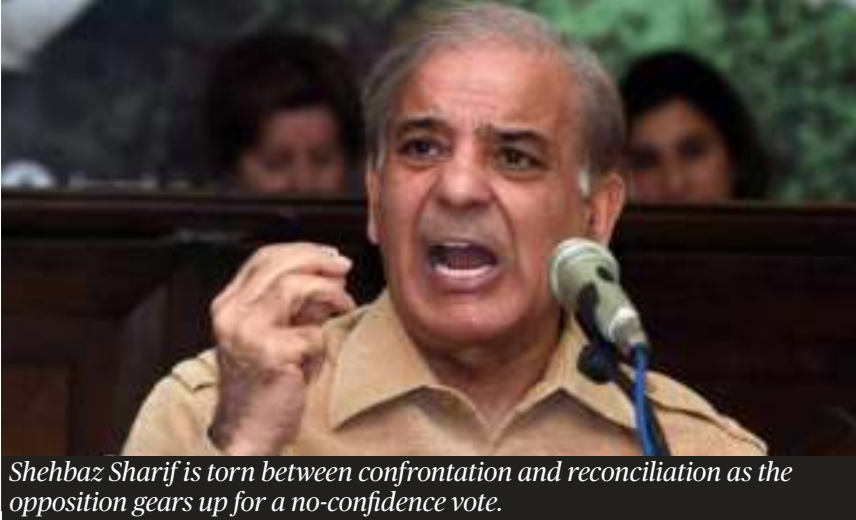
Undoubtedly, Prime Minister Imran Khan's government is under pressure because of a host of factors, including his slim majority in the Parliament, which makes it vulnerable and dependent on the allies. The country's immediate economic challenges, including the biting inflation and soaring current account deficit, have intensified against the backdrop of a tougher than usual International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme. Yet, most of these economic challenges are the result of the exogenous shocks – from

the fallout of the pandemic and high international commodity prices due to the latest Russia-Ukraine conflict. These external factors have overwhelmingly offset the benefits of the increased economic activities, higher exports and better revenue collection. A situation, which is being exploited by the opposition to build a narrative about the government's alleged incompetence.

This, however, does not mean that we ignore how the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) and its controversial Governor Dr. Reza Baqir damaged Pakistan's economy by keeping the interest rates in double digits all through 2019 and early 2020. The sharp devaluation of the Pakistani currency against the dollar, which many economic experts say now stands undervalued, added to the country's economic woes. On top of that, political expediency prevented the PTI government from implementing its reforms agenda – from the police to the crucial energy sector reforms. Additionally, the government did not manage to push the privatisation programme or turn around the loss-making state-run institutions. But saying this, the scorecard of the PTI government is not all bad.

It did handle the COVID-19 challenge extraordinarily well. A fact now internationally acknowledged. The pro-people initiatives like the Ehsaas Programme,

*The success of the opposition camp hangs solely on the presumption that the establishment would give tactical support to the anti-Imran Khan move.*



*Shehbaz Sharif is torn between confrontation and reconciliation as the opposition gears up for a no-confidence vote.*

shelters for the poor, the Sehat Card and the Kamyab Jawan Programme did win the hearts and minds of many low-income Pakistanis. A number of economic initiatives also helped boost economic activities – particularly in the real estate, textile, IT and select other manufacturing sectors – increase exports and earn massive profits for the corporate and business entities. Under some extremely challenging circumstances, this is not a bad performance, though it fell too short of the government's own rhetoric and expectations that it built among the masses.

The government's biggest failure, however, has been on the much-publicised accountability front, which remains the cornerstone of the PTI and Imran Khan's politics. The government did manage to provoke and threaten a number of opposition leaders because of its frontal attacks exposing their alleged corruption and framing cases against them, but unfortunately, the country's poor investigation, prosecution and legal system failed to bring any of them to closure.

Former premier Nawaz Sharif slipped through the government's fingers and has been living in London since November 2019, while all the opposition heavyweights accused of corruption are roaming around freely either on bail or after being acquitted. But Imran Khan's failed crusade against corruption continues to ring alarm bells for all those politicians who want to protect their massive business empires and political turf. A mere lip service to the anti-graft campaign, forces even those opposition leaders to join hands, who traditionally compete against one another.

*The opposition's dilemma appears greater than Imran Khan as its top leaders battle for political survival and to protect their business interests.*

As the battle lines between the government and the opposition are being drawn for what many believe is the final push, the stakes appear to be higher for the opposition parties than Imran Khan, who neither has to pass on the baton of his political dynasty to any son or daughter nor protect the family's business or commercial interests. To stay in the game, Imran Khan just needs to survive in the government for a little over a year. If the prime minister manages to reach the finish line, he would still hold chances in the next elections as the only politician with a following in all the four provinces. His main rivals – the PML-N holds its main cards in Punjab, while the PPP banks predominantly on the rural Sindh.

In the remaining part of his term, the prime minister will have to decide about the nomination of the new army chief or giving an extension to the current one, which also appears to be an option – at least for now. Whether he completes his term or goes down a few months ahead of time, Imran Khan would be very much a

force to reckon with in the next elections.

The opposition's dilemma appears greater than Imran Khan as its top leaders battle for political survival and to protect their business interests. It is also not as monolithic as many would want to believe and stays marred with internal frictions, contradictions and competing interests.

The PML-N, the largest opposition party, has been shifting its stances every few months. From the message of reconciliation with the military establishment as espoused by Shehbaz Sharif to outright confrontation – the line adopted by Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam – the PML-N has tried both.

In the words of a PML-N stalwart, dealing with the PTI is not a problem, but neutralising the military continues to be a challenge even today. "We thought that by attacking the military leadership, we would create space, but we failed to create even a minor crack in the walls of the GHQ. The confrontation did not help us," he said, requesting anonymity.

However, Shehbaz Sharif's efforts helped Nawaz Sharif as he was plucked out of prison in an unprecedented concession given by the court, and was sent for treatment to London, where after a few months of silence, he again started attacking the military's top brass. But this strategy did not help the PML-N get more concessions. Therefore, Shehbaz Sharif again appears to be in the driving seat and Nawaz is forced to shift gears to pragmatic politics and abandon the ideological strategy.

The PML-N stalwart said the party's top leadership has resigned to the fact that they must mend fences with the army leadership at any cost. "There has also been a realisation within the army that the project IK (Imran Khan) has failed to yield results as the economy is in a mess and the country's promised stability and progress remain elusive," he claimed.

The next elections are being considered make-or-break for the PML-N as if it remains out of power for another five years, the party won't be able to stand united, party insiders say. That should explain the desperation of the Sharif family and the top PML-N leaders to get themselves rehabilitated in the corridors of power with Shehbaz eyeing the top slot. He is in a hurry to become prime minister as the focal point of the PML-N's politics is now to win the next elections.



For many of the PML-N seniors, including the two Sharif brothers, the next elections could probably be their last. Nawaz will be 73 in December 2023, while Shehbaz will be 71 coming September. Both these patriarchs are betting on their children – Maryam, 48, and Hamza, 47, respectively – to carry forward their political dynasty.

“The PML-N cannot wait for another five years. It will end in factions if it stays out of power any longer,” the PML-N veteran said. “Going into the final year, all our focus is on how to win the next elections. And yes, we are aware that the reality of the army has to be accepted,” he said, underlining the fact how the party and its leadership suffered each time it confronted the country’s most powerful institution.

He said that he doesn’t see any change coming in the power matrix of Pakistan. “Nawaz Sharif is a pragmatic person. He has accepted reality.”

But the PML-N’s desire to pave a way for itself into the power corridors via GHQ should not be seen as a done deal. The military leadership has its own way of taking stock of the situation and making decisions. Going by the official on-the-record and off-the-record interactions with the press, the military high command has been unanimous in giving one message; it is not into the business of making or breaking governments.

Since the 2002 elections, every ruling party has completed its five-year term and the PTI too appears set to achieve this milestone and most likely without replacing the leader of the house.

However, a faction within the PML-N, the PPP and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl desperately want an early ouster of the government through an in-house change so that they can make changes to at least the election laws. One of their top priorities is to scrap the law concerning the use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in the next elections. For Shehbaz Sharif, grabbing power sooner than later is vital as he also faces some mega corruption cases, though another important voice within the party – Shahid Khaqan Abbasi – is advocating early elections rather than orchestrating an in-house change for which the opposition remains short of numbers in the National Assembly.

However, the PPP is on the same page with Shehbaz as he remains open to giv-



*The JUI-F failed in its efforts towards posing a formidable threat to the ruling PTI government.*

*The next elections are being considered make-or-break for the PML-N as if it remains out of power for another five years, the party won’t be able to stand united, party insiders say.*

ing some key ministries in the next federal government to his one-time nemeses as well as making a few seat adjustments in Punjab with it – an idea opposed by many within the PML-N.

But the success of the opposition camp hangs solely on the presumption that the establishment would give tactical support to the anti-Imran Khan move.

However, many major politicians within the opposition camp see these expectations as misleading. They say that there are no visible signs of conflict or its basis on any issue between the PTI government and the military leadership. The issue about the appointment of the ISI chief is now water under the bridge. Overall, the military establishment remains at ease with the PTI and continues to enjoy a level of trust with its leadership. This is not the case with the opposition, especially with the PML-N.

Compared to the PML-N, which is in a rush to come to power, the PPP is sitting on

the political chessboard with a long-term view. Bilawal is in his early 30s and is not in a hurry to become the prime minister, though his party will certainly be taking its chances to form a coalition if it gets some seats in Punjab. But for now, the PPP is focused on keeping its turf in Sindh intact, where it faces little competition – especially in the rural Sindh.

Yet, the PPP also wants to see the back of Imran Khan and stands in consensus with the PML-N hawks that he should not be allowed to appoint the new army chief or give an extension to the sitting one. If this happens, and Imran Khan gets another five-year term, then it would be another tough five years for these two parties and their leaders.

Despite all the lip-service to the cause of democracy and supremacy of the Parliament, the opposition’s game plan is based overwhelmingly on which way the winds blow from the GHQ. For their part, Imran Khan and his team appear confident that they can survive the opposition’s protests on the roads and the no-trust move in the Parliament.

The maximum the opposition can do under these circumstances is to keep Imran Khan under pressure in the remaining period of his term so that he enters the electoral battle exhausted and worn out.

But known for his stubbornness and resilience, can Imran Khan really be shaken by the opposition’s tirade? As the captain and the opposition dig in their heels, Pakistan’s parliamentary form of democracy seems to have again failed in providing the much-needed direction and political stability to the country. ■

# Interview



Speculations are rife in the mainstream and social media whether the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) allies will hold the ranks when the opposition moves a no-trust motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan. In this context, a lot of meaning was given to the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan's (MQM-P) meetings with the opposition parties – from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to the Awami National Party (ANP) and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal (JUI-F).

Narratives Magazine talks to Amir Khan, the MQM-P's senior deputy convener, to find out what was the agenda of those meetings and discuss a host of other issues.



# Not a Time to Quit

“MQM stands with the PTI despite reservations”

Amir Khan

By Amir Zia

**D**oes the MQM-P stand committed to the PTI-led coalition government?

The MQM is a coalition partner of the PTI. Our agreement with the PTI aims to resolve many of the problems of Karachi, Hyderabad and other urban centres of Sindh. And as per this agreement, the federal government has already taken several steps. For example, the Green Line Bus project has been completed. The federal government has also earmarked funds for K-4 (water supply project for Karachi). The establishment of a university in Hyderabad was one of our key demands. Although work has not started on this project, its charter has been approved. Another important issue was the census. In Pakistan's entire history, we have never held a census on time. The last census held in 2017 – under the PML-N government – was highly controversial as Karachi's population was grossly undercounted. In a meeting, the CCI (Council of Common Interests) decided to hold a sample census in five percent of the blocks, but that decision was never materialised. Since then, we have been demanding a fresh and early census. This demand has finally been accepted. And now, instead of 2027, a new census will be done in 2023 – four years earlier. The government has already allocated funds for this exercise, and its preparatory work has started. It's a huge success.

However, many other issues remain unaddressed. The top among them is the injustice meted out to the urban population, which is even being deprived of its quota of 40 percent in government jobs. Those who are supposed to give jobs belong to only one community of Sindh, and they have not been fair to us. On the quota marked for urban Sindh, recruitments are made on fake domiciles. The beneficiaries are individuals belonging to a particular political party – the PPP. During the last 12 to 13 years, some 300,000 provincial government jobs were given in Sindh. Out of



Senior Deputy Convener MQM, Amir Khan, assures that a split with the PTI is not on the cards.

them, candidates belonging to the urban areas got less than 10,000 jobs. And even in these 10,000 jobs, most recruitments were done on fake domiciles.

In a nutshell, many of the points of our agreement with the PTI have been accepted. Still, on others, implementation remains far too slow.

In the 2018 elections, the MQM was

*Karachi, despite all its mega civic problems, a crumbling infrastructure, rampant street crimes, and poor healthcare and education systems, still generates 65 to 70 percent of all the country's revenues.*

deprived of many seats because of the malfunctioning of the RTS (Results Transmission System). The PTI got 14 seats in the National Assembly from Karachi. There were expectations that the ruling party would make the mega-city a priority, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, who won a seat from here. But that wasn't done.

Karachi, despite all its mega civic problems, a crumbling infrastructure, rampant street crimes, and poor healthcare and education systems, still generates 65 to 70 percent of all the country's revenues. The Sindh government has usurped all the powers of the local bodies and made them redundant and powerless. Yet, this resilient city continues to deliver. We think the prime minister should have focused more on Karachi during the last three and a half years, but he visited Karachi only a few times and that too just for a few hours. Nothing has been done to stop the PPP from committing injustices and atrocities on urban Sindh.

We demand that along with the National Finance Commission, the federal government must ensure the implementation of the Provincial Finance





MQM workers protest outside the CM house against the new Local Government law.

Commission for the just disbursement of resources.

**The MQM-P's central leadership, including yourself, have been meeting with top opposition leaders. What's the plan?**

The PPP bulldozed the new Local Government law that made the city governments literally powerless. We staged protests, rallies and conferences. Many political parties, including the ANP, the PML-N, the JUI-F, and the GDA, supported our demands. We met their leaders only to thank them. As we held these meetings, the political situation started to heat up. There was a meeting between the PML-N and the PPP leadership amidst all the talk of a no-confidence move. While thanking them, we also discussed the

*Today, people are facing a lot of problems. And if the PTI, or for that matter, the PML-N, or the PPP are not meeting the people's expectations, how can they come up to our expectations?*



MQM workers baton charged by police during their January 27 protest, one worker was killed and several injured.

changing situation as a political party. They (opposition leaders) also asked that the MQM play its role. We heard them, but everywhere we made our position clear through the media that we are an ally of the PTI. The PML-N complain a lot about victimisation, but in Sindh, greater injustices are being inflicted on the MQM by the PPP. All these issues were part of our discussion. We will put the details of these discussions before the party's co-ordination committee and our workers. Whatever is beneficial for the country and its people, we will decide accordingly.

**There is a point-of-view that the PTI government is unjustifiably being targeted by the opposition for the country's economic woes. Most of the challenges, including inflation and accepting the harsh IMF conditions, remain beyond the control of this government. What's your take?**

Indeed, inflation is a global problem. Accepting the IMF's harsh conditions also remains highly unpopular. But we believe that any government would have to accept these conditions. However, the government could have improved its governance and should have found ways to give relief to the common man despite challenges. On this front, the government is lacking.

We also see a lot of mismanagement. For instance, the gas crisis could have been managed better with some planning. The winter gas shortage had been looming, but nothing was done about it. The government wasn't able to import LNG on time. Similarly, the urea crisis could have been handled. The entire country is now in trouble because of such shortages. Our industrial production is hurt due to the gas shortages. Even the industrialists were forced to hold demonstrations.

**Who is responsible for the political polarisation? What can be its impact?**

The way both the government and the opposition attack one another and all the mudslinging and foul language they use are unsuitable for the political process. Both sides should show restraint and must not take their differences to a level where they can't even sit together when there is a need.

The government has greater responsibility. When one becomes prime minister, he should listen to everyone and



take people along. One feels that this is one weakness of the government, it is not even prepared to talk to the opposition, which has a constitutional role in the system. The central government should adopt a more soft and flexible approach. In Sindh, we see the same problem. The PPP treats the provincial opposition the same way.

**Barring General Pervez Musharraf, historically, the MQM has never been able to work with any of its coalition partners – from the PPP to the PML-N. Will it be different this time around?**

A question was asked a few days back: Are we satisfied with Imran Khan's performance? The short answer is that we have been in coalition governments with the PPP several times and also partnered with the PML-N government. We were dissatisfied with both of them. And we were not the only ones. The entire country was unhappy with them as problems of the people compounded.

Today, again, we see economic deterioration. See how the rupee has slumped against the dollar. If we are dissatisfied with the PTI today, the same dissatisfaction was with the PPP and the PML-N. The promises made by those two parties were never fulfilled.

Our responsibility as a political force is to highlight the issues of people and our voters. If we don't fulfil this responsibility, what else would we do? There is a lot of room for improvement. But we also say that the PTI government has a right to complete its five-year term. And the opposition also has the constitutional right to bring a no-confidence vote. All should act within the law and constitution. The MQM will not support any unconstitutional move.

**Has the PTI failed to come up to your expectations?**

The issue is not of our expectations. The point is whether the PTI has been able to come up to the expectations of the masses. Today, people are facing a lot of problems. And if the PTI, or for that matter, the PML-N, or the PPP are not meeting the people's expectations, how can they come up to our expectations?

**Coming to the MQM's own challenges... Do you think the next elections would be more challenging for the party given its own divided house and efforts by the rivals to ingress in**



As per the PTI's promise, Karachi will get a fresh census in 2023.

*When one becomes prime minister, he should listen to everyone and take people along. One feels that this is one weakness of the government, it is not prepared to talk to the opposition.*

**the MQM-dominated areas?**

People want that we all should get united. The MQM also desires that we all converge on a single platform. The last six to seven years have been tough on the MQM. The party faced a crisis-like situation because of an operation by the state. The August 22, 2016 incident happened, and the MQM-P had to announce its disassociation from its founder (Altaf Hussain). The MQM appeared in disarray, and we had to save it. In Pakistan's entire history, no party disassociated itself from its founder, but we did it for Pakistan. Anti-Pakistan rhetoric remains unacceptable to us. And we kept the party flag fluttering despite all the odds. Then, there was the issue of Farooq Sattar. However, the MQM still wants to take everyone along. Our doors are open for all. But if someone wants to erase the name and symbol of the MQM and form a new party, this is also unacceptable. We are ready to wel-

come everyone with full respect if they come under the flag and banner of the MQM. We all should work together, but we also say there should be no preconditions for rejoining the party. Compared to the traditional political parties, the MQM operates differently. In the MQM, everyone has to follow the party's rules and regulations. From our party convener to an ordinary worker, no one is above them. Also, those who join us, all have to work under a discipline.

**Do you think the next elections would be difficult for the party in this situation?**

In my opinion, MQM's vote bank remains intact. In the 2002 elections, the MQM secured around 700,000 votes. In the 2018 elections, when the MQM was divided, financially weak, and under challenging conditions, we got around 750,000 – higher than the previous elections. In 2018, it was unfortunate how the RTS broke down, and the results were changed. Everyone knows in Karachi the way our seats were snatched. Even today, we are financially hard-pressed. We are barred from carrying out our charity work. Our charity wing is not allowed to operate and collect zakat, fitra or the hides of sacrificial animals. Therefore, supporting the families of our martyrs has become an uphill task, and we have to do it through our party funds. But we still are confident that in the next elections, we will perform better than in the past.

**How do you see the PPP's agreements with the Jamaat-e-Islami and the PSP?**

Firstly, I will say that the MQM and the Jamaat-e-Islami have a lot of dif-



*Karachi's crumbling infrastructure under the PPP.*

ferences. Yet, on the issue of the Local Government system, we are delighted to see that the Jamaat-e-Islami embraced the same slogans and demands that the MQM had introduced. In the past, however, the Jamaat-e-Islami used to accuse us of fanning ethnicity and hate by making such demands that include giving financial and administrative powers to Karachi. Now all the Jamaat-e-Islami banners have the same slogans that the MQM introduced.

As far as their sit-in and agreement with the PPP are concerned, it stands exposed when the chief minister, in the presence of (JI leader) Hafiz Naeem, said that all the points of the agreement were already part of the new Local Government law. But if the Jamaat-e-Islami wants to take credit, they can do it by all means. However, the matter remains that there has been no agreement – it is just an eyewash. The Jamaat must have realised by now that the PPP managed to manipulate them.

The other (the PSP) was also given a lollipop. They needed an excuse to end their sit-in. There were hardly a few dozen people at the sit-in. They perhaps themselves asked the PPP to come and give them a lollipop.

The MQM's demand is that the provincial government implement the Supreme Court's ruling on granting powers to the Local Governments according to the con-

*Urban Sindh never votes for the PPP because of its bias against them. The PPP takes revenge on the urban areas because they do not vote for this party. Whichever candidate they bring, they won't get votes in the Urdu-speaking areas.*

stitution. The MQM filed this petition in 2017, and by the grace of Almighty Allah, a decision finally came.

**Do you really think that the PPP will follow the Supreme Court's directives on empowered Local bodies?**

If the PPP again drags its feet on the issue, we will raise it with full force in the assembly, roads and wherever possible. The Supreme Court decision should be implemented. If the PPP fails to do so, our op-

tions are open – from the courts and the assembly to the roads. The Supreme Court's decision is beneficial not just for Sindh but for the entire country. Across Pakistan, now the people can go to court if their respective provincial governments fail to allow empowered local governments.

**The PPP is eyeing to make inroads in Karachi's district central. Is it a challenge for your party?**

First, let me say that the MQM's demand for new administrative units is not just for Sindh but for the entire country. When we talk of new administrative units, they (the PPP) scream and shout that we

want to divide Sindh – the 'dharti maa' (motherland). But we say that provinces are not 'dharti maa'. It is the country – our Pakistan – which is our motherland. When we call for new administrative units, they don't like it. However, they keep dividing Karachi, carving out one district after another just to suit their interests and ensure seats for themselves. This is unacceptable, and we are already in court on this issue.

Coming to your question, the PPP has the right to carry out their work. But urban Sindh never votes for the PPP because of its bias against them. The PPP takes revenge on the urban areas because they do not vote for this party. Whichever candidate they bring, they won't get votes in the Urdu-speaking areas. Those of our Urdu-speaking friends who are with the PPP, even they don't get fair treatment. If the PPP treats Sindhis and Mohajirs the same, why can't even for once the Chief Minister of Sindh be a Mohajir? We do not say that a Sindhi speaker shouldn't be chief minister, but why not an Urdu speaker for a change from the PPP's ranks.

Murtaza Wahab is their administrator in Karachi. He belongs to Karachi and is their own man. Yet, the PPP doesn't transfer powers even to him. The people of Karachi understand the PPP and its narrow self-serving politics. They would never vote for this anti-Karachi party. ■





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# *Viewpoint*

## The Vicious Cycle



Pakistan's public debt has surged to a record Rs. 41.46 trillion as of September 2021 compared to Rs. 36.95 trillion in September 2020.

**DEBT**





# Is There a Way Out?

Pakistan faces grave challenges that threaten its unity and stability. The writer argues that there is an urgent need to develop a national consensus and introduce sweeping political, economic and social reforms



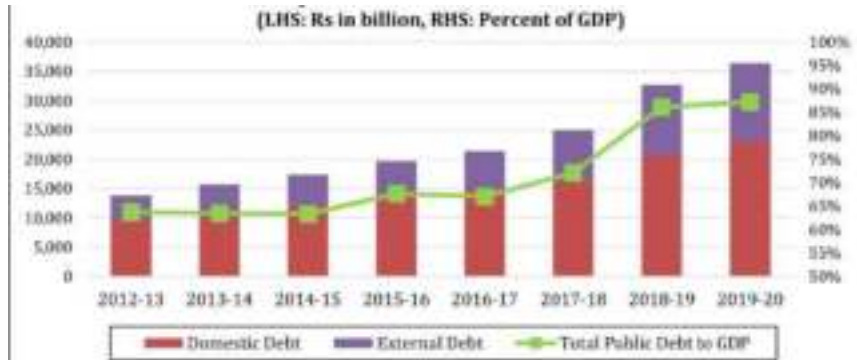
By Lt. Gen. (R) Naeem Khalid Lodhi

*The writer is a former defence minister and defence secretary. He has held major command positions in the Pakistan Army.*

**H**ad it only been the question of economic challenges, one could have waited and hoped for a slow but steady recovery. Some economic indicators have already started to show improvement. But the continued transgressions by various institutions and an open abhorrent attitude towards one another has broken all the modicum of decency and lawful behaviour. Political and economic instability within, and confusing and shifting signals in foreign relations have created a sense of uncertainty all around. But before discussing the options available to the apex leadership, institutions and the public, let us review the entire situation holistically.

## The Great Economic Challenge

Not an expert of the subject, the author will rely only on some authentic facts and figures shared by the open sources. Pakistan's public debt has surged to a record Rs. 41.46 trillion as of September 2021 compared to Rs. 36.95 trillion in September 2020. Since September 2021,



*The debts keep mounting as Pakistan's economy flounders under successive governments.*

this public debt – which includes both the domestic and external debt – continues to mount.

Another red-flag for Pakistan's economy is the energy sector's circular debt which is accumulating by nearly Rs. 35 billion every month. During the first four months (July-October) of the current fiscal 2021-22, it increased by Rs. 139 billion to hit the record Rs. 2,419 billion mark. The way things are moving, the government appears without any grand plan even to manage the circular debt, let alone getting rid of it.

The federal government under the current National Finance Commission Award and the 18th Amendment – which provides cover to the distribution of resources – has been left with heavy liabilities

*The federal government under the current NFC Award and the 18th Amendment has been left with heavy liabilities and little resources at its disposal.*

and little resources at its disposal. Provinces are getting record resources, but they do not share the expenditure, including debt servicing and defence. The provinces take their share as per the NFC before the subtraction of above two big expenditures, and this kind of distribution of resources is becoming more and more unsustainable.

Then, there are no Provincial Finance Awards that could ensure the flow of money down to the districts as the provincial governments act like states within states and abhor the idea of devolving powers to the grassroots. This further vitiates the political environment.

Pensions – both federal and provincial – are being paid from the annual budgets rather than creating sustainable Pension Funds. In view of a large chunk of the economy being black or grey, the amnesty scheme has been only given to the Construction Industry, and not extended to industry, agriculture, and for value-addition on products and other capital intensive areas like start-up companies, establishment of large hospitals and universities, and infrastructure development.

Large amounts of wealth have either already migrated overseas from Pakistan or are in the process. Lack of automation and rampant corruption have prevented the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) from retaining the full sales tax collected from all consumers, instead, restaurants, shops



*Balancing US and China ties will be crucial for Pakistan's stability.*

and service providers are retaining a sizeable portion. The FBR is busy squeezing and further milking the honest tax payers instead of broadening the tax-base. Yes, just increasing the number of filers is not the answer to the problem. Most of the retail shops, agriculture landholders, and the small businesses remain out of the tax-net. Plethora of taxation rules, with numerous loopholes and interpretations keep the taxpayers at the mercy of various officials. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that larger chunks of money are going into the pockets of corrupt officials and their facilitators, rather than the national exchequer. And no government, military or civil, has so far succeeded in making tax collection simple, efficient, and automated in this era of Information Technology. And probably except for one odd regime, none ensured flow of capital down to district, Tehsildar and union council levels.

### Politics

Needless to highlight that politics in Pakistan is all about money, power grab and retention, corruption, cronyism, bad-mouthing, dynasties and family, party, or the so-called institutional interests. If the perpetual appearance of politicians in talk shows on the news channels are any indicators, no one seems to be genuinely worried about the welfare or plight of the public. Even if they talk about poverty or inflation, they never seriously discuss the factors behind it or try to come up with solutions.

Even if the government policies are discussed or criticised, the alternatives are seldom recommended. Democracy within parties is more of an eyewash as few rich families control their affairs in an

*Democracy within parties is more of an eyewash as a few rich families control their affairs in an autocratic manner.*

autocratic manner. Most political and religious parties have degenerated into family fiefdoms.

There seems to be no appetite even for discussing changes and reforms in the non-performing political system. The local governments – the most vital terminus for empowering the people – remain nonexistent for a major part of the tenures of the elected governments. Political interference in bureaucracy, police, and other public institutions have converted them mostly into subservient entities, and thus ineffective to provide any service to the public.

### Justice System

If there is one system that hurts the masses the most, and is in real derelict condition, that is our (non) Justice System. Rather than dispensing prompt justice, it provides relief and space to criminals under various disguises, mainly through 'stays,' 'adjournments,' 'non-appearance of lawyers,' 'sickness,' and 'holidays' – just to name a few. Higher courts seem to have neither control nor desire to supervise the performance of lower judiciary in terms of quality of judgments or the snail's pace of their proceedings.

The provision in the Constitution for lateral entries in Higher Judiciary has

been blatantly misused to fill slots mostly with politically aligned lawyers or those affiliated with certain favourite chambers. This has tainted the impartiality, efficiency, and respect of superior judges. And it leaves no incentive for the lower judicial cadres to work with dedication and honesty to climb up their profession.

Another branch of our judicial system, the lawyers organisations, are also politicised and use their clout to intimidate judges – and at times even physically thrash them with impunity. The investigation and prosecution are pathetic and thoroughly corrupted. Thus, a total breakdown that may be difficult to repair, if not impossible.

### The Military

We definitely need to review the following aspects of our military apparatus keeping in view the threat, affordability, and its integration with society etc.:

- Dividends of nuclear deterrence.
- Large standing component vis-a-vis pool of trained reserves
- Regular and short service components. Volunteer and conscripted cadres.
- Organisational structure and induction of modern specialties, keeping in view the changing character (hybrid) of wars.
- Nation-building tasks and integration with the civil society. Self-sustenance through agriculture, sheep farming etc.
- Large footprint in businesses, real estate, and polity. Profits should go back into the defence budget etc.

### Governance & Internal Security Apparatus

After the initial imbalance at the time of partition, our bureaucracy and police kept developing during the first few decades and turned into effective and reasonably efficient cadres, propping up able officers who contributed significantly in creating and maintaining order, providing various services, and a sense of security to the masses. And then started the political interference and institutional high-handedness, resulting in total destruction of the fabric woven on merit and professionalism. Syndrome of 'my *patwari*,' my DC, my inspector,' etc. thoroughly destroyed the institutions. The result is near nonexistent governance and order at all tiers. Ad-hocism and strong political af-



filiations are the prerequisites if an officer wishes to flourish and continue upward mobility.

### Foreign Policy

There is a clear dichotomy and internal split on some of the vital issues, creating confusion within our polity and even with our friendly countries. We need:

- Balancing between US and China. (CPEC and IMF as well as balancing a reliable friend and an unreliable one).
- Balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia. (neighbour vs. an old friend)
- Settling the basic questions about Kashmir (nature of support) and deciding whether trade with India is worth it at the cost of abandoning Kashmiris. As all our economic woes will fizzle away with this great leap?
- Deciding our relationship with Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban. Ironically, we still think that the greatest spoilers would come to the help of hapless Afghans.

Repairing this derelict and broken system is neither easy nor can this venture be undertaken by any single political party or institution. It requires a new resolve by all and everyone to adhere to a modified (not necessarily a new) social, political, and economic contract. If we fail to do this, our beloved country will transform into a lawless jungle – if it is already not the case.

### What to do?

One person even with a lot of knowledge, experience, and insight cannot come up with a comprehensive solution for all the ills. A collective effort by the sane political segments (there are plenty of them in each political party), higher judiciary, top bureaucrats, armed forces leadership, lawyers, businessmen, religious scholars, and agriculturists is the need of the hour. A consensus arrangement under the guidance and guarantees of the higher judiciary and arranged by the armed forces should be the way forward.

A Grand National Dialogue is immediately required that acknowledges the blind alley we have been pushed into due to the faults and intransigence of all the parties and institutions, and the need to immediately remedy the situation. The stakeholders should honestly draft the 'Terms of Reference' and a timeframe to introduce major economic, political, judicial, and institutional reforms, including

in the armed forces, and decide upon a mechanism to ensure that it becomes part of the Constitution and the law.

### Who will take the initiative?

A group of big personalities or institutions, who care about the future generations and this country.

The following points need consideration.

- There should be no finger pointing. Everyone is responsible for this situation.
- Repent and move forward, doing away with all bitterness, forgetting and forgiving all. Ensure that intransigent, incorrigible and confirmed black elements do not become part

*The provision in the Constitution for lateral entries in Higher Judiciary has been blatantly misused to fill slots mostly with politically aligned lawyers or those affiliated with certain favourite chambers.*

of the national exercise again, as happened earlier.

- Shun all the known ills that have crept into our politics, and draft stringent laws to prevent forming of dynasties, employment of money, guns etc. in politics.
- All erstwhile commissioners to form provinces for good governance.
- Elections should be held from bottom upwards. Local governments, Provinces, and then Federal.
- Taxation reforms through automation, simplicity, reasonable, and flat rates – no exemptions etc. Collection and distribution should be done from bottom upwards.
- Suggesting implementation of agreed upon Islamic injunctions, like abolishment of usury, distribution of inheritance etc. Unearth fake pirs/dargahs,

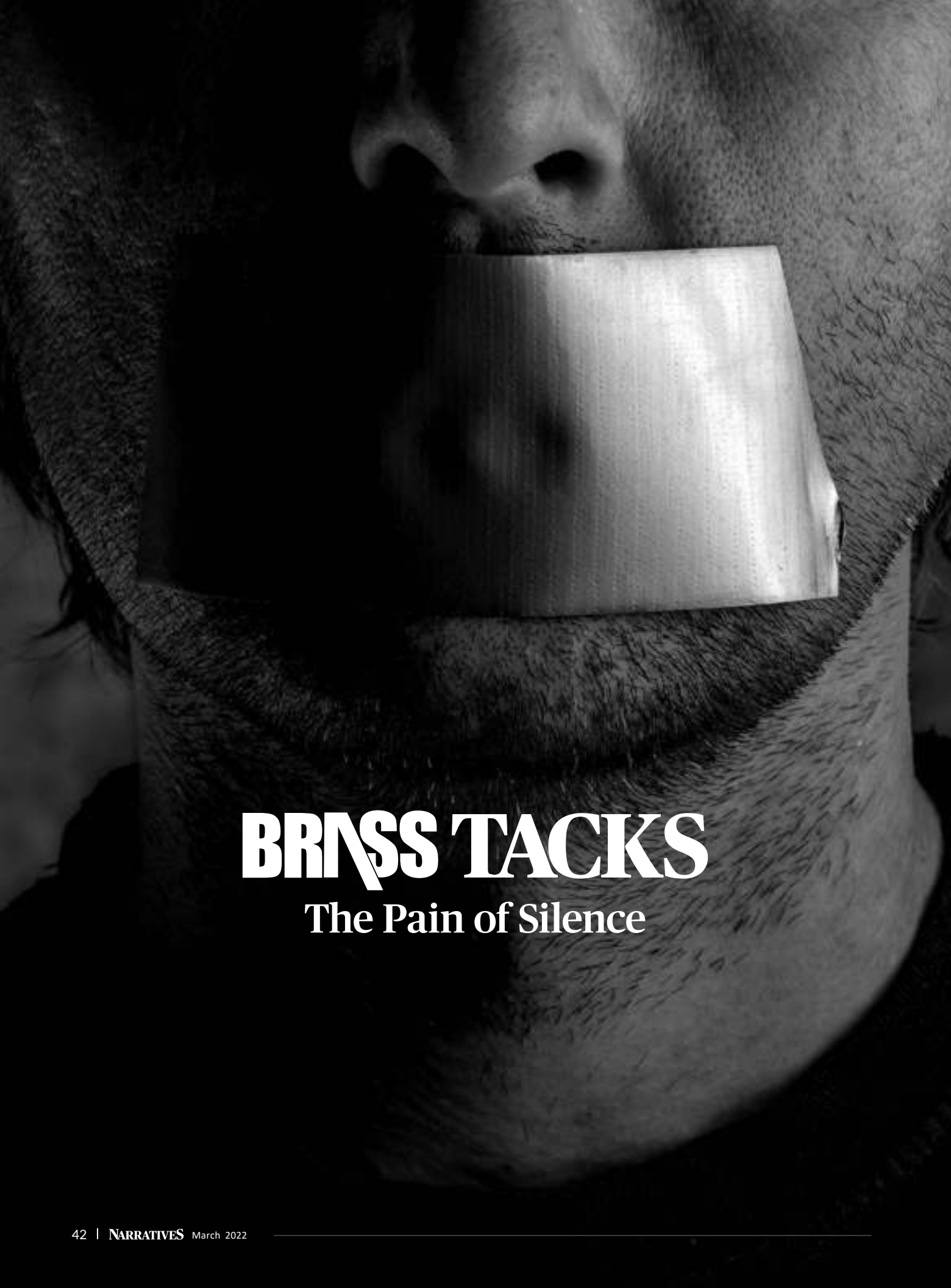
making tons of illicit money and ensure exemplary punishments.

- Suggest ways and means to bring black and grey money into national circulation. Temporary fiscal and monetary emergency by reduction of pay and privileges of top officials and enforcing upper ceiling in packages of CEOs, bank presidents, lawyers, and consultants etc.
- Judicial reforms to create an honest, impartial, and efficient cadre of respected judges.
- Institutional reforms including in police, bureaucracy, forest, agricultural research sectors etc.
- Educational reforms with special emphasis on promoting the right social behaviour and real spirit of religion.
- Media reforms to curb sensationalism, exaggeration, half-truths, and fake news.
- Foreign Policy debates on vital issues.
- Strict laws that ensure prompt and exemplary punishments for heinous crimes, constituting special or military courts to bring the situation under control.
- Laws be enacted and enforced to bring about a change in social behaviours that waste time and resources in ugly show of power and money.

The author is not competent to suggest details of reforms in each area. However, we have enough experts, who can come up with comprehensive plans for each sector. The Apex Dialogue Group can achieve this task by forming sub-groups for each sector and giving them a maximum of three to four months to present practical and inexpensive reforms.

During this exercise, an interim setup (as per constitution) be mandated to hold elections under the new laws (Presidential Ordinance) and all suggested Constitutional amendments be placed before the new parliament for approval and the country starts moving on new paths of national cohesion, unity, development, and progress.

If we fail to take such an initiative to right the wrong, then Pakistan may face a great political upheaval or a civil strife, creating more chaos and obliterating all the social and governmental structures. Alternatively, if Allah is Kind, a new political group may emerge with a new manifesto and appeal to the populace to ensure a change for the better. ■



# **BRASS TACKS**

The Pain of Silence



# An Unmitigated Crime

Societies prosper and perish by the wisdom of their choice, not the profit of their complicity. Societies prosper by the courage of their voice, not the cowardice of their silence. Societies prosper by the rationale of their planning, not the abuse of their prejudice. Societies prosper not by mere claims of their goals, but the reality of their success



**By Raof Hasan**

*The writer is a Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Information.*



*Protestors demanding justice for the victims of the Model Town massacre are assaulted by police.*

*"I swore never to be silent whenever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."*

— **Elie Weisel**

**T**he history of the world is replete with tragedies which were born out of the silence of those who needed to speak out at times when grave injustice was being perpetrated, but they opted not to. They preferred to remain quiet. Looking at it from a different perspective, so many human catastrophes could have been averted if people had gathered the courage to step forth and challenge the inflictors.

Even more gruesome would be the prospect of speaking not on the side of the aggrieved but the tormentor, not on the side of the victim but the aggressor, not on the side of the exploited but the

looters and plunderers. This would be tantamount to adding to the pain and sufferings of the weak and impoverished, thus reversing the tide of justice. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, and much to the angst of the conscientious few, this may already have happened with the poor staring blankly at a canvas which does not promise any respite or relief. The infliction seems perpetual and the pain unbearable.

Pakistan has weathered many crossroads in its chequered history, but none

*Persecution of minorities, desecration of the burial places, rape and murder of the helpless were all greeted with silence.*

more daunting than the perpetual denial of justice to those who needed it the most, and the silence of those whose word could carry weight and substance, but they remained uncaring and unconcerned, thus helping further perpetuation of the inequity, inequality, and injustice syndrome. But there comes a time when silence becomes the albatross. It assumes the form of an unmitigated crime, an abettor, and an accomplice of breeding the process of injustice. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, for most of its years since independence, this beleaguered country has waded through turbulent waters with no protective gear to guard it against brewing challenges and no hope to salvage the adversarial situations for relief. As a matter of fact, along the excruciating passage of time, things have continued to deteriorate rapidly so much so that they now appear to be beyond any ordinary remedy. Only extraordinary measures may bring some relief.

It is mindboggling to count the times



*The Sharif and Bhutto clans are plundering Pakistan, we can stay silent no longer.*

when the nation should have spoken out with one voice to defend their rights and their dignity, but they forfeited that option. Dictatorships were greeted with silence as were the democrats who came hiding their despotic spots. Silence greeted the spree of loot and plunder as it did defacing and denial of justice. Volumes of crime and corruption were garlanded by a profusion of drumbeats as also the infliction of rank cruelty upon the hapless. Silence ruled when gangs chanting democracy soaked the country in the blood of its innocent. Even the decision of the court that the daylight murder of pregnant women in Model Town could not be probed, was greeted with silence as was the closing of the Hudaibiya Paper Mills case with instructions for the media to not even report it. Silence pervaded when judgements were dispensed against orders received on phone, when justice was purchased by sending brief cases full of silver coins, and when the apex court and its sitting chief justice were attacked in broad daylight by the goons of a political party.

Silence also loomed when the rich and the powerful openly indulged in buying courts while the poor were deemed not deserving of justice. Persecution of minorities, desecration of the burial places, rape of the innocent, and murder of the helpless were all greeted with silence.

*Even the decision of the court that the daylight murder of pregnant women in Model Town could not be probed was greeted with silence as was the closing of the Hudaibiya Paper Mills case with instructions for the media to not even report it.*

Blatant lies, deceit and forgery could not break the wall of silence. The minds were lulled and the tongues numbed into silence in responding to the vilest and wickedest provocations. Ingrained principles were sacrificed and the nascent promise compromised, but the impregnable wall of silence remained unmoved.

It, therefore, may not be wrong to assume that silence remains a preferred

occupation of the nation. So be it, but has anyone ever tried to measure the cost this silence has inflicted upon the state and its people, and how much they have suffered as a consequence of this servile indulgence? Like I have said often, there is a threshold and maintaining silence beyond it, no matter how stoic, it would transport the guilty into the domain of cowardice, even criminal complicity. Silence beyond that threshold leaves little to distinguish between the perpetrator and the perpetrated, between justice and injustice. They all merge into one.

This threshold is defined by separating the true from the lie, the genuine from the fake, the spontaneous from the contrived, and the real from the false. Societies prosper and perish by the wisdom of their choice, not the profit of their complicity. Societies prosper by the courage of their voice, not the cowardice of their silence. Societies prosper by the rationale of their planning, not the abuse of their prejudice. Societies prosper not by mere claims of their goals, but the reality of their success. These are no easy targets. These are no standards for the weak-hearted among the mortals. These require both the courage of conviction and an unwavering determination for succeeding.

But, most importantly, when the truth and falsehood start getting mixed up and



it becomes difficult to sift one from the other, and when the spirit to follow the genuine is dissipated and striking compromises becomes a norm, the danger bells start tolling. It is a signal that decay has set in. It calls for the society to look inward and see where the fault lines are and how these can be rectified. This realisation is critical for retrieving it from plunging deeper into the pit of regression and ignominy. It is time to think, and think seriously.

Because of an embarrassingly low and compromised quality of leadership that ascended the helm often in this country, the society was made to endure multiple influences and pressures which were detrimental to its evolution into a credible and vibrant force. It is thus that the society was rendered unable to realise its true potential and promise. It continued wading through phases of uncertainty perpetrated by a variety of dubious leaders who actively cultivated a gruesome culture of crime and corruption. Incalculable damage was done by the charlatans hailing from the Sharif and Bhutto/Zardari fiefdoms. So widespread was the affliction that it virtually contaminated every individual who breathed here. Over time, it bred a society that was deprived of its faculty to discern the right from wrong. Somewhere along the way, the two merged, thus gravely corrupting the societal ethical threshold. In fact, the separating line disappeared completely, leaving in its place a hedonistic infatuation with crime and corruption.

So deeply dug in are the roots of this pervasive ailment that the reform process that Prime Minister Khan initiated after coming into power has been met with immense resistance from the crime conglomerate, the beneficiary elite, and their sundry a-dime-a-dozen sycophants and cronies. They saw their financial and political demise reflected in the face of the success of the reform initiative. Consequently, their opposition was laced with heavy doses of venom and bitterness directed at the person of the Prime Minister. With relentless help and assistance from the state institutions, which had been infested with people of dubious character through the Sharif and Bhutto/Zardari rules, they were able to slow down the process of cleansing the deck. The bureaucracy and the judiciary played critical roles in this sabotage and a job which



*Former finance minister Ishaq Dar was investigated by the NAB for corruption of Rs. 1.2 million in connection with the Hudaibiya Paper Mills case.*

*The reform process that Prime Minister Khan initiated after coming into power has been met with immense resistance from the crime conglomerate, the beneficiary elite and their sundry a-dime-a-dozen sycophants and cronies.*

should have been completed by now is still some distance away.

Once again, the missing link has been the voice of the people which would have lent immense power to the drive. But, because of the corrupt influences that they have been exposed to for years at a stretch, their voice remained muted. But the positive thing is that, with the passage of time, and with the fruits of reform becoming more visible, an increasing number of people are attracted to the change

which is taking shape. With the ousted leaders fighting a battle for their financial and political survival, some adverse influences may still linger. They are even aggravated in certain respects, fully aided and abetted by their operatives within the state institutions. But it is also a reality that the status quo forces are on the retreat and it may not be long before their influence may disappear altogether.

Nevertheless, the nation may still have to contend with the remnants of these retrogressive forces. It is here that the combined voice of the people can generate a significant appeal and influence to expedite the process of change. That voice of conviction, that voice of resolve, that voice of power was never more needed than now to defeat the vile and sinister manoeuvres of the criminal syndicate spearheaded by the Sharif and Bhutto/Zardari clans who dread staring into the pit of their nightmarish political oblivion.

The society has endured the biting pain of silence for much too long. It is time to cast off this syndrome. It is time to lend our voice to the battle for national redemption which is raging. I can see that resistance of the status quo is failing and the sun is about to set on their political fortunes. They have already been shifted on the support system.

Be it the long march or the vote of no-confidence, or any other stratagem their wicked minds can think of – let them indulge in their swan song! ■



# FRONTIERS

India's Chained Press





# Occupied Kashmir: Media Under Siege

How India has made journalism a crime in the Occupied Kashmir



**By Altaf Hussain Wani**

*The writer is Chairman, Kashmir Institute of International Relations (KIIR), Islamabad. He is a member of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, AJK chapter.*

**P**racticing journalism in the Indian Occupied Kashmir has never been an easy job. Along with other segments of the society, the journalistic fraternity too, has suffered immensely because of the continued conflict and turmoil in the region. Since 1989, at least 19 journalists, including a senior journalist and Editor of the *Rising Kashmir*, Dr. Shujjat Bukhari, were killed while performing their professional duties. A number of journalists, publishers, and newspaper owners also had to face reprisals and illegal detentions under black laws such as the Public Safety Act (PSA) and Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). These draconian laws have been used as a weapon to throttle independent journalism by India's repressive regimes that have always deemed free media as the biggest threat to their illegal rule in the disputed Himalayan region.

Moreover, the uncalled-for curbs on media such as surveillance, formal and informal investigations, harassment, intimidation, restrictions on movement, and mobility of journalists have hugely



*Kashmiri journalists stage a protest against the assassination of Dr. Shujjat Bukhari, Editor of Rising Kashmir, in 2018.*

hampered the objective journalism in the region besides undermining the role of free media.

Denying writers and columnists their right to freedom of opinion and expression, depriving newspapers of their editorial voice, and forcing them to toe the government line remain among the most abrasive measures that the Indian authorities have taken to suppress Kashmir's in-

*The worst days for the press in Kashmir's entire history started in 2019 and continue even today. As the Indian government tightened its hold on media houses, independent journalism came under attack.*

dependent voices critical to Indian government's policies in the occupied land.

These colonial-era tactics have rendered the idea of free press in Kashmir meaningless and virtually dysfunctional as it closed the doors for an inclusive and objective reporting of the situation in the region. But despite this, the media industry has stood its ground and resisted with valour the government campaigns to limit its freedom.

However, the worst days for the press in Kashmir's entire history started in 2019 and continue even today. As the Indian government tightened its hold on media houses, independent journalism came under attack in the restive region through the relentless clampdown and communication blockade.

In the aftermath of 5th August, 2019, when the occupied Kashmir was deprived even of its symbolic special status, the occupation authorities used repressive laws to shut down or suspend independent and critical media outlets highlighting routine human rights violations. The Director of Information Services and Public Services indefinitely banned the printing and distribution of newspapers both inside and outside the valley without





*The NIA raids the offices of the Greater Kashmir, October 28, 2020.*

citing specific laws or reasons. The illegal ban on newspapers remained in place for several months in 2019 for so-called 'security reasons'.

Undue restrictions have choked the media. As the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate at alarming levels, there has been a ruthless crackdown on dissent, raising global concern.

The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression, in various communications to the government of India, expressed concerns regarding the restrictions on the right to freedom of assembly and the right to free-

*Anti-terrorism laws against journalists haunt the entire media fraternity in Occupied Kashmir as journalists continue to live in a state of constant fear.*



*Kashmiri journalist Aasif Sultan is arrested by Indian police, one month after the annexation of Occupied Kashmir in August, 2019.*

dom of expression, as well as the reported pattern of detentions and harassment of journalists and human rights defenders.

Responding to news that the Jammu & Kashmir police has invoked the UAPA against Kashmiri journalists, Avinash Kumar, Executive Director of Amnesty International, India, said that initiating investigations against journalists by the police signal the authorities' attempt to curb the right to freedom of expression.

While the media was gasping for breath, blocking advertisements to the valley's leading newspapers and the promulgation of a new media policy in 2020 proved the proverbial last straw that broke the back of the media industry in Kashmir. It was yet another atrocious attack to strangulate free press, which pushed the news media to the brink of extinction and squeezed the space for independent journalism.

The new media policy, which institutionalizes censorship in the region, had overwhelmingly incapacitated the media from giving objective coverage to issues and problems of the people of Kashmir. The media policy was a disastrous recipe to coerce the already strained media into submission.

The post-August 2019 scenario has been even more alarming as hardships for journalists multiplied after the occupation authorities started a vicious campaign of bullying and harassment to prevent the media from performing its legitimate professional duties. The valley, in particular, witnessed an uptick in incidents of police violence against journalists. From harassment, intimidation, and beatings, to being shot at with lethal or non-lethal ammunition, the Kashmiri journalists continue to face a wide range of abuses by the police and other arms of the Indian security forces. Journalists and other media persons are increasingly being attacked, arrested, or summoned to police stations and intelligence centres.

During these turbulent times, there has been a wider upward trend in the use of excessive and unlawful force by India's so-called security forces and armed reprisals against journalists, with more than 17 media persons summoned by police and security forces for questioning. As the witch-hunt against critical voices continues unabated, illegal detentions, slapping of seditious charges against Kashmiri journalists, and systematic harassment of



their families has become a new norm in the valley.

Daunting challenges faced by the media persons could be gauged by the fact that high profile journalists, whose work has been acknowledged and published in prominent international media, became the prime targets of the institutionally enhanced censorship regime and many of them have been booked under PSA and UAPA. Asif Sultan, a thriving journalist is one of those, who has been detained under the UAPA since 2018.

Arbitrary arrests, systematic harassment and intimidation of journalists, and sealing of newspaper offices by the Indian occupation authorities speak volumes about the frightful environment and status of press freedom in Kashmir.

There is no denying that harassment of journalists has always been there but what the media persons have been facing under Modi's repressive regime today finds no precedent in Kashmir's history. The use of anti-terrorism laws against journalists by the authorities haunts the entire media fraternity as journalists continue to live in a state of constant fear. So far, dozens of top-ranking Kashmiri journalists, including Gowhar Geelani, Naseer Ahmed Gani, Qazi Shibli, and Masrat Zahra, have been booked under the PSA, UAPA, and other laws. The houses of 11 media persons including Fayaz Kaloo, the Chief Editor of *Greater Kashmir*, Shoukat Motta of Kashmir Narrator, Hilal Mir, a freelance journalist, and Aslam Bhat of *Kashmir News Service* were raided by police or the National Investigation Agency (NIA) authorities. The *Kashmir Times'* Srinagar offices, which were raided by the NIA sleuths, have remained shut for the past two years.

During the last three years, at least 18 journalists were summoned by police from time to time for questioning over merely reporting on events in Kashmir, which according to new media policy is a criminal offense of serious nature.

Asif Sultan, a photojournalist, remains in detention, despite several appeals from local and international media organisations. Recently, another budding



*Kashmir Walla Editor Fahad Shah is one of many Kashmiri journalists to have been detained and held without trial under India's notorious 'black laws.'*

***Senior journalist and Chief Editor of Kashmir Walla – an online news portal – Fahad Shah is the latest to fall prey to repressive media censorship that has been a hallmark of India's authoritarian regime's Kashmir policy.***

journalist, Sajjad Gul, was arrested on 5th January, 2022. Gul was arrested and booked under criminal conspiracy and other charges, days after he posted a video of a family shouting anti-India slogans after their kin was killed in a gunfight in Srinagar.

Senior journalist and Chief Editor of *Kashmir Walla* – an online news portal – Fahad Shah is the latest to fall prey to repressive media censorship that has been a hallmark of India's authoritarian regime's Kashmir policy. Shah, an internationally acknowledged journalist whose work has been published in the *Times*, the *Guardian*, and *Christian Science Monitor*, was summoned by the police and later detained at Pulwama police station for

allegedly 'glorifying terrorist activities' and 'inciting the public.'

Shah has long been a vocal critic of India's repressive and human rights-abusing regime. His arrest has caused global outrage amid calls for his release. Media organisations within and outside Kashmir have called the arrest an attempt to 'silence independent journalism.'

In a joint communique addressed to the incumbent governor of Jammu & Kashmir at least 40 press freedom and human rights organisations have urged his intervention to release the

Kashmiri journalist.

Reporters without Borders (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) have termed Shah's arrest as part of a wider clampdown campaign on press freedom in Occupied Kashmir. "The arrest of Fahad Shah shows Jammu and Kashmir authorities' utter disregard for press freedom and the fundamental right of journalists to report freely and safely," Steven Butler, CPJ's Asia programme coordinator in Washington D.C., said in a statement.

In a joint statement, two editors of leading US foreign affairs magazines while calling for the release of the award-winning journalist Fahad Shah, said: 'A free press is essential to democracy; using law enforcement to silence journalists is a dangerous abuse of power'. We urge the authorities in Kashmir to release Shah and to allow journalists in the territory to work freely without being subject to harassment', the statement said.

The arrest of Fahad Shah and others is part of the BJP government's clampdown campaign on press freedom across the region. The Kashmiri journalistic fraternity has a long history of fighting for their rights and speaking up in the face of incredible challenges. But the responsibility to stand up for journalists' fundamental right to freedom of opinion and expression cannot and must not rest solely on the shoulders of the struggling Kashmiri journalists. It is our global responsibility to raise voices in their support to ensure that the ruthless suppression of dissent in the region comes to an end. ■



**By Tahir Mehmood**

*The writer is a student of human history. He has authored two books: **A Long Long Walk and Where Clouds Meet.***

## Progressive Nationalism

The ultra-liberal and ultra-conservative are a threat to the ideals of progressive nationalism that serve as a binding force for the diverse Pakistani society.

**H**umanity's quest for identity is as perennial as human origin itself, but particularly in the aftermath of the French Revolution in 1789, modern Europe witnessed the huge power of rising nationalism that brought along both development as well as destruction. Nations took pride in theories of racial and ethnic superiority. However, after suffering the misfortunes of the two Great Wars, the term 'nationalism' is somewhat now perceived in a negative sense. Despite this, nationalism remains the founding stone and source of strength for all modern

nation-states.

Pakistan endured many challenges to its survival, peace and prosperity since its birth on Aug. 14, 1947. Having been created on the power of an ideology that drew strength from a separate religious identity, Pakistan even today finds challenges defining its nationalism, and instead of moving on the path of economic and social prosperity, the nation is often dragged into ceaseless debates about strategic orientation of the state and society and their relations with the individual.

The ultra-conservative and ultra-liberal small minorities cloud the real



issues of the common man.

Of man's many shortcomings, one is that his powers vis-à-vis the grand scale of time and space stand limited. In most cases, man tries to present the universalistic solutions for all times, but every time it is found responding to challenges of his own times, and limited bounds of space. Thus, we Pakistanis are also obliged to follow this and stay focused on our times, geography, people, and their well-being despite the limitless stretch of ideology and imagination.

### Two Defining Limitations

A revisionist India with its huge size, population, and clout has never accepted the reality of independent Pakistan, and has never failed to mention the creation of Pakistan as a vivisection of their sacred *Bharat Mata*. As we Muslims draw strength from our holy book – which is universal and for all times – for many Indian Hindus, the idea of *Bharat Mata* or *Akhand Bharat* remains sacred. It haunts them when they look at the map of South Asia. In their 'cherished goal' of seeing a united India, there is no distinction, whether it is achieved through an all-embracing apparent love-fold of Gandhi and Nehru, or the deathly gripping Hindutva under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In their moments of both love and hate, when many Indians claim that 'there is no difference between Pakistan and India, and their people share the same culture and cuisine etc.', they forget that this oneness mantra raises alarm bells for Pakistanis.

Since Indian Hindus cannot scrap the grand *Bharat Mata* notion from their religious scriptures, their desire for oneness will keep posing a permanent threat to the separate Pakistani nationalism. Indians have failed to accept the 1947 Partition. They would continue trying to dominate and subjugate our nation, and no Indian friendship-cloak could ever hide it.

Pakistan as a geographic entity, safeguarding the interests of Muslims living in the north western part of British India appeared as an idea in 1930, but the regions and ethnicities that it comprises today are centuries old with distinct and proud history and culture. Despite the enormous unity that the Pakistani nation draws from religion, these powerful ethnic expressions can be exploited by any foreign power that aims to weaken our nation. This also remains a historical



*Despite its contradictions, democracy remains the most viable system for a country as diverse as Pakistan.*

*This centralised state (Pakistan) is in no way, and should never be, giving semblance of a superimposed body, but as a guarantor of an all-inclusive diverse society functioning on merit and the rule of law.*

dilemma that when it comes to the issue of settling internal power crises, religion alone cannot do so. Islam's history is full of such examples where the most practicing Muslim fought and bitterly destroyed each other during internal power struggle. This limitation necessitates that along with keeping the religious identity as a unifying symbol, the Pakistani nation also needs those common rallying points and methods, which can ensure the settlement of internal distribution of power and resources.

Pakistan is lucky in a sense that despite the presence of strong ethnic identities, the state bequeathed from the British Raj had powerful institutions of military and civilian bureaucracy, as well as po-

litical parties/personalities that could transcend many parochial prejudices. In the absence of a strong centralized state, it would have been difficult to keep the country united and move it on the road to peace and progress. This centralised state is in no way, and should never be, giving semblance of a superimposed body, but as a guarantor of an all-inclusive diverse society functioning on merit and the rule of law.

### Challenge of Internal Discord, Institutional Rifts & System Resetting Demands

Our comparatively short history as a nation has seen many attempts of political resetting and consequent dissatisfaction after every such effort. However, this has not stopped our segment of activists, dreamers or political opportunists to attempt this one more time. In the first decade of Pakistan, there was a cry to replace the old breed of corrupt politicians, and there came a new lot of politicians in the 1960s and 70s. Then came a wave to replace the 'feudal politicians' with a new brand of industrialists and business class politicians. This change brought along its own ills and the society witnessed the growing role of money in Pakistani politics. Yet again, to achieve the dreams of a better Pakistan, a new breed of presumably austere leadership – with no economic stakes to take advantage while being in the government – has been set in motion after the 2018 elections.

But now as a consequence of economic challenges and administrative fail-



*Is nationalism the missing link in Pakistan's socio-political fabric?*

ures on various fronts, there is yet again a speculative debate going on to replace the parliamentary system with the presidential system to ensure merit and authority.

Frantic cries also emerge occasionally to totally discard the western democratic system and replace it with some kind of authoritarian system of government for rapid economic growth and social order.

Our 'revolutionaries' in fulfilling their dreams – and history is a witness to the fact and no political party is cleared of such charges – intently or inadvertently drag other institutions, including the military and the judiciary into politics.

No one can deny the institutional overstepping too, but it is more on the politics to show character and not get enticed by the lure of power. This should end now as if the state institutions get maligned on a daily basis, nothing will be left with the state to protect the society. This should be understood by all.

While making system resetting arguments, usually our zealot visionaries and political opportunists ignore to answer the questions related to the peaceful transfer of power. It would be prudent to remember that democracy is not the result of any conspiracy, but an outcome of human struggle spanning over centuries to put a check on the ills of absolute power and prevent the use of violence in the transfer of power. It is a fact that democracy is not the most efficient system for rapid development, but it has an inherent power of inclusivity and integration. A nation like Pakistan which has yet to fully integrate the powerful ethnic entities into

*The ultra-conservative and ultra-liberal small minorities cloud the real issues of the common man.*

a cohesive society, democracy provides a mechanism to settle issues through the power of ballot and debate. As far as the argument of the failure of democracy is concerned, a belief in the system and consistency would allow it to deliver at least the minimum expected out of a people's representative system. Those who wish to see a revolutionary change forget to see that keeping in view challenges to Pakistan's security, particularly from India, we cannot afford a prolonged internal strife or bloody revolution in the country. Any violent actor operating on this land will be directly or indirectly used by the enemies of Pakistan. That is the reason previous coups etc. were mostly soft. Any such attempt will put our survival in jeopardy and should be avoided. Here, the example of China is often cited by the change seekers, but they again forget that millions of Chinese lives were lost to put in place this one party communist system. Nothing comes without a price, but every price is not to be paid as it could cause total bankruptcy and collapse.

Alongside political acrimony, goes the unabated ideological schism in the

country. In these times of economic decline, and political and social unrest, two segments – the far-right and ultra-liberals – seem quite proactive to shape the Pakistani state and society in their image. Extreme religious expressions have more acceptability and space in a society which is suffering from poverty and injustice. However, we should never forget that if growing religious extremism is bad for India in the long run, it is also not profitable for Pakistan.

It would also be important to keep Afghanistan's political landscape in our minds due to our inseparable geographical, religious, and historic linkages. A politically and socially vibrant Afghanistan is more in the interest of Pakistan in the long term than a momentary geopolitical triumph.

As far as the politics and activism of ultra-liberals are concerned, it is ironic that most of their clichés are west-pleasing endeavours rather than an outcome of a deep philosophical thought. These elements fail to take into account Pakistan's ground realities and often create storms in a cup of tea using the traditional and social media in the name of freedom, human rights, and social equality. They repeatedly condemn our military expenditures and nuclear capability as a barrier to our development, but forget to condemn the west which produces and exports the most sophisticated weapons. Similarly, they forget to notice that many poor countries neither have large forces or nuclear arsenals, yet they remain poor.

The propaganda by the ultra-liberal element has the potential to bring more ruin and anarchy than prosperity. We need to remain vigilant. Let's wait for an ideal world to have an ideal Pakistan.

If the past is of any use then it should expose our shortcomings and follies committed to 'purify and cleanse' the system. This drive started in the first decade after the creation of Pakistan and since then, both hard and soft versions of authoritarian approaches were tried but results are in front of us. Of the last drive which started after the 1999 coup, the end point was return of the same leadership, which was pushed out of the country.

It would be prudent to notice that by pushing out the national leadership to other countries, leaves them at the mercy of foreign powers. After all, why should these countries favour them in their dif-



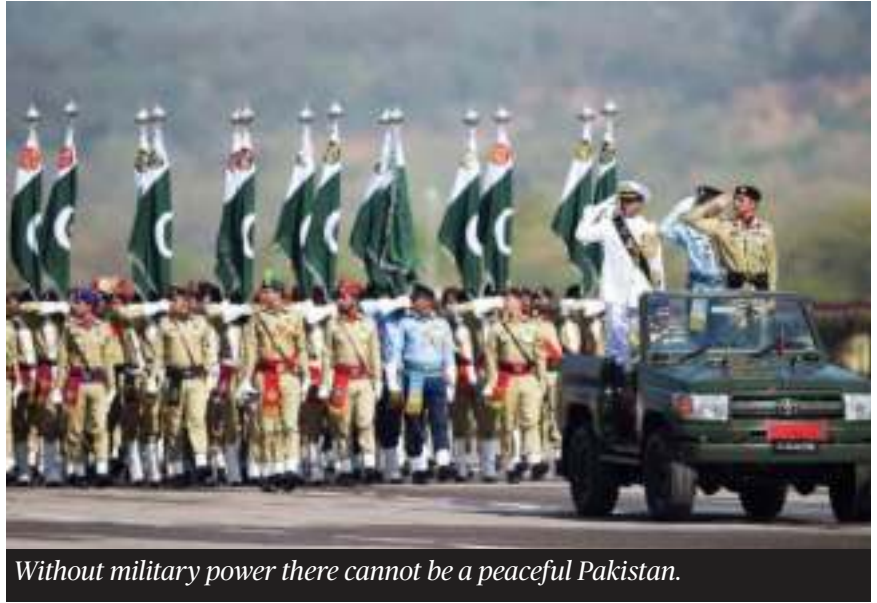
difficult times if some policy concession or softness is not expected or guaranteed later? By such imprudent acts, we facilitate the jobs of the hostile intelligence agencies. It would be far better to try the culprits here, or leave them if acquitted by the courts to the people's verdict in elections. Our national honour also demands that we settle our political disputes within the boundaries of our homeland rather than forcing politicians to take refuge and asylum in other countries.

### Progressive Nationalism

Amidst these system resetting debates and tension among various institutions of the state and within the society, Pakistan is lucky to have one such document that in some manners accommodates the rational and lawful demands of diverse segments of our nation. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan evolved after a consensus that not only addresses the ideological questions but also the routine power and governance-related issues between the individual and the state, and the federation and the provinces. The Constitution validates the separate religious identity of Pakistani nationalism, which remains the *raison-detre* of its freedom struggle. At the same time, the Constitution also ensures various safeguards to the freedom of individual, religious minorities, and women. The Constitution also provides platforms to smoothly settle the power-related issues between provinces and the federation.

Where it yearns for maximum provincial autonomy, the constitution also envisages a strong centre that can effectively address the internal and external issues, faced by the nation. It also clearly enunciates the role, duties, and bounds of various organs of the state. The 1956 and 1962 constitutions could not survive for long and resultantly the country witnessed 1971 debacle due to non-resolution of internal power differences. In the two-year time, the 1973 Constitution will see its golden jubilee, and the nation is lucky that it has survived despite coups and political upheavals. This progressive document is pro-people, pro-state, and pro-federation.

In these challenging times when internal rifts and power struggle can lead to further economic, political, and social decay, we all can make deliberate efforts to cultivate and promote a progressive Pakistani nationalism which neither succumbs to the dictates of religious ex-



*Without military power there cannot be a peaceful Pakistan.*

*In their moments of both love and hate, when many Indians claim that 'there is no difference between Pakistan and India, and their people share the same culture and cuisine etc,' they forget that this oneness mantra raises alarm bells for Pakistanis.*

tremism nor of ultra-liberals. The 1973 Constitution serves as a foundational pillar of our nationalism and defines the limits of our political practices and puts a check on any adventurism. A few points of the progressive Pakistani nationalism should include:

- Pride in the continuity of democratic institutions under all circumstances. The evolution and refinement should come through the established mechanism rather than machinations. A national truth and reconciliation commission, comprising members from all segments

of the society, should help address the unsettled issues.

- Where the Constitution guarantees supremacy of the political institution, other institutions must be allowed to maintain internal autonomy and meritocracy.

- A fully autonomous judiciary and free media should serve as watchdogs to any abuse of power or overstepping.

- Whereas religious identity remains central to our nationalism, no one should be allowed to coerce an individual and take away liberties as guaranteed by the Constitution. Religious freedom to minorities should be a hallmark of our society.

- Pakistani women are a pillar to our national strength and nothing should be permitted to hamper opportunity, life, or career for them.

- Wherein we remain committed to regional and world peace, Pakistani nationalism should be confident and proud enough to maintain necessary military power potential. 'From geopolitics to geoeconomics must not be taken as a moral goal but as another facet of power politics in the international arena. Peace should remain a condition mutually desired rather than a dictated one by any regional or foreign power.

There can be a desire to change overnight, but Pakistani society and state is not ready to undergo the rigours of such a cataclysmic change. The enemy remains at the door, waiting for the opportunity, and only internal discord or façade unleashed under any pretext, will allow him to exploit and further weaken us. ■

# HORIZONS

## Shaky American Umbrella





# Russia's Ukrainian Challenge

The United States is provoking Moscow by trying to expand tentacles of NATO directly up to the Russian frontiers

By **Ibrahim Sajid Malick**

**F**or decades, Europeans contributed little money, lives, or resources to their defence and paid even less attention to this cause as they remained sheltered beneath an American nuclear umbrella leftover from the Cold War. The American shelter now appears on shaky grounds.

While the United States has evacuated its diplomatic corps and ordered American citizens to leave, China's embassy in Ukraine is still open for business. The Chinese Foreign Ministry will give consular protection and aid to Chinese people who stay in the country.

As the crisis builds between Ukraine and Russia, the shadow of a previous regional conflict hangs heavily – the 2008 war between Georgia, Russia, and South Ossetia. Many observers, with good reasons, are seeing ominous parallels between the events of 2008 and what is happening today. Is Russia again about to invade a neighbouring state that is unapologetically seeking NATO membership?

Former President George W. Bush was advised by American intelligence in 2008 that measures to bring Ukraine and Georgia closer to NATO would be viewed as provocative by Russia. And this would very certainly prompt Russia to take preemptive military action. But, in the end, Bush ignored their warnings. Russia attacked Georgia four months later, in August 2008.

Russia's message was evident to Ukraine. For the next many years, it retreated from NATO membership. However, in 2014, Ukraine sought to negotiate an association agreement with the European Union, believing that this would be a safer path to the West. Moscow reacted again, accusing Ukraine of gaining access to NATO through the Crimean peninsula. Russian President Vladimir



*War appears imminent as close to 200,000 Russian troops have amassed along the borders of Ukraine.*

Putin, encouraged by the West's tepid response to 2008, launched an ongoing proxy war in Ukraine's southern Donbass area in 2014.

China has urged all sides to be calm and avoid inflaming tensions and exacerbating the Ukraine issue. China's stance on the Ukraine crisis has been clear.

*As the crisis builds between Ukraine and Russia, the shadow of the 2008 war between Georgia, Russia, and South Ossetia hangs heavily. Is Russia again about to invade a neighbour that is unapologetically seeking NATO membership?*

Beijing is emphasising that all relevant parties should work for a comprehensive resolution of the situation via communication and negotiation. China invokes the 2015 Minsk accords, which the UN Security Council adopted, and are generally recognised as essential political documents. The new Minsk agreements signed in 2015 in Minsk, Belarus's capital, by representatives from Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia are comprehensive documents to achieve a military ceasefire, political reform, and national reconciliation in eastern Ukraine.

The Minsk accords, signed in September 2014 and February 2015, detail the actions required to end the war in Donbas between government soldiers and armed groups.

Talks between Ukraine and NATO about membership started in March 2008. The very next month, on April 2nd, Russia invaded Georgia. On November 30th 2009, Ukraine declined an invitation to sign up to the Intensified Dialogue programme that brought Ukraine closer to joining NATO. This led the Kremlin to spell out its warning: "This is not helpful for building trust and stability in Euro-Atlantic space." Will Pakistan learn anything from these events?



*Many Ukrainian civilians, men and women, are joining army reserve units in order to back up conventional forces in the event of a Russian attack.*

Moscow firmly believes that Ukraine is their strategic partner; she should walk along the path of equal cooperation – as a nation friendly towards Russia, but outside of any closed military alliances.

The most pro-western leaders have since independence now lead Ukraine's government. President Petro Poroshenko has been clear from his electoral platform: Ukraine will aim for full, rather than only individual, NATO membership.

In September 2015, Ukraine began its first-ever military exercises with Poland. The Polish parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee was told by retired US General Ben Hodges, commander of US Army Europe: "No one should be worried about Ukraine joining NATO or the EU any time soon. But Ukraine needs to reform itself rapidly so it can meet those standards." Polish experts insisted Ukraine would take at least two decades to meet NATO

*If Russia invades Ukraine, the greatest response the West can muster would appear insufficient and disproportionate to such an extraordinary occurrence. This is one of the reasons why imminent violence is being predicted with such surety.*

standards. Ukraine's military is poorly equipped and cannot defend Ukraine against Russia. Ukraine has not had proper training in fighting in modern warfare, deploying effective command structures or using its equipment.

US President Joe Biden has embraced a clever strategy for declaring a foreign war. He will be proven correct if there is a conflict. If that doesn't happen, it'll be because he succeeded to halt his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in his tracks. Furthermore, he will have done it without making significant sacrifices, and – importantly for Biden – in agreement with the US partners, in the cause of a unified West. Of course, it would be preferable for Biden if there were no invasion. That would demonstrate his and the West's ability to repel an attacker. However, if Russia invades Ukraine, the greatest response the West can muster would appear insufficient to many and disproportionate to such an extraordinary occurrence. This is one of the reasons why imminent violence is being predicted with such surety. The more unavoidable it is depicted, the more successful any alternative conclusion appears to be.

An invasion appears to be a real possibility in the West, judged by the frenzy of diplomatic action and the unusual tone of anxiety in declarations by key leaders. It's difficult to believe they'd put on such a spectacle for no reason other than to smear Russia's reputation. After all, it's not just the US and the UK dedicating time and attention to the subject, but also the leaders of France and Germany. They are generally hesitant to cast aspersions on Russia.

It's also very likely that, at some point last year, Moscow was terrified that Ukraine would use force to retake control of its breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk regions, emboldened by Biden's election victory, Azerbaijan's successful operation to retake Karabakh, and Kyiv's acquisition of new weapons, such as Turkish Bayraktar drones. As a result, in the spring of last year, Moscow sent a warning signal by massing troops near Ukraine. ■



*Ukrainian forces are considered too small, ill-equipped and inexperienced to repel a potential Russian invasion.*



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# HORIZONS



**By Imtiaz Gul**

*The writer is the founder and Executive Director of the Centre for Research and Security Studies.*

## Putting CPEC Back on Track

Chinese speed and expectations must be taken into consideration for fruitful bilateral relations

**B**efore embarking on the trip to Beijing, Prime Minister Imran Khan had cleared Rs. 50 billion that Pakistan owed to the Chinese IPP investors. Another Rs. 100 billion of the nearly Rs. 900 billion was paid after the visit. In response, on February 10, the Chinese insurance company, Sinasure, moved forward and cleared the way for fresh Chinese investment, thereby removing a big bottleneck that had prevented the disbursement of investment loans since the late 2020.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's meeting with President Xi Jin Ping, on

February 6, literally put the economic relationship back on track between the two allies. Both leaders agreed to take this time-tested relationship forward more vigorously as well as closely collaborate on counter terrorism measures.

The 33-point Joint Declaration, announced after the visit, ended the string of speculations on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's (CPEC) projects and the reported Chinese displeasure over outstanding payments to its power companies.

The undertone of the declaration was categorical; the political relation-



ship is stronger than the 'technical issues' around the power projects.

'I think these are hyped-up technical issues, and would not form major obstacles for our two countries' greater cooperation,' said a senior Chinese diplomat when asked about the payments to Chinese IPPS.

At the centre, there have been 10 power projects – 9 power stations worth 5,600 plus megawatts and the roughly 900 km Lahore-Matiari High-Voltage Transmission line. All had been completed, but Pakistan's relevant authorities dithered for months, hoping the Chinese would revise the tariffs downwards, a bizarre and indecent expectation in the presence of sovereign guarantees that the state of Pakistan had accorded to these projects.

The Prime Minister, it appears, had been told that the delay in bilateral talks for sorting out 'technical issues' was because of COVID-19. And obviously, the Pakistani leader – despite all his good intentions – was unable to think through the sinister games that advisors and bureaucrats, around him, had been playing.

'We experienced delays because of the corona situation and only a physical meeting with President Xi helped us remove the roadblocks,' Imran Khan told a select gathering of former and serving diplomats.

Although, Chinese businessmen, investors, and some officials have been telling us a different story. It also merits mention that the Chinese leadership has been all over, albeit via internet for political, business, and diplomatic talks on various forums. Business never stopped, but here our bureaucrats gave the Prime Minister the impression that as if the pandemic had brought the Sino-Pakistan relations to a standstill.

Imagine the loss; Imran Khan performed the ground-breaking ceremony of the Gwadar Power Plant in November 2019, but no work was done on this project until his Beijing visit.

In a nutshell, Pakistan and the people of Balochistan in general and Gwadar in particular, lost two precious years. The Water and Power Authority also failed in connecting Gwadar with the national grid. And hence the string of protests that have been erupting every now and then in this emerging port city.

Chinese officials say that the joint



*Chinese premier Le Keqiang greets PM Imran Khan upon his arrival in Beijing as PM Khan aims to revive a stalled CPEC.*

*After over two decades it was only China that injected nearly \$27 billion in Pakistan – regardless of the merit or otherwise of the way some investments were done. Beijing stuck its neck out.*

statement has spelt out the course for China-Pakistan cooperation for the next stage, including the 'high-quality development' of the CPEC, joint response to address COVID-19, deepening economic and trade cooperation, strengthening people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and resolving the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

The joint statement, they said, resonates mutual trust, the spirit of cooperation with a reiteration of commitment to pursue ideals of a close China-Pakistan community and a shared future.

The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics theme – Together For A Shared Future – was also reflected in the joint statement, mirroring the Chinese ethos i.e., desire to grow and help others around you to grow and develop in a peaceful environment.

In weeks to come, we may witness

even greater enthusiasm in bilateral relations but a lot will depend on whether the Prime Minister and his well-meaning friends can neutralise the bureaucratic mindset and the anti-China sentiment within their own circles.

We have yet to see whether the Beijing meeting would lead to kick-starting the ML-1 (Train project) or will the CPEC only muddle along because of the tardy, multi-layered systems here in Pakistan.

Some circles within the government have started talking about the need to 'reduce over-reliance on China for national development.' It reduces the country's stature. But this postulation, perhaps meant to mitigate the US-led west's concerns over the growing Sino-Pak ties, carries an unrealistic and potentially dangerous proposition i.e. Pakistan can do without Chinese support.

This overlooks the bitter reality that after over two decades it was only China that injected nearly \$27 billion in Pakistan – regardless of the merit or otherwise of the way some investments were done. Beijing stuck its neck out. Of course, it wanted to expand westwards as part of its Belt-and-Road-Initiative, but demands for loans or investments originated in Pakistan. And the Chinese obliged in deference to the old and unwavering relationship.

Fruitful outcomes from Prime Minister Imran Khan's Beijing visit will also depend on whether Pakistan's decision-makers and implementation organs can adjust themselves to the Chinese speed and expectations. ■

# GUEST *Column*



## The Call



**By Maj Gen (retired)  
Saad Khattak**

The writer is a retired Major General of the Pakistan Army and a former Pakistan High Commissioner to Sri Lanka. He has launched his own political party, the Pakistan Aam Admi Movement.



# Pakistan's Aam Admi Movement

PAAM promises to alleviate the plight of the common man of Pakistan, offering them an effective alternative political party to rely on



**I** retired from the military in November 2016 after 37 years of service. To employ my vast security-related experience, I along with Mr. Abdullah Khan, established a think tank – Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), Islamabad – that focuses on monitoring, recording, evaluating, and reporting on the anti-state violence mainly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, while keeping an eye on broader Asia.

During our interactions with the academic community and influential officials as well as the youth, I could draw a conclusion that hardly anyone was satisfied with the system of governance and those running it. During the PICSS seminars in various universities across the country, I noticed a strong sense of apathy and despondency prevailing, especially among young Pakistanis. The youngsters appeared mostly disillusioned and hopeless about their future and their country because of rampant corruption, nepotism, and elitism in almost every civilian-run institution and that too, at every level.

I discussed these issues with close friends and even many acquaintances. Most of them appeared deeply concerned about the state of affairs and discussed them endlessly, but what Pakistan needed were not mere empty words but solid ac-

tions too. Yes, Pakistan's maladies needed a pragmatic and practical approach to take on the mafias destroying Pakistan in every sector. That meant taking the bull by the horns – not an easy undertaking by any means.

Another major decision that I took after retirement was to get back to my roots – an option seldom exercised by retired officials, who mostly prefer to settle in big cities.

To reconnect with my people after a gap of 37 years, I decided to register the Khushal Khattak Trust (KKT). The KKT focuses on providing and promoting healthcare and education among the

needy as well as creating awareness about the negative fallout of drug abuse and aerial firing. Conflict resolution is also an important activity which is being carried out through the KKT platform.

The KKT remains my humble effort to pay back to my people. This platform – run through our meagre resources – has been serving the people for the last four years.

During the routine management of KKT affairs, I experienced that in order to get full support of the politically appointed district administration, police, and other related departments, one has to be either on the right side of the ruling political elite or else one would be seen and taken as a potential rival.

I experienced a lot of bitterness and unnecessary obstacles at the hands of the local political elite that reinforced my belief that the problem lies with the system. We, therefore, decided to initiate a struggle at the grassroots level to create awareness about political empowerment to motivate and groom capable, patriotic, and well-meaning people from the middle class, who are kept outside the ambit of the country's power equation by the corrupt ruling elite.

Towards the end of 2019, when I was tipped as Pakistan's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, a few of our friends decided

*We started the discussion on registering a political party representing the proverbial Aam Admi (common man) and ensuring that he reaches the corridors of power.*



*Saad Khattak aims to free Pakistan from the shackles of the exploitative elite.*



*Gen (r) Muhammad Saad Khatak stands with the office bearers of the PAAM.*

to commence the formal and arduous struggle to break these shackles and free the common man from the clutches of the elite.

We started the process of discussion on registering a political party representing the proverbial *Aam Admi* (common man) and ensuring that he reaches the corridors of power. After due diligence and deliberations, my friends in Pakistan began the process of registering a political party with the Election Commission of Pakistan.

**Why Pakistan Aam Admi Movement?**

More than 98 percent of Pakistanis are left out of the power equation as the system is tailored to benefit and serve the interests of the 2 percent that make up the political and bureaucratic elite. The common man needs to be shaken from his deep slumber and motivated and mobilised to challenge the ruling elite and change the status-quo. I had to cut down my tenure as the High Commissioner by three months, to play my role in the formation of the party for the common man.

On numerous occasions, both during my formal and informal interactions with the elite and common people, we were confronted with many sarcastic questions. The main ones were; why another political party? Don't we have enough of them – more than 150 registered parties, to be precise? What did these parties achieve for the common man? How will our party be different from them? How will we break the hold of the dynastic political elite which is hand-in-glove with the bureaucracy and the other power centres? Who would provide funds for the new party? Whose agenda are we

*This silent majority, fully aware of Pakistan's ills, remains unable to contribute because of the entrenched political mafia. The PAAM has taken the plunge against the tide and with the will of Allah would make its contribution.*

pursuing? Are we working on someone's behest?

These and many more pointed questions are still being asked from us on a daily basis.

Like almost all common Pakistanis, it is our considered opinion that all the major political parties, including the ruling party, have miserably failed to address the problems of the people and meet their aspirations.

While the business empires of the elite within these parties have expanded, they have displayed complete indifference to the interests of the country and its 220-million inhabitants. The bureaucratic apparatus supports the status-quo forces, protecting its own narrow interests at the cost of wider national interests.

Pakistan Aam Admi Movement (PAAM) was registered on October 29,

2021 after which it formally and modestly commenced its political journey across the country. We are receiving a tremendous response especially from the youth across the country.

The party is trying to provide a platform for those able, qualified, patriotic citizens, who have the capabilities and capacity to take the country forward by participating in the political process.

This silent majority, despite being fully aware of Pakistan's ills, is unable to contribute because of the entrenched political mafia. The PAAM has taken the plunge against the tide and with the will of Allah would make its contribution.

The party was successfully launched at the Karachi Press Club on January 16, 2022, the occasion was attended by common people, including many women, representing a cross section of Pakistan.

Karachi was intentionally chosen for the launch of PAAM since it serves as the melting pot of 'Aam Admi' belonging to every ethnicity, sect, religion, and province. It is the former capital, the city of Pakistan's founding father, a business and industrial hub and the economic engine of the country. Yet, Karachi remains deprived of its share in virtually everything thinkable. By launching our party in Karachi, we wanted to demonstrate our solidarity and commitment with the city and its people and pledge to undo all the wrongs and injustices done to our 'mini-Pakistan.' Bridging all the divides, we will restore Karachi to its rightful position with the public support, InshaAllah.

**PAAM's aims and objectives in brief:**

1. Bring forward leadership from the



middle-class through a bottom-up approach. Build institutional, focused leadership rather than a personality-centric entity and change the decision-making process to shared collective wisdom rather than revolving around an individual and his or her cronies.

2. Focus on exposing and eradicating corruption as a top priority. It is a challenging task, but not an impossible one. For this, PAAM aims to introduce sweeping reforms in our judicial system to make it quick, cheap, and easily accessible for the common man. We want a judicial system which can give exemplary punishments to the criminals and the corrupt and protect the innocent.

3. The judicial reforms – made on a war footing – will also make the system responsive to the day-to-day public needs and societal aspirations. The lost public trust in the existing judicial system as an institution will have to be restored through active participation and cooperation of the executive and judiciary. Major surgery and aggressive reforms will be an inescapable necessity.

4. The healthcare and education system – that are by-and-large non-responsive to the needs of the common majority – will have to be revamped. A uniform education system will be introduced that would not just give degrees and worldly knowledge, but groom students in line with the true spirit of our Islamic values.

5. Improve governance and public delivery through rapid incorporation of digital e-governance to make the entire system transparent, efficient, and responsive to the public needs with minimal interference from the elite and their bureaucratic and societal extensions.

6. Focus on our youth – both boys and girls – and increase their stakes in political governance as per their aspirations so that Pakistan can utilize their potential, talent and energies. The new education and political system will make the youth a permanent stakeholder, giving them a feeling of pride in their contributions and ownership in the noble task of nation-building and achieving the goal of a prosperous Pakistan.

6. Use of technology to make doing business easy and transparent as well as in all the facets of governance and public delivery systems.

7. The economy needs to be fixed through a major surgery through home-



*Can the PAAM uplift the majority of Pakistanis who live in poverty?*

*The country and its people had pinned their hopes on the current political dispensation. It proved no different from the past and jumped in bed with the status quo forces. Now it stands hijacked.*

grown solutions. A 'Made in Pakistan' approach will be adopted as a top priority. The sacrifices and surrendering of perks and privileges will begin from the top. Major reviews of imports and exports will be done, while both the earnings and spending will be linked to NADRA database with the CNIC as the primary document thus revamping the entire taxation system.

8. The IMF programmes will have to be phased out with better fiscal and economic planning, focusing on greater self-reliance and national pride. The nation's financial and economic sovereignty and self-reliance will be our sacrosanct priority. The entire banking system will be made riba-free, ending the perpetual war with the Almighty Allah.

#### **Conclusion:**

The continued silence and apathetic patience of the majority towards the state of affairs in Pakistan is criminal and no longer sustainable. It is dangerous and detrimental to the future of our country and future generations. The moment of now or never has arrived. The country and its people had pinned their hopes on the current political dispensation. It proved no different from the past and jumped in bed with the status quo forces. Now it stands hijacked. Efforts to put it back on track are futile as the political leadership has lost its credibility. The country and its people can no longer take the shame that has been inflicted upon them by these self-centred elites. The time has come for the majority – the true custodians of Pakistan – to take charge of their destinies. No other political party provides the hope, honesty, transparency in its affairs, a shared decision-making mechanism, inclusivity and opportunity that the PAAM does for the ordinary people. They must come forward and be counted.

The PAAM has appeared on the political horizon at a critical juncture of our history. The time has come to change the nation's destiny, rid it from the poison of dynastic politics, and lead it on the path where Pakistan can fulfil the dreams of Allama Iqbal and Quaid-e-Azam. The dreams of a strong, stable, modern, and prosperous Pakistan – in line with the true spirit of the Islamic welfare state.

May Allah Guide us towards that destination. Ameen. ■



By Ibrahim Sajid  
Malick

*Without issuing any charges, the federal government dismissed Dr. Tariq Banuri from the chairmanship of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in March 2021 by changing the Higher Education Ordinance 2002 to lower the chairman's tenure from four to two years. The HEC is intended to be an autonomous body with the fixed term of the chairman. While the legislation mentioned COVID-19 and the knowledge economy, it did not introduce regulatory guidelines for online education, digital libraries, or students' internet access, and computers.*

## What's in a Degree?

Acquiring degrees doesn't necessarily depict the quality of education one has received

**F**irst of all, you critiqued the higher education institutions of Pakistan, terming them 'degree mills' in the last column you wrote for *Narratives*. What do you mean by degree mills?

A degree is a piece of paper. When I look at that piece of paper, it either tells me something, or it doesn't tell me anything. If it's a proper degree, it tells me that this person who has this

degree has some competence. There are things that they know; there are things that they can do; they have some professional attributes that they have picked up from going to a good institution. They have interpersonal characteristics and can work with others. So if somebody has a degree from a good university, let's say NUST, I can assume some academic and interpersonal skills.

On the other hand, you can get a degree from either a weak institu-



tion or an institution engaged in, let's say, unacceptable activities. My honest view is that it doesn't tell you anything most of the time. Degree holders could be good people, probably not genius, because they would not go to such an institution. Or it could be somebody who doesn't know anything. So you see, you have two degrees, one degree gives me some information. And the other degree gives me no information whatsoever. It could be a random person off the street, who I look at, and I have no idea what they can do or not do etc. So if you start giving degrees of the second type, you're neither helping your students nor helping the country as a whole by providing the skills, expertise, and knowledge that the country needs.

The second one is easier to do. Universities announce they are open for admissions and keep on lowering the standard to increase enrolment. And at the end of a particular period, they hand out a piece of paper. Basically, they throw 'graduates' into the market. Now in Pakistan, beginning around 2002, under the HEC, universities were made to believe that they could issue degrees indiscriminately. The more graduates you produce, the better you are, the more students you can admit, the better you are. The larger the number of degrees with all kinds of exotic names, the better you are. The degrees from most of those places are totally useless.

I sit on recruitment boards and selection boards. I can tell you that there is no point in looking at a large number of degrees because they just don't give you any information whatsoever. Students might as well not have that piece of information. In fact, let me say the following. Suppose I get a CV of a person who has studied entirely in Pakistan. So if somebody has a degree from UET Lahore, NED University, or UET Peshawar, I basically feel that this person can be relied on to do some good work. Some of the new institutions in the nonprofit sector have worked very hard to establish the quality of their degrees such as LUMS, Habib, Aga Khan University, to a lesser extent, GIK Institute, not comparable to LUMS. Depending on the department, Punjab University students probably struggled to get in and, therefore, have decent potential. But many of the other universities, actually, might be getting good students. They might be given a good education, but universities



*Depending on the institution, many Pakistani graduates possess degrees that are as good as random pieces of paper, according to Dr. Tariq Banuri.*

really don't maintain consistent quality standards. It doesn't tell me anything. So I might just ignore that altogether and look at the person afresh. Right? So if the degree doesn't give me information, it's just a piece of paper. If you give me 100 rupee notes, I know that people will accept it and provide me with something in return if I go to the shop. If I don't know it, there's just a piece of paper in my hand. Right? So many universities have become this, and we need to rescue them.

**You mentioned less than 10 names out of 211+ universities in Pakistan. And that's very unfortunate because all those 211 plus universities have a seal of approval from the HEC. And as chairman of HEC, you're telling me that it has done an abysmal job of accrediting universities. Are you ranking universities based on their**

*Suppose you have a system in which everybody who comes in ends up graduating regardless of their quality. In that case, you can tell that it's a poor quality institution or a poor quality degree, right?*

**intake? If a university has a higher intake standard, our assumption is that it will be a better university.**

I have to explain this, see again to simplify matters greatly. Suppose I am trying to assess something. I will look for a consistent quality pattern. It gives me a very different impression if I find either inconsistent or poor quality. The higher the institution's quality, the more careful they are in trying to find the best possible students, so they can invest in them. The second one is the integrity of their evaluation systems. Universities are a significant part of what is called a social evaluation process. We academics spend 90 percent of our time in evaluation. What I mean is, I have to look at students and say did they pass? I have to look at people who send me papers for review; I see whether they're good or bad. I have to look at grant proposals. I mean, that's all we do; we evaluate people. So evaluation is a very central part of it. Suppose you have a system in which everybody who comes in, ends up graduating regardless of their quality. In that case, you can tell that it's a poor quality institution or a poor quality degree, right? And some of our degrees, particularly our PhD degree, fall into that category. Anybody who gets admitted gets through regardless of the quality.

The third one, of course, is what happens in the middle? Did you actually invest in them? Or did you just say, well, you spent four years here and then come back and get your degree? Does a university have an excellent mentoring system, good infrastructure, libraries? Do they in-



*Dr. Banuri urges universities to take the quality of their degrees more seriously.*

spire and motivate students to use digital resources effectively. So it's not only the entrance. It's a whole process. Ultimately what I'm saying is, if the university doesn't try to invest to protect its quality, then very quickly, it just becomes a piece of paper. Right? And for many universities, their degrees have become just pieces of paper.

**As a parent, when I see the seal of approval of the HEC, it means I have to invest 10 lakh rupees of my savings on my child's education. The degree paper that they're walking out with, will be worth something. Still, you're telling me that it is just a piece of paper.**

Traditionally, it has been that way and is one of the challenges that I have confronted. And this is one of the reasons why the unfortunate incidents of March 2021 took place; one of the challenges that I've had is to turn that engine around and get people to start focusing on quality. But we have set up an intricate structure that is highly resilient to intervention in order to move forward. This means that you know once you have a particular pattern of functioning, you have several people who are told that to be successful, this is what you have to do. And 'this is what you have to do' has nothing to do with the quality of education you provide, well then that's what they will do. And so you have a huge cohort of people who actually think that this is the right way to behave and have no concern whatsoever with the output. So, for the last few years, I've been fighting a battle with all of these institutions and especially their leadership to turn

*The PhD degree has, unfortunately, become a joke. It's such a serious problem. We conducted an exercise to assess gaps in the education of some fresh PhDs. 534 PhD students participated. And the results were horrifying.*

that ship around. Therefore, my job is to get the universities to engage with this issue in the first place, become conscious of quality, and focus on the different things they can do to protect and uphold quality. That's a struggle that we're going through – the regulatory part of the HEC. I would probably say that it's the first time that we have tried to use it in 20 years. In the past, the HEC did not use it but just set absolutely minimum standards. And then paid no attention to it. The only reason the HEC would give attention to it after many years, was to harass somebody; if I don't like your face, and I have given you the approval, I will find two or three things that you're doing wrong and come and start harassing. That is what the institution was

good for. I didn't want that; what I wanted is that you and I have a partnership, say we are going to build a first-class university; I was going to say world-class, but maybe not a first-class university. And I will do my part, and you will do your part. And on that basis, my regulations will, on the one hand, provide you with the guidance and the framework that you need, and on the other hand, provide you with the freedom. That's the direction in which it's not been an easy task and will take some time; I think what has happened now, if I may sorry just take one last thing, is that the unfortunate incidents of the last one year, because of the prominence that some of these issues received including the coverage that you provided to it have now come into a kind of public discourse. I've been greatly encouraged by the response of the younger faculty members, who have been writing to me in the thousands. I mean, you know hundreds leading up to the thousands basically saying: This is what we want to do, but the framework is such that we just can't find a way of moving ahead with it. And hence, I've been trying to work with those people to try and help them to come out. And now ultimately, if you look at this kind of awareness, this knowledge that this thing, this way of doing things is wrong, and that things have to be done differently; this knowledge is the one that is going to transform the universities. The HEC will play its role, both in inspiring and providing a framework as well as in providing freedom. But the energy really has to come from the universities. And that's the direction in which we are going.

**In your previous response, you were particularly concerned about the quality of PhDs in Pakistan. Can you elaborate?**

The PhD degree has, unfortunately, become a joke. It's such a serious problem. We conducted an exercise to assess gaps in the education of some fresh PhDs. 534 PhD students participated. And the results were horrifying. Because we found that essential skills, essential professional behaviours, essential knowledge were missing. And so my task, my response to this, was to set up remedial systems to fill those gaps. And I still believe that there are constructive ways in which we can move forward. There are some people who recognize their own deficiencies and subvert the whole system. ■



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# Entering the Global Workforce

Pakistan is repositioning its technical force to meet the demands of a new age and create opportunities for its youth in the changing job market



**By Amir Jahangir**

*The writer is the Founder and CEO of RINSTRATECHNOLOGIES. He is also the Global Expert of the World Economic Forum on Competitiveness.*

**P**akistan is among the top five freelancer markets in the world. With an English-speaking education system and a good analytical mindset, Pakistan is ranked as the fourth most popular country among the top destinations for Internet Communications and Technology (ICT) outsourcing because of the exponential growth of the IT sector. Moreover, Pakistan enjoys the fourth position globally in the category of Software Development and Technology.

As a result of the twin forces of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 recession, day-to-day digitalisation has leapt forward, with a large-scale shift to remote working and e-commerce, driving a surge in work-from-home arrangements and a new marketplace for remote work. However, it has also brought about significant well-being challenges as



*Extreme Commerce founder and CEO Shaikh Kashif 'Sunny' Ali speaks at a career counselling session in Islamabad in September.*

workers have struggled to adapt to new ways of work over a short period of time.

The Pakistan Freelancers Network, launched by Extreme Commerce, comprises professionals engaged in creating e-commerce solutions and expertise for Amazon, Ebay, Shopify, and other domestic and international portals for e-commerce and digital trade. The Freelancers Network is also working to prepare Pakistani youth to cater to the global demand for emerging technologies that will dominate freelancing work by 2025, including Cloud Computing, Big Data Analytics, Internet of Things (IOT), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) etc.

The World Economic Forum's Report on the Future of Jobs states that "In the

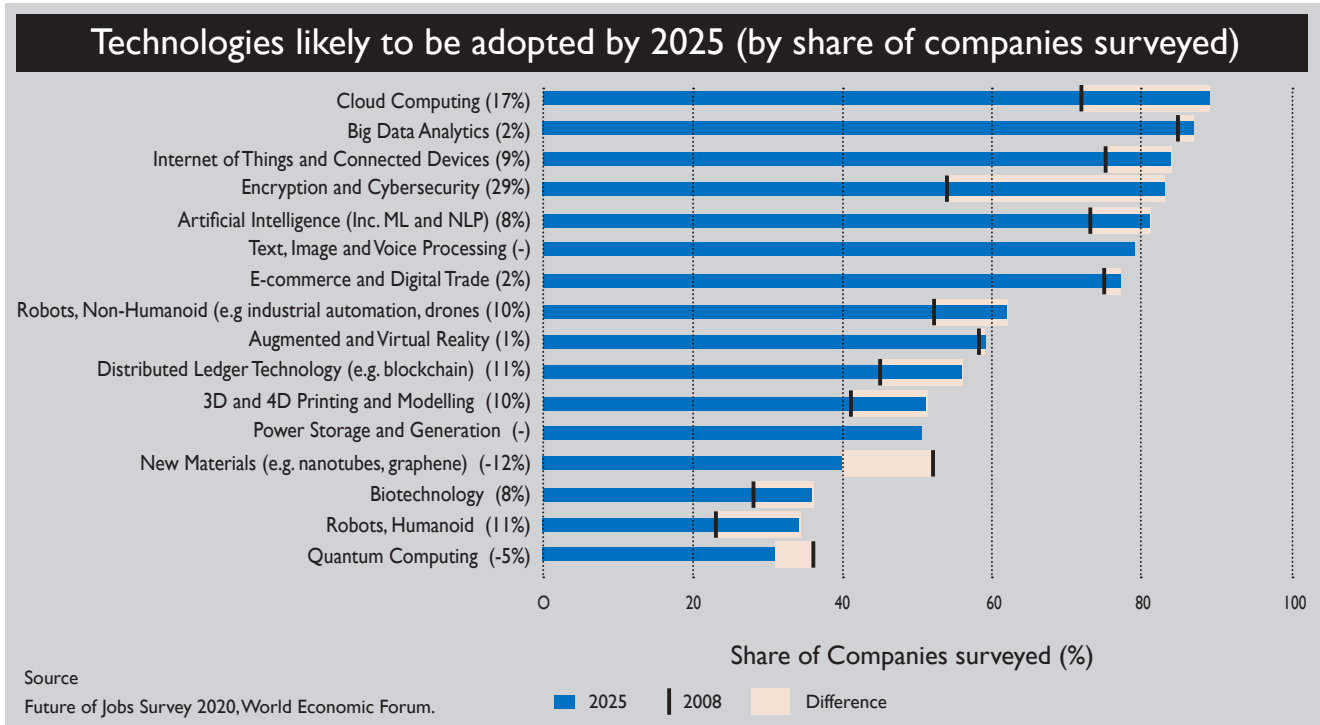
COVID-19 context, workers have been segmented into three categories: 1) 'essential workers' such as delivery personnel; career and health workers; food shop workers; agricultural workers and manufacturers of medical goods; 2) 'remote workers,' who can work remotely and are likely to keep their jobs; and 3) 'displaced workers,' who have been displaced from their jobs in the short term and potentially will be in the future, and who fall disproportionately into the sectors most negatively affected by the pandemic, namely Hospitality, Retail, Service work, as well as Travel and Tourism.

The Pakistan Freelancers Network has crossed the 1,000,000 (one million) mark and has created a new workforce that can contribute globally from Pakistan, bringing more remittances into Pakistan as compared to the past.

Pakistan is also repositioning its technical workforce, from the traditional low-skill and low-paying jobs to a more sophisticated technical education and skill sets. The recent initiatives by the Technical and Vocational Training Authority Punjab (TEVTA), in a recent agreement with RINSTRATECHNOLOGIES, has outlined its vision for digital storytelling as one of the key skills for technical jobs in the country. RINSTRATECHNOLOGIES is Pakistan's first platform for Digital Storytelling.

TEVTA Punjab showcased RINSTRATECHNOLOGIES

*The Pakistan Freelancers Network has crossed the one million mark and has created a new workforce that can contribute globally from Pakistan.*



and Extreme Commerce at the Dubai Expo 2020 and showed the world how Pakistan is ready to benefit from platform economies. The platform economy is an economic and social activity facilitated by platforms. Such platforms are typically online sales or technology frameworks. The most common type by far are ‘transaction platforms,’ also known as ‘digital matchmakers.’ Examples of transaction platforms include Amazon, Airbnb, Uber, Careem, Food Panda, and Daraz.

RINSTRA is creating initiatives to identify storytellers who can be groomed and presented on the world stage. People who have the skills to showcase their expressions through scripting, editing, animation, graphics, and simple film and documentary-making are being identified through competitions and film festivals that are subsequently to be advanced to international competitions. So far, RINSTRA has been successful in engaging more than 120,000 people who are interested in producing quality content in various genres from Pakistan.

The new initiatives by TEVTA include stakeholders like National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTC), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the TVET Sector Support Programme (TVET SSP), the European Union, and the Norwegian



*“The skills gaps in the local labour market and inability to attract the right talent remain among the leading barriers to the adoption of new technologies... in Pakistan.”*

– The World Economic Forum

and German Governments. This has also brought a paradigm shift from its conventional system approach to a modern skill ecosystem to be implemented henceforth.

Fresh evidence from the Chief Human Resource Officers, who are conducting the World Economic Forum’s Future of Jobs 2020 Survey, indicates that, on average, 44 percent of the workers can work remotely during the present COVID-19 crisis, while 24 percent of them are unable to perform their current role. This estimate indicates an aspiration to expand the availability of remote work. The current theoretical share of jobs that can be performed remotely in any given economy has been approximated at 38 percent of jobs in high-income countries, 25 percent in upper-middle income economies, 17 percent in lower-middle income economies and 13 percent in low-income economies.

COVID-19 has impacted the workforce and taught them to improve work efficiency while operating from home. This has introduced new forms that have enabled the work to be done via zoom and meets etc. Additionally, it has enabled the workforce to go digital and stay connected, irrespective of time and space constraints.

The new and emerging jobs being identified for Pakistan are:



Business Development Professionals; Digital Marketing and Strategy Professionals; Mechanic and Machinery Repairs; Digital Transformation Experts, and Big Data Specialists etc.

Some of the jobs that are becoming redundant and losing their market share include those that can be done more efficiently by algorithms and computers like data entry clerks; administrative and executive secretaries; analysis work, general and operations managers; sales, assembly, and factory workers. Similarly, accountants and auditors are also being replaced by systems and software-based tools.

The World Economic Forum has indicated in its Future of Jobs Report that, 'the ability of global companies to harness the growth potential of new technological adoption is hindered by skills shortages. The skills gaps in the local labour market and inability to attract the right talent, remain among the leading barriers to the adoption of new technologies. In the absence of ready talent, employers provide access to reskilling and upskilling to 62 percent of their workforce, and that by 2025 they will expand that provision to a further 11 percent of their workforce. However, employee engagement in those courses is lagging, with only 42 percent of the employees taking up employer-supported reskilling and upskilling opportunities. Incidentally, this trend is quite low in Pakistan and the desire for the companies to spend money on training is diminishing every year, as the bottom line lowers every year, with shrinking profit margins.'

Skill shortages are more acute in emerging professions. The ease of finding skilled employees across a range of new,

## Emerging and redundant job roles

Role identified as being in high demand or increasingly redundant within their organization, ordered by frequency

EMERGING	
01	Business Development Professionals
02	Digital Marketing and Strategy Specialists
03	Mechanics and Machinery Repairers
04	Digital Transformation Specialists
05	Software and Applications Developers
06	Sales and Marketing Professionals
07	Data Analysts and Scientists
08	Business Services and Administration Managers
09	Big Data Specialists
10	Advertising and Public Relations Professionals
REDUNDANT	
01	Data Entry Clerks
02	Administrative and Executive Secretaries
03	Management and Organisation Analysts
04	General and Operations Managers
05	Door-To-Door Sales workers, News and Street Vendors
06	Assembly and Factory Workers
07	Accountants and Auditors
08	Legal Secretaries
09	Business Services and Administration Managers
10	Postal Service Clerks

Future of jobs: Emerging and Redundant Jobs in Pakistan  
Source: World Economic Forum



*Can Pakistan close the digital skills gap in its labour market to meet the demands of the post-Covid era?*

strategic roles, including business leaders, is becoming increasingly difficult. It is hard to find Data Analysts and Scientists, AI and Machine-Learning Specialists, as well as Software and Application

Developers, among other emerging roles. While an exact skills match is not a prerequisite to making a job transition, the long-term productivity of employees is determined by their mastery over key competencies. Although Pakistanis are more active in acquiring new digital skills, they lack the sophistication and finesse that is required in these professions.

Some of the barriers to removing the skills gap in the local labour market are the inability to attract specialised talent, a lack of understanding of opportunities, low flexibility of the regulatory framework, shortage of investment capital in the ecosystem, lack of flexibility in hiring and firing, and a lack of interest among the leadership in their foresight for the future. These shortcomings can be overcome through a more public policy focus on the need for the jobs of the future and a more active industry-academia linkage that can generate more debate and collaboration for solutions-based, commercially-oriented research.

One thing that is still lacking in Pakistan is the future orientation of the government's policies for placing more emphasis on the need for jobs of the future. This requires a conscious effort which can bring the various arms of the government to work towards identifying and improving the competitiveness challenges of Pakistan and devising ways to improve them in order to create livelihood opportunities for 57 percent of the population which is still below the age of 18. The challenge before the government is to create 150,000 jobs every month, as this is the number of people entering the job market, month after month. ■

# Pakistanicon

The Power of Prayer





# A Unique Life

His father's words and wishes remain the guiding beacon of Dr. Bari's life



**By Zahra Chughtai**

*The writer is a prominent freelance journalist and runs her own interiors and lifestyle online publication.*



*Healthcare for all has been the guiding principle of the Indus Health Network.*

**“D**on't let the 'me' intervene, my father always cautioned me,” says Dr. Abdul Bari. And that piece of wisdom is something he has lived by. The founder and CEO of the Indus Hospital and Health Network – the largest free of cost medical service in Pakistan – Dr. Bari remains remarkably approachable and free of any sense of self-importance. Bearded and bespectacled, any gravitas is belied by his ready smile and open, courteous demeanour.

Starting operations in 2007, the Indus health network has grown from a single hospital in Karachi to a health network spread across Pakistan. It encompasses 13 hospitals, eight of which are government hospitals being run as public-private partnerships. There are four blood centres and four rehabilitation and artificial limb centres. Their primary health and outreach programmes touch 51 districts, including a boat clinic, and an increased focus on telemedicine. And many more projects are in the pipeline.

Dr. Bari's family hails from Peshawar but he was raised and educated in Karachi. “My father moved to Karachi in 1956,” he says. “I am a true Karachiite.”

After graduating from Adamjee Science College, he studied medicine at Dow University (Medical College at that time) and later did his post-graduation in Cardiac Surgery from Karachi as well.

“I come from a middle-class background. We are a family of 11 siblings and we grew up in a small apartment. My father was a very religious man and he had a particular habit. After his prayers, he would always pray aloud. And for me, he always had one prayer, ‘Ya Allah, make Bari serve humanity in his career as a doctor.’”

Studying at Dow Medical College and the affiliate government-run Civil Hospital, the young Abdul Bari and others like him were acutely aware of the problems faced by patients. Some years earlier, a few students had formed the Patients Welfare Association with an aim to provide some relief.

“I joined the Association in 1980,” recalls Dr. Bari. “There was a cupboard in the office of our professor, Surgeon Mushtaq and that was our treasury. We would collect money and buy medicines to give away.”

Unbelievable as it seems now, till the eighties, blood banks were completely dependent on professional donors. “Here was a permanent line of professional do-

nors outside Civil Hospital,” explains Dr. Bari. “They had a ‘thekadar’ called Kalay Khan. He would yell out the blood group needed and the donors would line up.”

A healthy individual can donate blood once in three months but these donors were giving blood every week. “They would take saline drips in between, so their blood was not only diluted, low in haemoglobin, but also infected with hepatitis, malaria, and you name it...”

Then in 1981, the professional donors went on strike to lobby for higher remuneration. This proved to be the impetus needed to change the system.

Dr. Bari was a second-year student at the time. “There was no other source of blood and we realised that we could not be hostage to these people,” he says. “We needed to set up our own blood bank with voluntary donors.”

Dr. Bari was made the director of this project and he and his band of colleagues set to work. They were allotted a room which had to be repaired and reconstructed. “We would work late into the night supervising things. And we were also going up against a mafia so there was a level of stress. We would always go home in groups when it got late.”

Then there was the task of motivating people to give blood and collecting





*The 'boat clinic' in Bhong, Punjab is the Indus Network's most iconic, and one of its most essential clinics, providing a lifeline for poor rural migrants, cut off from mainstream health services.*

rare blood groups etc. Initially, medical students were the best scouting ground for blood donors. "We were known as the vampires," laughs Dr. Bari. But the biggest challenge was changing mindsets and eradicating erroneous beliefs about donating blood. "I remember arguing with a man whose wife urgently needed blood. I told him she will die if you don't give her blood. But his logic was that if he did so, she would become his sister. The family was actually willing to let her die."

Slowly the message was heard and it spread. "The system changed, volunteerism prevailed and now professional donors have vanished. It took time, 30 years, but that is how long real change takes."

The blood bank had been set up but patients were given whole blood which was a tremendous waste.

Dr. Bari floated the idea of setting up a blood fractionation system to the Patients Welfare Association. A fourth-year student at that time, he and his colleagues were on study leave. "We got machines and training from Germany and I learnt to separate blood into plasma, platelets etc." This training was then passed on to the technicians at home. The most intimidating part for Dr. Bari was telling experienced doctors to change the way they were working. "My mentor Surgeon Mushtaq told me to prepare a presentation on the subject which he would allow me to present at a surgeon's conference to be held in Karachi. He helped me practice, I would go to his house and he would time me." Thanks to those efforts, today, it is common practice in Pakistan to separate

*"Historically, in any Islamic society, three things were the responsibility of the state: health, education and inns for travellers."*

blood into its various components and administer only what is needed.

All these experiences with the Patients Welfare Association groomed Dr. Bari for the task he would take up in future. "I learned motivation, procurement, and how to deal with donors."

From the beginning, the association had one inviolable code: there would be no personal projection of any individual. "I recall I was invited to a show on PTV to talk about the work done with the blood bank. There was a lot of debate within our group and finally they decided I shouldn't go. The producer was very surprised."

The eighties were a turbulent time in Karachi. In 1986, a massive bomb blast in one of the city's oldest and busiest markets, Bohri Bazaar, shook the local community. "I was doing my house job then and I clearly recall the carnage. Picking out survivors from the bodies which came in... At that time, I saw how the city responded to the tragedy. People were lining-up to donate blood, waiting with bags of money to give." This assured Dr. Bari of

the immense potential for charity and the work it could support.

The Patient Welfare Association decided to upgrade the over-burdened Emergency Ward at Civil Hospital. A committee was formed and the architecture firm of Arshad Shahid Abdullah volunteered their design services. The project was budgeted at 36 lakhs and fund raising began. "We launched a programme targeting schools. We would go and give presentations and plastic money boxes were left at the schools to collect money." Out of the 36 lakhs needed, 24 lakhs were raised from the school campaign. "About 3 lakhs of this was received in coins stuffed into 40 sacks."

The night before the inauguration of the new Emergency Ward, Dr. Bari was with the project team of doctors, architects and planners. "And I said to them 'If God wills it, one day we will build a hospital which provides quality care free of cost.' And so the dream was born in 1987."

Later that year, Dr. Bari's colleagues and friends went abroad for their post graduate studies. Dr. Bari's father was a paraplegic at this time and he did not want to leave the country. So he remained in Karachi and trained at the NICVD as a cardiac surgeon. "Surgeon Rahman was my mentor there," recalls Dr. Bari. "The institute provided quality care but was very limited with only ten beds and two theatres. The waiting list stretched three years during which most patients didn't survive."

By this time, the young Dr. Bari knew a thing or two about fundraising and project building. "I had some credibility by now and enjoyed donor confidence." He took on the task of expanding the Cardiac Unit at NICVD. "Tariq Qaiser who had designed our Emergency Department building, as a young architect with Arshad Shahid Abdullah, had his own firm now. He designed the new space for us, we raised funds and began construction within three months." The new unit was attached to the old one and it was a challenge cordoning off areas and carrying out construction while the rest of the hospital continued to function.

Meanwhile, another important event in Dr. Bari's life was coming up. "I had to fly to Peshawar for my wedding," he says. "The rest of my family had already left. We had a shortfall of 5 lakh rupees for the NICVD project and I was very worried about it. I





was in contact with someone about a potential sponsor but it was very uncertain. That night I went to sleep and suddenly woke up in cold sweat. I kept tossing and turning and couldn't sleep. Then I got up and said my prayers. 'Oh Lord, when I leave the city tomorrow may it be without any burden on my shoulders.' After that I slept peacefully." The next morning when he went to work, he got a call from a donor, who pledged the remaining amount.

In 1995, Dr. Bari did his fellowship to become an Assistant Professor of Cardiac Surgery. It now became his mission to establish a Department of Cardiac Surgery at Civil Hospital where none previously existed. Dr. Bari formed the Friends of Cardiac Surgery and set about raising funds for the task. "I went back to the same donor who had funded the last five lakhs for the Emergency Ward. He agreed to give me the money on the condition that I take his son under my wing and allow him to assist me on the project."

In 2000, the first cardiac surgery was performed in Civil Hospital by Dr. Bari's mentor Surgeon Rahman. After that, a flood of patients followed. Dr. Bari continued working at Civil Hospital till 2018 when he took early retirement.

But during his stint at Civil Hospital, he had not forgotten his most ambitious dream of building a free hospital. In 2004, Dr. Bari's doctor friends returned from abroad. "I reminded them of our dream and said that the time had come to realise it." They set up a foundation with some 17, 18 people on board and started scouting for land. Then someone told



*Conceived during a conversation between university pals, the Indus Health Network has risen to become one of Pakistan's largest providers of free health care services.*





*KPK Secretary Health, Dr. Syed Farooq Jamil (left), visits the Indus Hospital in Korangi, Karachi.*

them about the Islamic Mission Hospital and Nursing School which had been set up with funding from Abu Dhabi. “But the project had run into financial issues and couldn’t get off the ground. The building was already there and so, we decided to take over that project.”

In 2005, Pakistan was devastated by an earthquake and Dr. Bari and his team left for northern Pakistan where they ran a field hospital in Balakot.

In 2007, the focus shifted back to Karachi and the Indus Hospital started operations with 150 beds. “We had no money but we had faith and determination,” says Dr. Bari. “Everyone was skeptical of the model of a free private hospital. They all said it wouldn’t work.”

So why didn’t the team opt for a model which combined donations and profit from the affording? “Because I have seen that model fail,” insists Dr. Bari. “After one generation it becomes a profit-based private hospital. And there is no way that all patients will be treated equally. There will

*“Then there was the task of motivating people to give blood and collecting rare blood groups etc. Initially, medical students were the best scouting ground for blood donors.”*

be a difference between those who pay and those who don’t.” Dr. Bari also holds another ideal in mind. “Historically, in any Islamic society, three things were the responsibility of the state: health, education, and inns for travellers.”

His belief and determination prevailed. Today, 15 years on, the Indus Hospital network is firmly established

and growing. Their annual budget has grown from millions to billions of rupees and sees an increase every year.

While Dr. Bari was chasing his goals, his wife, also a doctor, remained his pillar of support, holding up the home front. “I had told my wife of my mission while we were still engaged, and she always encouraged me. I saw my children grow up horizontally,” he laughs, referring to the fact that they were mostly sleeping when he got home. “But one thing I did was to always drop them to school in the morning – from school right up to university.”

When the couple’s three children, two boys and a girl, were a little older, Dr. Bari’s wife did a post-graduation in family medicine but later took a degree in hospital administration. Today, she is part of the Indus Health network. “So our missions aligned,” he smiles. “With the advantage that we are both so tired when we come home, there are no fights,” he jokes.

What has been the biggest challenge in pursuing his dream? ‘Money has never been the problem,’ says Dr. Bari. “Once you have people’s trust, you will find they are looking for good ways to spend their money. The biggest challenge has been that of human resources.” What is Dr. Bari’s future vision for the Indus Network? “Health is not only physical and mental, it is social and environmental,” he maintains. “Only if people are lifted out of poverty can there be a true cure. We must adopt a holistic, multi-sectoral approach towards a larger goal. We need to connect with like-minded people so we can see an impact.”

Dr. Bari would like to see the Indus network become a bridge to connect different sectors like education, agriculture, health etc. “We have to focus on all the creatures of God. This includes the veterinarian sector and we have also started a rabies vaccination programme for dogs.”

Dr. Bari believes that public-private partnership is the way forward. “We must put ourselves in a position where we can influence policy making. Everyone has their strengths. No one can get results alone. Nor us, nor the government. But if we all work together, it’s a win-win. And this has been seen in the handling of the COVID-19 crisis.”

Although Dr. Bari’s father did not live to see the Indus Hospital, he knew that his son was on the right path. “I can’t become complacent about it. One has to do jihad with oneself every day.” ■



*Dr. Bari speaks at a symposium announcing the Indus Health Network’s partnership with Getz Pharma to eradicate rabies from Karachi.*

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# Entertainment<sup>[.]</sup>





## Exploring New Vistas

Some interesting and new trends emerged on Pakistani entertainment channels over the last year or so, giving a new push to the careers of some of our singing sensations. Yes, prominent vocalists have tried to break barriers and explore new horizons by taking a plunge in the world of 'serious' acting. Hadiqa Kiani, Atif Aslam, and Azan Sami Khan – all played leading roles in some hit drama serials.

Hadiqa Kiani starred with veterans like Sania Saeed and Nauman Ejaz in Hum TV's *Raqeeb Se*. Starlets, including Iqra Aziz and Faryal Mehmood were also part of the

serial, which created waves.

Then, Atif Aslam made heads turn with his acting debut in *Sang-e-Mah* – another Hum TV production – along with Hania Aamir and Kubra Khan. Many critics gave Atif a thumbs up from the very start of the serial.

Last but not the least is *Ishq-e-Laa* in which Azaan Sami Khan gave a promising debut performance along with acclaimed actresses Yumna Zaidi and Sajal Aly.

Hum TV roped in all the three singers for its drama serials. The question, however, remains would we see more of the acting talents of our singing sensations or were these just one-off stints?

Many still remember vocalist Haroon Shahid's entry on the TV screen after having appeared in the film *Verna* with Mahira Khan. TikTokers Arsalan Naseer and Dananeer also won great acclaim for their debut roles in prime time serials.



## Drama & Social Messaging

More power to the multi-talented artists of Pakistan!

Dramas are not just for entertainment. They can also serve as a powerful tool for social messaging and a catalyst for change. And Pakistani dramas sometimes fused the two, though lately there has been a slow but sure shift of incorporating social messages in the family drama. This indeed is a promising sign as playwrights are moving away from the tried and tested themes to explore new ground.

Now one sees the women protagonists fighting patriarchal norms, young people challenging archaic traditions, and supportive male family members endorsing women's rights in the new-age Pakistani drama. In a popular serial last year, a mother was shown giving evidence against her own son, who was accused of sexual harassment.

TVOne has come up with the thought-provoking serial *Mor Moharan* which is not just a beautiful love story, but also warns about the devastating effects of climate change – a topic hardly taken up by our entertainment channels.

Kudos to its producer Seema Taher Khan, a committed environmentalist herself, for betting on this topic, which few would want to touch in our commercially-driven entertainment world. *Mor Moharan* handles the tricky subject of a fight over water, in a barren land, among sons and daughters of the desert. The serial – directed by Owais Khan and written by Ali Moeen – has Sonya Hussyn and Zahid Ahmed in lead roles along with veterans like Firdous Jamal, Babar Ali, Adnan Jaffar, and Samia Mumtaz, in supporting roles.

One also sees channels picking up bold, unusual topics for production these days. Another of TVOne's hits, *Dil Na Umeed Tou Nahin* took up sensitive themes like human trafficking, child-labour, and runaway children. The story is all about the horrors which victims have to endure – real-life stories and faces which one sees on a daily basis. This serial also ran into unnecessary trouble because of PEMRA, but audiences remained glued to their screens to watch its every new episode, while the social media witnessed a heated debate on the various twists and

turns of the story.

Previously, TVOne broke the norms by simultaneously airing two serials – *Seeta Bagri* and *Maryam Pereira* – based on the plight of the Hindu and Christian communities.





## Emerging New Stars



Durfishan Saleem



Saboor Ali



Talha Chahour



Aymen Salim

All these youngsters have made their mark with strong, credible performances and screen presence, showcasing that there is no dearth of talent in this land of the pure. As the seasoned and

senior artists retire, fade away, or explore new pastures, there are fresh ones waiting in the wings to make their mark.

## Our Cinema World

Sadly because of the COVID-19 restrictions, cinemas were not open for months and even the much-anticipated Eid releases got delayed.

One film that made it to the cinema halls was *Khel Khel Mein*, starring Sajal Aly, Bilal Abbas, and Marina Khan. Although the story was based on a sensitive topic – the Fall of Dhaka – it still managed to win appreciation and a decent viewership because of the way this explosive topic was handled sensitively and

artistically.

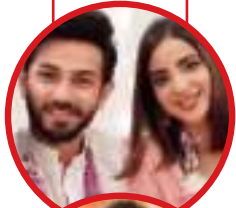
The other film that was due for release, but banned for its disturbing content was *Javed Iqbal: The untold story of a serial killer*. The ban triggered widespread condemnation from Pakistani film lovers, artists, and other stakeholders; if the authorities want Pakistani cinema to flourish, then they have to give artistic freedom. The filmmakers had no intention of glorifying a serial killer, and in fact showed him being punished for his crimes.



## Star Weddings

2021 seemed to be the year of weddings for the showbiz community. The list includes:

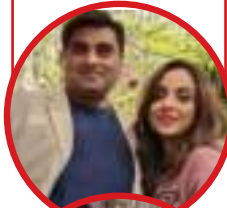
Saboor Ali  
&  
Ali Ansari



Hiba Bukhari  
&  
Arez Ahmed



Nadia Khan  
&  
Faisal Mumtaz Rao



Natasha Ali  
&  
Shahzaib Ali



Mariam Ansari  
&  
Owais Khan



Sohai Ali Abro  
&  
Shehzar Mohammad



Usman Mukhtar  
&  
Zunaira Inam



Rehman Ajmal  
&  
Tayyab Saleem



And some of them tied the knot with great celebrations despite the pandemic.

## Of Shows & Celebs

### The Big Pick

'The Big Pick' is creating buzz these days.

The show, being aired on TVOne, boasts an impressive list of showbiz celebs on its guest list with many stars already lined up for future episodes. Hosted by the popular social media star Hasan Choudary, 'The Big Pick' has a lively contemporary feel with Hasan giving a humorous spin on diverse topics such as sports, politics, newsmakers, and heartbreakers. Lovely Mawra Hosain can be seen in the show, giving frank answers to bold questions, while the versatile actor Imran Ashraf shows his unscripted, spontaneous side.

### TVOne's Morning Star

A fresh morning show is currently making waves on TVOne because of a celebrity host and strong content. Aply called 'Morning Star,' the show's anchor is the popular TV and film star, Azfar Rehman. His guests are recognised professionals from various fields – ranging from health and beauty to career counselling to legal advice and lifestyle trends. A healthy cooking segment and celebrity guests add more flavour to the show.

But it is mainly Azfar's charming, unassuming manner, and lively interaction with guests that is bringing in appreciation from the viewers.





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# Nostalgia

Memories of Karachi





# The Love of Reading

Reading offered depth to the self and beyond while fostering our imaginations



**By Seema Faruqui**

*The writer is a Kuwait-based Pakistani educationist, who has passed on her love for science to generations of youth and inspired many to take up the study of environmental science.*

*The first part of this series of articles on Karachi of the bygone days appeared in the December 2021 issue of Narratives. (<https://narratives.com.pk/nostalgia/memories-of-another-day/>)*

**S**eeing the lifestyle and habits of my grandchildren and students alike, I realise that the degree to which the world has changed is more radical than ever before. We baby boomers, like all the generations that came before us, lived in a far simpler time. We were forced to be self-reliant in terms of entertainment and keeping busy, and thus were more commonly pushed to engage our imaginations in different ways. Looking back, I appreciate the present, am excited for the future, but am thoroughly grateful for what we had.

The 60s was a time when 'mass media,' referred to just the radio, newspapers, magazines and cinema at that time, was not that obsessively dominating as it has become nowadays. From our days in Australia and then back to Karachi, reading was a favourite pastime for us three



*In an era without smartphones and TVs, books provided the main avenue for escape and imagination.*

girls, as it was for many in Pakistan as well as those 'Down Under.' Books were an instant gateway to distraction and imagination, and we could not get enough of them. In Karachi, we borrowed from our school libraries, the British Council and bought books and exchanged them with our friends and cousins, creating complex categorised networks where it quickly became known who would have what type of books and who to connect with for the next sequel of a beloved series. Whether comic or novel, fantasy or adventure,

*The art of reading was deeply embedded in our generation and the generations before us. It was this love for books that moulded us into becoming great communicators and nurtured our imaginations.*

everyone connected to the magic spun through storytelling.

Coming back to Karachi as young ladies, books and the radio became far more ever present in our daily lives, as the days of jumping on our bikes and seeking adventures down lanes or in forests had come to an end. However, we never felt isolated nor restricted as those adventures just took on a new form through the written word.

We could not wait to come home from school so that we could get to our ultimate treasure trove, The Ideal Library on Tariq Road. The ability to borrow books, magazines and comics for a nominal sum allowed us to maximise the number and type of comics and books we could then spend the evening powering through. Our daily ritual of visiting the library, after afternoon tea, was one of the highlights of the day as it was for many of us who lived in and around PECHS.

We would gather in groups closer to our school, St Joseph's Convent School for Girls, and together visit Anthony Coutinho & Co., the bookshop that was just across the road. Our main 'haunt' was in fact at our school gate, where all the girls would gather waiting for our rides home. Looking back, it is a strange 'East meets West' scene, where instead of a soda pop shop setting, we were surround-





*Keeping the love of reading alive.*

ed by various kulfi, chaat, and churan walah's carts all within 5 meters of the gates themselves. A few hundred girls, the various hawkers, and the guards, all waiting together, but we quickly got engrossed in the plot of the newest sequel of a book or movie that had come out. The sense of freedom that came from the end of day vs. recess or lunch time, totally nuanced our stories. Though there were those that gossiped, there were many of us deeply involved in the plot twists, mysteries, or character development which was more an ode to our simpler times. The art of storytelling was alive and well and those of us who could build the imagery and relay the excitement of the books, were the focus of attention and sought after as friends. It was up to us storytellers to build within minutes the sense of awe and magic that an author would be able to create in chapters; the goal of being just as creative in order to maximize one's audience and 'popularity and power.'

Today, the Pakistani and Indian channels have brilliant dramas and soaps whose daily or weekly cliff hangers become fodder for the masses. Likewise for us, it was primarily our novel sequels, but sometimes what was coming on the latest radio or TV show gave us material to then weave magic. All of this was made possible by our individual trips to the various bookstores and libraries, and then the complex trading that followed.

Occasionally, our father would take us to The American Book Store on Elphinstone Street. It seemed, in gen-

*Looking back, it seems that comics and movies were our window into American life, whereas the books we read gave us similar insight to life in British Boarding schools and villages.*

eral, that the girls we went to school with primarily focused on English books. Depending on our age, we read various Enid Blyton series (what a prolific author she was!) including *The Adventures of Noddy* and *The Famous Five*, and series by other authors that included Trixie Blendon, Billie Bunter, Anne of Green Gables, Jeeves and Wooster, Pollyanna, murder mysteries with the likes of Agatha Christie's *Poirot* and *Miss Marple* series or Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, and Westerns written by Zane Gray... the list is endless. We also enjoyed perusing a wide range of comics like *Little Lulu*, *Archie*, *Superman*, *The Phantom* etc.

Some of us focused on Urdu books and comics, while there were many who had the advantage of both languages and thus twice the material to choose from.

We, unfortunately, were late to learn Urdu, and being that there was already so much scope within English itself, our interests rarely travelled to those other jewels; something that I have always been regretful of and have tried to make up for. However, at the time, we were able to overcome this limitation through the beloved Radio Pakistan. Radio, however, is to be reminisced about another day.

Regardless of age, the love affair with books resulted in a whole generation who were knowledgeable, wrote and spoke well and were masters at communication. As we grew older, and our English Literature classes delved further into poetry, plays, and novels, so did our understanding and desire for theatre, elocution and public speaking. It seems almost foreign now, given today's medium of PowerPoint or Prezi or even TikTok videos, but for us memorising pages upon pages of poetry or a speech to present in class with full emotion and grandeur was the norm. My sisters and I would individually practice at home and then do run-throughs at night, before performing at school. To this day, even when I read aloud a story or poem sent to me via social media, that inherent need for 'dramatic flair' always kicks in (sometimes to the annoyance of my children). Though they themselves participated in forensics, the soul's deep love for emotive reading is not present, as it still is within us.

It is almost comical though, that even though we took literature and poetry so seriously, a comic could just as easily grab our attention and have us enthralled. The joy of our ritual jaunts to the bookstores and libraries, resonated within us when we heard the call of the comic walah, 'Comic wallah, English comic wallah.' While some of us gravitated towards reading *Archie*, describing the boy next door, suburban American ideal, others were fascinated by *Superman* and other super heroes present in the DC and Marvel universes. Looking back, it seems that comics and movies were our window into American life, whereas the books we read, gave us similar insight to life in British Boarding schools and villages.

Our world was further expanded through magazines. Of course, we went back to the British and American classics through *Schoolgirl*, *June* and *Princess*, or *Calling All Girls*. Our mums and aunts would read *Women's Own* and *Women's*



Day, full of beautiful picturesque English gardens and narratives relating to the British Royals. Three magazines that opened the door to the rest of the world were the *Times* magazine, *Reader's Digest* and the *National Geographic*. I remember always looking forward to their newest editions, but then there was a certain reverence with which one would turn the pages. The written word of those articles, whether a political or economic comparison from the *Times* or an in depth look at the lives of indigenous people on a far off island in *National Geographic*, always seemed to have a greater, almost sacred meaning. The *Reader's Digest* was our monthly collection of jokes and well-written meaningful articles celebrating the beauty of human relationships and values. Our trip back to Pakistan opened my eyes to the world and what was beyond the realm of our gardens. Books provided creative worlds in which we would get lost; but it was these magazines that gave a retrospect of God's world and creation. Though obviously not religious books, it always was with more serious intent, almost reverence, that those pages would be turned



and the information be absorbed. It was these magazines that allowed us to be able to paint pictures in our minds and give references and parameters to the world that we could see in our minds.

The art of reading was deeply embed-

ded in our generation and the generations before us. It was this love for books that moulded us into becoming great communicators and nurtured our imaginations so that we were able to see beyond the obvious and come up with thousands of inventions that have flooded the world in the last 50 years. Having taught for 40 years, if there is one piece of advice I can pass onto new parents and grandparents, it is that you should encourage all children to read. Read to them till they learn to read themselves and instil in them the love of reading. The brightest of my students, the ones who stood out and did well at school were all prolific readers. When I speak to them today, as successful leaders across the world varying from political, corporate, and social fields, they all relate to how reading continuously helps them in their careers and their lives. Beyond success however, reading, whether it be a comic or novel, encourages each mind to find their escape and bliss. We were all, and shall forever be in our hearts those children that secretly continued our adventures through our books and our flashlights when all were supposed to sleep in our beds. ■

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# BOOKSTORE

## Authors of the Month



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Aysha Bair



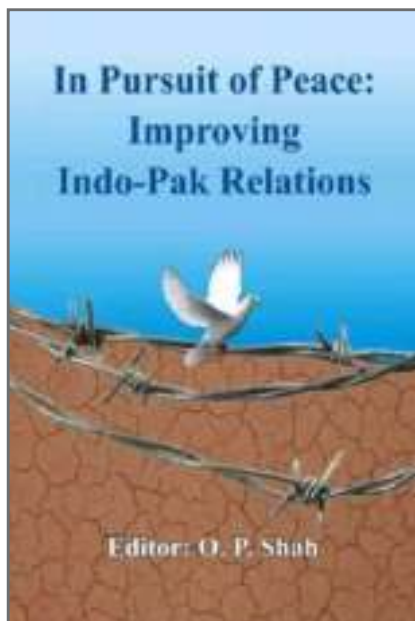
# Seven Indian Impediments

This brief essay is an unapologetically partisan Pakistani perspective. Read at your own risk



## By Javed Jabbar

*The writer is a former information minister. He is a renowned filmmaker and intellectual, having authored several books and directed three movies.*



### In Pursuit of Peace: Improving Indo-Pak Relations

Authors: Dr Huma Baqai and Dr Nausheen Wasi  
 Publisher: Freidrich Ebert Stiftung, Pakistan Office, Islamabad  
 Pages: 244

*Senator (r) Javed Jabbar's essay as published in a book titled 'In Pursuit of Peace: Improving Indo-Pak relations.' The book – released by the Kolkata-based Centre for Peace and Progress – has been compiled and edited by Mr. O.P. Shah, who heads this non-governmental organization, and is a veteran activist. Out of 50 essays included in the book, 13 have been contributed by Pakistanis. The remaining 37 essays are written predominantly by Indians, and a few by leaders and analysts of the Indian-occupied Jammu & Kashmir.*

**W**hile it takes two to shake hands, in the case of Pakistan and India, Pakistan's hand has always been extended. It is the Indian hand that is only sometimes proffered – but far more often, withdrawn or withheld altogether.

To say this is not to forget the laudable initiative by Prime Minister Vajpayee in February 1999 with his visit to Lahore and his belated, unqualified acknowledgement of Pakistan's creation and his own country's interest in building better relations. Nor is it to forget the unfortunate Kargil episode of May-July 1999 that derailed the start of a possible new chapter. Neither does one forget that, relatively soon thereafter, President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Vajpayee, followed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh were able to leave the past behind and come close to yet another possible new beginning. The internal crisis of Pakistan in 2007 and, for this writer, a still very intriguing attack on Mumbai in November 2008, once again stalled and then suspended moves towards a new phase.

Even after allowing some of the responsibility for disruptions being linked to elements in Pakistan, the situation in 2021 places the onus for a fresh impetus in bilateral relations wholly and squarely on India, not on Pakistan.

The second decade of the 21st century

is being shaped by factors of geopolitics, technology, connectivity and economy that are unprecedented and have a pervasive impact in their scale on virtually all countries. Though such never-before-witnessed conditions oblige us to develop new ways and options instead of resuscitating methods used in the past, in the entirely subjective opinion of this writer, the seven impediments suggested by this essay's title are thoroughly true and firmly rooted in the reality of aspects of India's society and state, especially since 2014.

Comments which follow about the Indian state's past propensities and present conduct are not meant to ignore the abundant affection and regard that this writer holds for many esteemed individuals from diverse fields across India. Their friendship, courtesy, and commitment to peace with Pakistan are deeply respected.

The first impediment is the rapid advent of Hindutva. Regardless of how this new, aggressive, violence-prone and intimidatory version of the creed has emerged due to historical or contemporary reasons, its palpable existence and persistence ceases to be a purely internal affair. In addition to the painful, tragic consequences for the large Muslim minority of India – itself a subject for justifiable global scrutiny and concern – Hindutva has directly impacted India's relations with Pakistan. This is most evident in Jammu & Kashmir but is also reflected in the content and tone of speeches and statements by BJP and RSS leaders, inside and outside Parliament, at central and local levels. That Hindutva has already grievously damaged the claimed secularism of Indian society and this condition is expressed by large numbers of India's own intelligentsia, sections of civil and political society and academia. The extent to which Hindutva has become an external menace is gauged by the fact that invitees to a conference being held in the United States in 2021, on the subject of Hindutva, have received letters threatening perilous consequences for attendees.

In contrast to the recurring election





*The Modi regimes attempts to tame the Kashmiri people have failed to quell their desire for independence.*

victories of a narrow, religion-driven political platform in India, not once in the eleven general elections held in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan between 1970 and 2018, has any religion-based party ever gotten more than a small percentage of the vote. To cap it all, religious zealotry is rising in a 'secular' India, while even showy religiosity in Pakistan in the past 30 years has not led to political success.

The second impediment is the apparent inability of moderate forces in India to mount a united challenge to Hindutva with a singular, coherent alternative philosophical framework. With both political and civil society segmented into the retreating Left, and other centrist, somewhat balanced segments unable to transcend partisan, regional or individual interests, the bulk of the Indian polity appears to be weak, confused, and lacking a clear, shared progressive direction.

Despite the fact that the BJP and its allies increased their share of the cast vote from about 32 percent in 2014 to about 38 percent in 2019, 62 percent of Indian voters in 2018 – a decisive, strong majority – voted against Hindutva on two occasions in the past 7 years, but the segment that has received less than 40 percent of voter support not only claims to represent 100 percent of voters – but pays little heed to the 60 percent-plus that actively opposed it.

Due to the absurdities of the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system which both Pakistan and India thoughtlessly adopted from the British Westminster model in 1947 – the two countries contin-

*In contrast to the recurring election victories of a narrow, religion-driven political platform in India, not once in 11 elections held in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan between 1970 and 2018 has any religious party ever got more than a small percentage of the vote.*

ue to pay the price for operating an electoral system that is non-representative of majority opinion, at the constituency level and at national levels.

In the two countries, even where voter turnout exceeds 60 percent – as in India in 2019 or sometimes 50 percent in Pakistan – a sizeable part of the electorate either does not vote at all or, because of the FPTP system, the winning candidate does not represent the majority. Yet the winner represents not only those who voted specifically for her/him, they being a minority of voters, but also those who voted against her/him, as well as of those who did not vote at all.

Two possible ways to undo such a non-representative system is to make voting compulsory (as in over 22 countries) and if the candidate with the highest number of votes does not get 50 percent plus one vote, a second (or even third) round should be held with only the top two or three candidates from the first round participating. Until a majority of votes is secured by a candidate.

The preceding digression was necessary to reinforce one's earlier contention that, even though the BJP coalition secured a decisive majority of seats in the Lok Sabha in 2019 due to the anomaly of the FPTP system, the present Government of India does not accurately represent the majority of Indian voters, leave alone the totality of Indian society.

But though one retains the hope that Indian society possesses the capacity to be larger-hearted, more inclusive and universal than the narrow parochialism of Hindutva; it is disturbing to see how the virus has infected other parts of the political spectrum. To be seen to unequivocally oppose the extremism of the BJP and RSS's brand of Hindutva seems to be seen by other political parties in India as creating the danger for themselves as being perceived less Hindu, less Indian, and less patriotic.

A third impediment is the set of actions taken on and after 5th August 2019. Violating both UN Security Council Resolutions as well as India's own Constitutional principles of democratic debate and due time for judicial consideration before enactment, the outrageously rushed 'annexation' of Jammu & Kashmir was enforced and the region forcibly divided into two entities.

Combined with the mass production of domicile certificates for non-Muslims to enable non-Kashmiri non-Muslims to become permanent residents of Muslim-majority Jammu & Kashmir, shadows from the Citizenship Registration law falling from the darkness on persecuted Assamese of Bengali Muslim origin and the vitriol spewed by persons such as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, among many others, the J&K crisis has aggravated prospects for bilateral ties by taking them to a potentially lethal flashpoint.

Pakistan has categorically stated its unwillingness and inability to conduct dialogue with India unless the measures taken on 5th August 2019 are suspended



or reversed. While there have been impasses in the past seven decades, this latest instance represents the creation of an obstacle not previously seen. The regressive action is actually a revelation of the profound failure of the Indian state to effectively address the challenge of Jammu & Kashmir for the past 74 years. After unilaterally withdrawing from the impartiality of a multilateral framework within which this dispute could have been peacefully resolved, India attempted a military solution to an issue that is fundamentally about the right of self-determination and human rights and dignity.

A steady increase – rather than a decrease – in the number of troops deployed to control unrest signals the continued failure of the Indian approach to the crisis. So deeply rooted and authentic is the character of Kashmiriat that neither 700,000 troops, which make J&K the most militarised region in the whole world, nor the contortions and distortions introduced on 5th August 2019, will bring a solution to the problem.

Though small parts of Indian news media retain a modicum of balance and credibility, the hysterical chauvinism of most of Indian media, including cinema, becomes the fourth impediment. While leaders everywhere have the inherent tendency to play to the media gallery and to tailor their words and actions to strive for what they believe, will produce the most positive perceptions for them through news media projection, in India's case, it is clear that the country's TV news channels in particular hold hostage most of the country's leadership. They also pre-empt and thereby prevent any attempt to reset relations with Pakistan or to attempt new initiatives for the reduction of tension.

Compared to the high pitched, screeching jingoism of most Indian media, Pakistan's own quite frenetic TV news channels offer a sharp contrast of relative balance and sobriety.

There is a modicum of internal filtration and phased processing of content in mainstream conventional media such as print, radio, and TV channels. But the anarchy of social media such as WhatsApp, symbolises the inanity and insanity of the instantaneousness with which hate and fake news can be mass circulated within minutes to become a formidable, almost insurmountable new barrier to any bold new initiative for taking the relationship



*The spectre of Hindutva has made establishing positive relations with India an impossibility for Pakistan.*

*A steady increase, rather than a decrease, in the number of troops deployed to control unrest signals the continued failure of the Indian approach to the Kashmir crisis.*

forward in a positive direction.

In theory, if not in practice, collectively and individually, and as perhaps best personified by the state of Indian news media and social media today, we have to not deal with V.S. Naipaul's 'a million mutinies now' but with a whole billion, and more. Those parts of Indian media content and the few courageous individuals that project mutually-respectful content, and campaign for moderation and sanity are admirable in their perseverance – despite the far louder clamour and venom churned out by inimical forces.

It is a telling sign of the complicity of media owners, editors, and content controllers – far more in India than in Pakistan – that there is no attempt whatsoever by the representative bodies of Indian media to initiate a dialogue with their counterparts in Pakistan. Neither at the level of newspaper publishers nor electronic media owners nor at the purely professional journalistic level has any part

of Indian media leadership attempted in the past seven years, in particular, to reach out to their equivalents across the border.

One looks back to the decade of the 1990s with both humble pride as well as sadness. When one was present in Colombo, Sri Lanka in April 1991 to establish the South Asian Media Association (SAMA) as the first network to bring together editors and media practitioners of both countries as well as other regional countries into an informal network and one was honoured at being asked to serve as founding Chairman, it was a privilege to be in the company of eminent Indian journalists such as Nihal Singh and P.T. Unnikrishnan.

In later years, SAMA was joined by distinguished Indian stalwarts such as Nikhil Chakravarty, Ajit Bhattacharjea, Vijay Darda, Karan Ketkar, I. Venkat, and several others. Between 1999 and 2004, through the South Asian Editors' Forum, of which the esteemed Vijay Darda was Chairman and this writer was a founding co-Convenor with Sundeep Waslekar, dialogue and interactions were arranged at Karachi, Hyderabad (India), and Kathmandu. Several positive steps were taken to improve perceptions and reduce the vitriol from the coverage of one country by the other country's media.

The Media Charter and Agenda for South Asia, 1995-2000 of which Nikhil Chakravarty was also a co-signatory included specific principles and prescriptions to 'eliminate hostile propaganda in mass media' and to 'breakout of the prevailing focus on the power structure and its proximity.'

A body called the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), formed in 2000 in Islamabad, borrowed most of the original SAMA's name and aims and then made several laudable contributions, for some years, to reduce the acrimonious content of news media.

In further fulfilment of the proposal originally made by SAMA, the Jang/Geo group of Pakistan and the Times of India conducted the notable process known as 'Aman ki Asha' for a few years.

Yet, initiatives were not sustained because political extremism was allowed to be stoked pandering to the excesses of the political leadership. And vice versa!

The fifth impediment is the role of RAW and Anti-Pakistan Disinformation Units (such as the networks exposed by an EU investigation a few months ago in 2021) in sponsoring violent, subversive content in public discourse that seeks to undermine national cohesion in Pakistan. Support to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, separatist elements of Balochistan, extremist ethnic outfits in Sindh, and attacks on Chinese citizens in Pakistan are well-known and confirmed by intelligence agencies. Harder to conclusively prove but very obviously evident are ploys such as relating false but credible sounding threats of terror against a visiting sports team – a la New Zealand's cricket team in September 2021, and other instances of encouraging distrust between civil and military spheres.

Much is made in India about the real or alleged control of the military in Pakistan on all principal aspects of internal and external policies. Such control is only partly true. Yes, the military does contribute to policy-making on strategically vital issues, particularly security of nuclear weapons and relations with countries of vital interest to Pakistan. But where such association is visible and evident in Pakistan, the military's strong influence in India on certain strategic subjects is covert and consistent – but not any less potent, regardless that it is not acknowledged. Thus, the sixth impediment is the unwillingness of the Indian military to allow the civil government to reconcile several critical territorial issues with Pakistan. These include Siachen, Sir Creek, and most of all Kashmir which is not only about territory but concerns the right of self-determination. The about-turn performed by Rajiv Gandhi's Government in July 1989, after

the initial agreement in Islamabad on readjustments in Siachen, is an eloquent example of how the Indian military compelled the civil government to reverse its position, thereby preventing a rare breakthrough. Like any large institution that, overtime, develops its own rigid interests and fixed positions, e.g. the Pentagon, the Indian military finds ways to obstruct constructive, equitable readjustments with Pakistan.

*Back-channel dialogue and quiet Track II dialogues alone offer a viable way to overcome the seven Indian impediments and, if any, impediments on the Pakistan side.*

Perhaps aptly, the seventh impediment should receive the least attention in this essay despite, ironically, requiring the most. One calls this the appalling ignorance about the realities, nuances, and complexity of Pakistani society and state that one finds in the utterances and writings of many prominent Indian commentators and public figures. There are admirable exceptions but only a few. That lack of basic knowledge exists and thrives in a country immediately next door to the other and one, moreover, which has many shared interests and even features, makes the ignorance and inaccuracy even more startling.

Whether it is getting wrong minor details about the respective seniority of Generals who could potentially succeed the present Chief of Army Staff in Pakistan or whether it is major dimensions of parallel truths in Pakistan that reflect both diversity and solidarity, whether this is the result of arrogant presumption, distorted information absorbed from media, or the expression of inherent prejudice, this sheer absence of knowledge of fundamental facts becomes a virtual tall wall that breaks connectivity. Shibboleths and fictions inevitably intrude into policy-making for both overt purposes and cov-

ert stratagems. Perhaps this writer also suffers from ignorance of certain aspects of Indian realities. If so, one is willing to keep learning.

In conclusion, two submissions. Though the title and the content of this reflection may convey the impression that this writer is congenitally hostile to India and unwilling to accept that Pakistan too has a responsibility to shape any improved bilateral relationship, one would like to affirm one's respect for the individuality and identity of both India and Pakistan as two new nation-states created simultaneously in mid-August 1947. Both are blessed with rich heritages of cultures and civilizations, both possess beautiful diversities of ethnicities, languages, lifestyles, both suffer enormous problems of human resource development, and both possess great capacity to resolve their respective internal problems and contribute to a better future for humanity.

Secondly, so public and deep are the prevailing tensions, causes, and currents shaping bilateral relations that secretly conducted, back-channel dialogue is the only feasible way to break the current logjam. Whether this is sustained over weeks, months or years, non-media reported exchanges between one or two representatives of the respective Heads of Government alone can candidly and comprehensively explore the scope for reconciliation – to formulate a new beginning that can then be presented for public endorsement in both countries.

Parallel to such a secret process, the resumption of periodic meetings of the non-media reported, confidential but numerically larger form, i.e. 8 to 10 persons from each side, should also be resumed. This latter mode is represented by the longest-running such process known as the Neemrana Initiative, which commenced in 1992 and which has stalled since 2018. Similar quiet dialogues are direly needed between the leaderships and owners of media in both countries and of influencers in social media.

With unfaltering patience, with unwavering vision for a better tomorrow, the secret, back-channel dialogue and quiet Track II dialogues alone offer a viable way to overcome the seven Indian impediments and, if any, impediments on the Pakistan side. Here's to benevolent secrecy and wise quietness in the age of advocated transparency and loud noise. ■



# Breaking the Patriarchal Cycle

Aysha Baqir brings us a heart wrenching yet inspiring tale of a young women's journey to freedom



**By Sami Subhani**

*The writer is a staff member.*



**In Pursuit of Peace: Improving Indo-Pak Relations**

Authors: Aysha Baqir

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In recent years, high profile incidents of violence against women, from the Lahore motorway gang rape case to the brutal murder of Noor Mukadam, have rekindled the now decades old debate in Pakistani society about women's rights and equality and to what extent social structures and attitudes perpetuate gender-based violence. Released in Pakistan earlier this year, *Beyond the Fields*, by Aysha Baqir, is part of a new wave of feminist critiques that seek to uncover how misogyny and gendered violence overlap with and are perpetuated by other forms of oppression based on class, creed, social status and colour. A fitting debut for the founder of the Kaarvan Crafts Foundation, a non-profit that seeks to empower low-income women by equipping them with essential life skills and raising awareness about gender sensitivity issues.

Set in the 1980s, the novel is told through the perspective of Zara, daughter to a family of landless peasants in rural Bahawalpur. Along with her twin sister Tara, Zara's days are spent helping their mother with household chores, while school remains the preserve of their older brother Omer. Their gender along with the timing of their births – the monsoon season – marks them out as omens of ill-fortune according to the midwife, who implores their mother “to seek their Pir's forgiveness.” Despite the dark clouds on their birth, the girls strive to enjoy whatever little happiness they can grab in their childhood. The fields, the river and the forest of their little village provide an escape from the dreary daily routine, becoming the canvass for the girls' humble games and adventures. However, as the sisters cross puberty and enter their mid-teens what little freedom they enjoyed, gets taken away under the stern direction of their mother, with sup-

port from their extended kin in the village. Playing outside is now deemed “haram” as the girls risk being “seen” which would “ruin our family name” proclaims their mother as she initiates the sisters' transition from “dutiful daughters” into “dutiful wives.”

While it would be all too convenient to paint Zara's parents and her fellow villagers as backwards villains, Baqir does well to avoid such a simplistic narrative, appreciating the nuance that is a part of life in rural Pakistan. As poor farmers who own no land they can call their own Zara's parents are at the bottom rung of an agrarian hierarchy dominated by the feudal landlords. For the landlord, everything in the village, including those who live in it, are treated as his personal property. When he wins a bid to export mangoes, the landlord promptly seizes the mango orchards which were once shared amongst the villagers. Though they attempt to protest this expropriation, they are beaten into submission by the landlord's vicious thugs, who imploring his henchman “to become men” threatens to kidnap and rape the female villagers should anyone step out of line.

Hence, Zara's parents are trapped in their own struggle for survival and with no access to economic or legal institutions for recourse they must raise their children in an environment where everything can be taken from them at any time. We begin to see that the rural hierarchy is held together by layers of oppression where gender and class overlap, one's power over women's sexuality serves as a proxy for the power they enjoy within the system.

While the placid and obedient Tara is usually happy to abide by her mother's dictates, unless convinced otherwise by Zara, in contrast, Zara seethes and chafes under the restrictions placed upon her. She is keenly aware of the lopsided nature



of the notions of honour and shame as applied by her community and her fiery temperament leads her to rebel against the expectations of those around her at whatever opportunities she can find. The difference in the sister's temperament is accentuated by their appearances. The mild-mannered Tara is bestowed with a "creamy peach" complexion, perfectly complimenting her obedient nature with the socially desirable skin tone. Conversely, the wayward Zara is, by her own admission, "dark as a berry," a shade treated by their mother as some kind of ailment, leading her to administer various herbal tonics on an exasperated Zara. The allotment of chores between the sisters appears to indicate that Zara is treated as somewhat of a lost cause on account of her skin, with Tara being given less strenuous tasks such as cooking and mending clothes, while Zara is charged with fetching water, sweeping and washing clothes.

However, Zara refuses to be cowed by the unfair treatment she endures, harbouring no ill will towards her sister, or even their mother, and remaining determined to live life on her own terms. Despite her mother's reservations, Zara is allowed to be home schooled by her brother after he pleads her case to their mother, on the condition that the lessons will be kept a secret from their father and the rest of the village. Additional encouragement is provided by "Master Saab" who aims to open a school for boys and girls in the village and believes Zara can serve as a model for other girls in the village. To see other men act as Zara's primary source of encouragement as opposed to the women in her life arguably sets *Beyond the Fields* apart from other novels in the feminist literature genre, where men are often the primary antagonists.

Although Zara's mother remains adamant that girls from their village don't go to school and that Zara's ultimate destiny is still to become a wife, this does not dampen Zara's hopes. Through her lessons, Zara is given a fresh source of personal inspiration, as she is exposed to the world of English literature, finding heroines in Laura Ingalls of *Little House on the Prairie* and Jo of *Little Women*. In these characters Zara finds companions

in her struggle to break free and conquer the challenges of life as an independent woman, though she despairs that unlike them, she may likely never be able to put her ambitions into action.

This changes in an unexpected and cruel way when Zara is forced to confront the rape of her sister. Faced with the tragedy that has befallen their daughter the parent's concerns quickly turn from



Aysha Baqir speaks at the international launch of *Beyond the Fields* at the 2019 Karachi Literature Festival.

*Beyond the Fields not only gives an inspiring tale of female struggle and liberation but also offers fresh insight into the social and political struggles that are shaping women's and men's lives in Pakistan.*

bringing their daughter's tormentors to justice to protecting the family honour. Rather than being seen as a victim Tara becomes a liability in an inhuman game of social capital as the parents fear that revealing Tara's rape will bring shame to the family and lead to them being ostracized and even exiled from their village. Interestingly, among the adults, the one to insist most ardently on bringing Tara's rapists to justice is the local maulvi.

Rather, it is the pre-Islamic notions of honour and shame that overrule the maulvi. Furthermore, we now see the socio-political developments of the Zia era come into view. The Hudood ordinances disadvantage Tara as her testimony is worth only half that of a man's, diminishing her chances of convicting her tormentors in a court. With little hope of justice, the parents ship Tara off to Lahore in secret, claiming that she has been married to a family friend, though it is later learnt that her apparent husband has been arrested for operating a brothel.

To get to the bottom of what has become of her sister, we see Zara finally take charge as she chooses to sacrifice the prospects of any further progress in her studies and sets off to Lahore to work as domestic help in the hopes of finding and rescuing her sister. In this regard the novel can be split into two stages, bound together by Zara's struggles to advance herself. In the earlier stages we see Zara confronted by various obstacles eager to acquire the means to break free of them and in the second half she is forced to advance to a stage where she must take what little she has and face the most dangerous elements of her life head on. Ironically, it is only by sacrificing her own goals in life that Zara is truly able to break free.

Through Zara's journey and the unflinching portrayals of the cruel misogyny she must endure the reader is able to empathize with her struggles intimately and cheer for her success. It is her perseverance and development as a person that keeps the reader engaged, however, this also undermines the novel in certain respects. The focus on Zara takes away from the other character's, such as Tara and Omer, development and they seemingly remain stagnant throughout the novel, serving as useful vehicles for the growth of the protagonist. Nevertheless, so gripping is Zara's journey that the reader cannot really complain. With plenty of poignant social commentary packed throughout, the reader is not only given an inspiring tale of female struggle and liberation but, through it, fresh insight into the social and political struggles that are shaping women's and men's lives in Pakistan. ■





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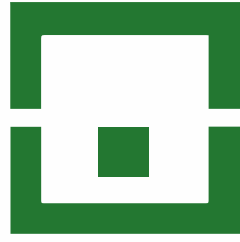
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