

# The Truth International

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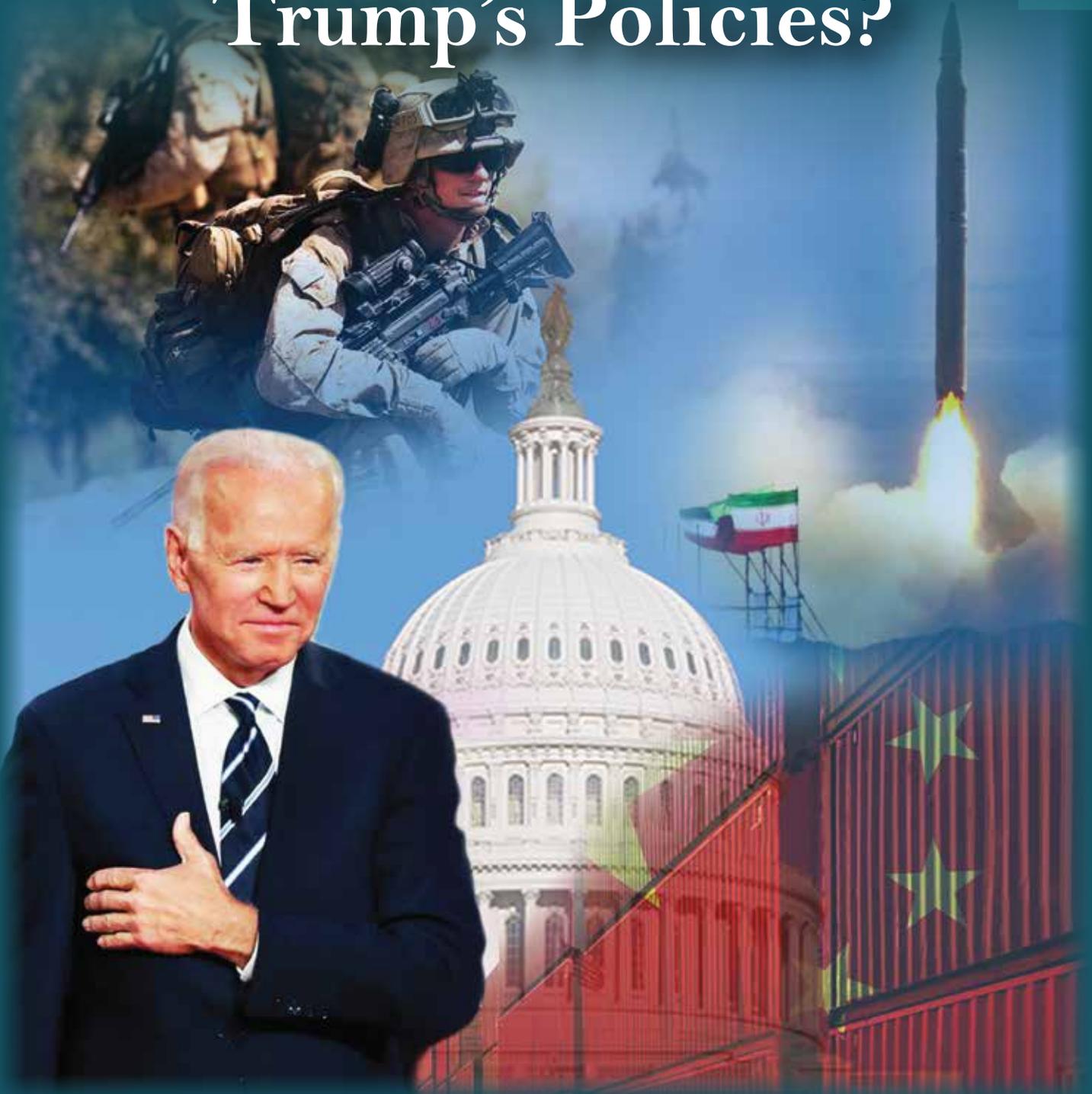
Moving away from America First narrative  
What will a Biden Presidency mean for Pakistan?

Light at the end of the tunnel  
Are we heading towards a COVID vaccine?

Of an obscene wedding and a wild  
goose chase

Who will make the filthy rich pay taxes?

## Can Biden Reverse Trump's Policies?



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# Top 5 most expensive watches sold on eBay in 2020



1

Panerai PAM 21 The Holy Grail Of All Panerai Featuring ROLEX Movement:

**\$125,000**

2

A. Lange & Sohne Double Split Chronograph 43.2mm Rose Gold Silver Dial 404.032:

**\$98,995**



3

Harry Winston Ocean Dual Time Baguette Diamond Watch:

**\$98,000**

4

DE GRISOGONO Grappoli Watch, 3rd Party Sales Warranty, Instruction Manual w/ Box:

**\$96,200**



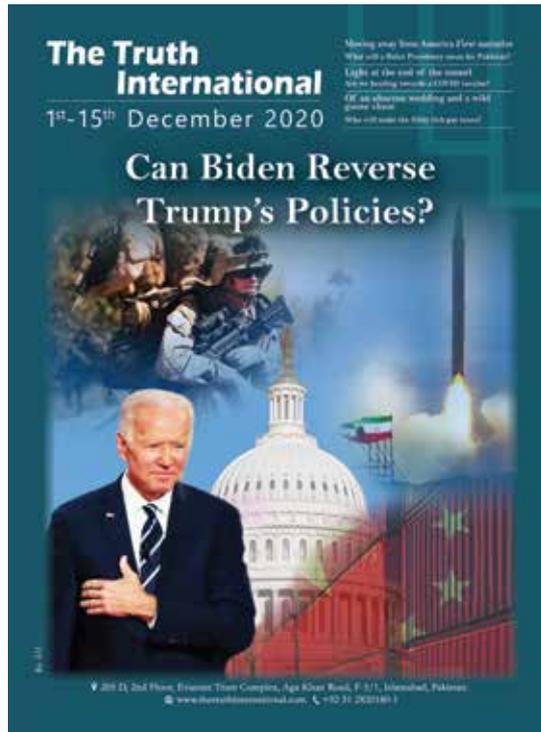
5

Audemars Piguet Royal Oak 26574BA. OO.1220BA.01 18K Yellow Gold Automatic Watch:

**\$95,000**

ebay

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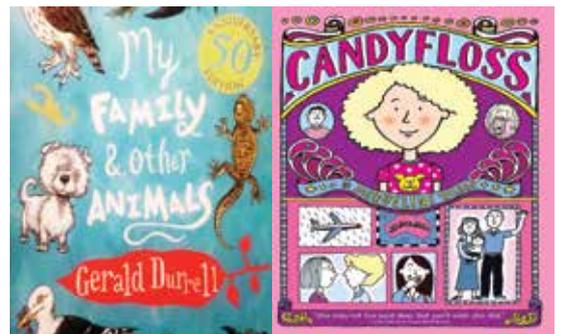
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# Trade replacing terror?

By M. Ziauddin



The graveyard of empires is seemingly turning back, rather reluctantly, from a 40-year long civil war that had, until September this year, looked like lasting till the last Afghan. This seems to be happening because the US that had fought its longest war in Afghanistan, perhaps having finally realized that it would go the Soviet way if it continued seeking 'total' victory, signed a deal with the Taliban in February to withdraw all foreign forces in exchange for security guarantees.

The Taliban for the first time are speaking to Afghanistan's government. The talks started September 12 in Doha but almost immediately faltered over disagreements about the agenda, the basic framework of discussions and religious interpretations. The Taliban, who are Sunni adherents of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence would like to follow the allied principles, but government negotiators say this could be used to discriminate against Hazaras, who are predominantly Shiite, and other minorities.

President-elect Joe Biden, in a rare point of agreement with his predecessor, also advocates winding down the 20-year long Afghanistan war although analysts believe he will not insist on a quick timetable.

Despite the peace talks, violence has surged across Afghanistan, with the Taliban stepping up daily attacks against Afghan security forces, perhaps in the hope of capturing as much landmass as possible before the agreement is finalized so as to be able to secure a larger share in the future government. The peace process has so far delivered nothing of substance. A recent United Nations report on civilian casualties found that despite the start of intra-Afghan talks, high levels of violence continue with a devastating impact on civilians, with Afghanistan remaining among the deadliest places in the world.

And as Prime Minister Imran Khan said last Thursday during his first ever visit to Kabul, 'after the Afghans, Pakistanis have the greatest stake in this peace process'. He said the residents of Pakistan's tribal areas, "who have suffered the ravages of the war in Afghanistan", will especially benefit from peace.

The prime minister assured the Afghan leadership of Pakistan's full cooperation for reduction in violence in Afghanistan as he sought to fix bilateral ties that have for long been weighed down by mutual mistrust.

Pakistan first facilitated by delivering Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban in Afghanistan and deputy of Mullah Mohammed Omar, months-long talks between the US and Taliban, whose successful culmination last February paved the way for intra-Afghan dialogue and later helped the Afghans to settle their differences and start the talks in Doha.

PM Imran Khan's daylong visit to Kabul has come at a time when a question mark hangs over the fate of Afghan peace process, and when the US is in the middle of a presidential transition. The latter development has to be considered because it remains to be seen how a Biden White House handles the Afghanistan war, specifically the key question of foreign troops' exit from the country.

Moreover, there are elements within the Kabul establishment that have no love lost for Pakistan, and are constantly blaming this country for Afghanistan's woes. It is true that Pakistan has some leverage with the Afghan Taliban but blaming this country alone for Afghanistan's problems is uncalled for.

Foreign forces, primarily America, must ensure that the withdrawal is orderly, while Afghan stakeholders — especially the government and the Taliban — must put in greater efforts for an internal peace deal. A chaotic withdrawal of foreign troops may plunge Afghanistan back into civil war.

More worrying for Pakistan is the ongoing export of terrorism from across the borders by Indian intelligence personnel using their diplomatic cover in the war-torn neighbor. Last week Pakistan made public a dossier containing 'irrefutable proof' of these activities. Indian intelligence agencies are said to be running 87 terrorists' camps targeting Pakistan; 66 of the 87 terrorist camps are said to be located in Afghanistan.

No matter who finally holds the whip-hand in Kabul, Pakistan's national interests dictate that we do everything that is required to convert the Free Terror Area straddling the Durand Line into Free Trade Area to establish a common market enabling the two countries to strive for mutual progress and prosperity on permanent basis.

## Obituary

A Friend & Co-Worker – Remembering Arshad Waheed Chaudhry

# Adios, My Friend, Until We Meet Again

By Waseem Abbasi

It was just a tweet; but a dreadful one. Never had I thought a tweet could scare me so much. I was recuperating from a COVID-19 attack myself when I saw an SOS twitter message from my friend Arshad Waheed Chaudhry's, wife saying Arshad's blood oxygen level had dangerously dropped and he was being shifted to a Rawalpindi hospital. "It can't be true," was my first reaction as I tried to shrug off the fear of losing one of the most trusted friends.

"How could a person as lively as Arshad fall ill so suddenly?" I thought. Then I called my friend Umar Cheema and he confirmed that he had indeed been rushed to a Rawalpindi public hospital after experiencing shortness of breath.

That was horrible, especially at a time when I was in isolation after testing positive for COVID-19. I started praying for my friend's speedy recovery and made it a ritual for the next few days.

After a few days I recovered but my friend did not. The news of his death was equally shocking. I thought people were put on a ventilator but they do recover in the majority of cases. But Arshad was not that lucky. He breathed his last on a ventilator on 14th November, 2020 leaving behind his two sons Roshan and Zain, wife Saima and hundreds of grieving friends like me.

Coronavirus has taken away another promising Pakistani journalist. Every member of the fraternity was shocked and devastated. Our common friend from the Texas Tech University, Texas, USA, Dr Rauf Arif took Umar Cheema and me on a conference call after hearing the shocking news.

Dr Arif was a journalist before moving to the US. He recalled how Arshad used to have lengthy conversations with him during the early days of his career. He wanted to make a mark for himself in journalism and was willing to make any sacrifice in his quest for excellence. Now that he is no more among us, there is no doubt that he left his mark with his professional excellence on screen and off screen.

I met Arshad when I joined Geo back in 2005. Young, energetic and well-mannered Arshad welcomed me as a new colleague with an open heart. He was a very easygoing person who could make friends with anyone. In the fiercely competitive Geo environment, he would let others take centre stage – a rare quality among journalists at that time.

When we were in Karachi for a month-long Geo training, we got a chance to spend most of our time together exploring the mega city and talking for hours on politics, social issues and family.

For an ambitious young man from a small village of Sahiwal, competing with an urban-raised, elite schooled colleague of Islamabad was a big challenge. But Arshad was very clear in his mind. He knew what he wanted to achieve in his professional life and how to go about it. Hard work was the hallmark of his personality.

He wanted to be a columnist but a popular mainstream paper like Daily Jang would not publish columns from a novice. Arshad did not mind. He kept writing and sending them to the op-ed desk of the paper anyway. His "columns" were edited and placed in the "Letters to Editor" section of the paper for years. This did not discourage him until finally he started getting published on main op-ed pages.

Similarly, after years of reporting from the field, he wanted to have his own show like every TV journalist. But this is not an easy task as news channels prefer familiar faces over reporters when it comes to hosting. Arshad kept trying. After more than a decade of hard work, he finally managed to get a small segment of his own titled "Geo Parliament".



Even then he had to face many challenges in execution. As professional cameras were not allowed in the parliament cafeteria, his show had to be shot on smartphone instead of advanced video camera. Also unlike other big names in TV hosting he did not have a team of researchers or even a producer.

Still, owing to his sheer hard work, Arshad managed to make it a big success – something his organization later acknowledged. My one takeaway from his life would be: "Hard work always pays".

Finally, after clearing so many obstacles over a decade he was able to attain professional fulfilment with his show on Pakistan's most popular TV channel and his columns in one of the most read newspapers. His name was recognized among power corridors. In his recent meetings with friends he used to express his satisfaction on his professional achievements. But just when he was finally starting to enjoy his professional success, death struck him in the most unfortunate way.

Arshad was not only a great writer, reporter and host, but also an ethical journalist who never compromised his principles. In a society as repressive as ours, a thinking and vocal journalist is hardly bearable for people at the helm. Arshad knew that very well – and yet he refused to censor his thoughts. His columns, his tweets and his bold questions never gave the impression that he is willing to compromise his principles.

Arshad's love for working journalists was evident from the fact that he put his own job in jeopardy while negotiating the issue of worker's salary with his channel's management. Such was his popularity among working journalists that when he contested for the post of Senior Vice President in recent elections of the National Press Club, he bagged more votes than the winning President.

Nor did he let his city life undermine his rural familial ties. A few of his relatives spoke to fellow journalist Hasan Nasir at his funeral. They said Arshad was the backbone of his family and his village. Whenever there was a problem in family or village, Arshad was the first person to be contacted for help – and he would always be glad to help.

His untimely departure and that too when he was at the high point of his career has left his friends, family and fans heartbroken. It will take weeks and months for us to come to terms with this loss.

Rest in peace my friend. You are an inspiration for all of us. We will miss you for the rest of our lives.

# Regional Power Games amid the United States' Transition

By Ibrahim Moiz

Though the transition following the United States' contentious tortuously-fought presidential election is yet to make any meaningful headway, the victory for the Democratic challenger Joseph Biden over Republican incumbent Donald Trump have implications for every region of the world.

This looks like an interesting window of time to take a look at four influential rivalries – Pakistan vs. India, Turkey vs. Russia, Qatar vs. the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia vs. Iran – through the prism of change. As the transition progresses and the new president is inaugurated, the dynamics of these binaries will continue to shift, in turn affecting several regional conflicts in which these powers are stakeholders.

While certain strategic foreign policy maxims are unlikely to change – support for Israel, for instance – the framework and process by which the United States approaches other countries could change, more so in some areas than others. A case in point is India: The United States should maintain its preference for the Indian state, but not necessarily for the fascist Bharatiya Janata Party regime.

Trump's personalized approach relied heavily on his personal relations with world leaders. Under Biden Washington is likely to revert to institutional channels that at least officially prefer the "Washington Consensus" of a liberal international order – meaning for instance that even if the United States continues to support India, the far-right regime could receive at least some diplomatic censure.

Below we examine the trajectory of American policy and its impact on regional politics with special reference to the four binaries identified above.

## Pakistan vs. India

India's potential as a bulwark against China meant that even at the height of the Cold War, when most even mildly non-aligned states were caricatured as communist sympathizers in Washington, the United States maintained a broad cordiality with even an often pro-Soviet India. After the Cold War this progressed into full-fledged bonhomie, especially in the war on terrorism where India was quick to paint the often Muslim insurgents challenging its hegemony as terrorists, and Pakistan's support for such militants as "state terrorism".

Along with Kashmir, mostly ignored in Washington, Afghanistan is a major theatre of the Indo-Pak rivalry. They backed opposite sides in the 1990s war, and the American invasion in 2001 – hastily if reluctantly backed by Pakistan in fear of isolation – ousted the Pakistan-backed Taliban. The heartburn it caused across Afghanistan gave rise to rampant Indian influence in American-occupied Afghanistan, some of which translated into support for militancy in western Pakistan.

Pakistan in turn sheltered and tacitly supported the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, whose success in pushing the United States, during Trump's reign, to the negotiations table provided Pakistan with a boost and left New Delhi scrambling for options.

On the other hand, Trump also more or less approved Narendra Modi's annexation of Kashmir in 2019, which no amount of Pakistani outrage managed to reverse. Meanwhile, a Modi challenged by China signed an agreement with Trump that left India's military deeply indebted to Washington.

Biden is likely to only marginally change these policies. Pakistan has some room for guarded optimism: when he served as deputy to Barack Obama, he was among the more pro-Pakistan officials in an otherwise deeply suspicious Washington, preferring to co-opt rather than challenge Islamabad in order to wean it away from China into the American camp. Earlier, Biden was among the few American officials to speak out on Kashmir. Biden's preference of a "light footprint" in Afghanistan is in the short term not too different to a recent proposal by Imran Khan for a measured American withdrawal.

Nonetheless Pakistan should not expect too much; the American institutions that Biden is likely to involve are heavily biased towards India. A Biden regime could scold Modi, without changing its stance toward New Delhi in any meaningful way. Moreover Biden's dovishness toward Islamabad is based on a desire to edge out China rather than any positive shared interests. Finally, Biden's "light footprint" approach in Afghanistan could give both India and Pakistan more months to weigh their options, but is unlikely to significantly change their overall preferences.

## Turkey vs. Russia

Among the more interesting relationships of the 2010s was the re-emergence of the historic rivalry between an increasingly NATO-independent Turkey and Russia. This was a limited strategic rivalry in several regional conflicts – in Syria, in the South Caucasus, and as far off as Libya. Even as they duelled, however, Recep Erdogan and Vladimir Putin made sure to maintain their personal channels of communication and not escalate matters beyond a point of no return. This understanding partly hinged around shared suspicion of the United States, whose relative withdrawal from the Levant under Trump's both these powers welcomed and should be keen to maintain.

Recently Turkey has been disappointed in its investment with the West, the European Union continuing to snub it while the United States, in the mid-2010s, tacitly approved a coup attempt against Erdogan by Fethullah Gulen and also backed Kurdish militants in northeast Syria related to the communist Karkeran organization in Turkey. In response, Erdogan moved to minimize reliance on the

West, and in the process opened a channel with Putin that survived several major differences.

The recently concluded war over Nagorno-Karabakh illustrates the strength of this Russo-Turkish channel. In a near-diametrical shift from its traditional role, Russia abstained from militarily supporting Armenia against a Turkish-backed Azerbaijani campaign, instead approaching the conflict as a peacemaker. Armenia has powerful lobbies in the United States and Europe as well as relying heavily on Russia; the withdrawal of Russian support means that Yerevan is likely to plead for American support.

Next is Syria, where Turkey strongly backed the Islamist-leaning insurgency, which came close to victory before Russia, along with Iran, decisively rescued the Baathist Assad regime. The United States' support for the Qasd Kurdish militants, rather than the Turkish-backed insurgents, was a destabilising factor for Turkey. Erdogan invaded northeast Syria and ousted Qasd on Trump's watch.

While Trump was indifferent to the fate of America's vassals in the region, Biden has strongly criticized both Russia and Turkey and is likely to wade again into the region.

#### **Qatar vs. the United Arab Emirates**

The third theatre of Russo-Turkish competition is Libya, which additionally involves another budding rivalry – between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Qatar took a largely supportive view of the Arab Spring popular uprisings in the 2010s – not least in Libya, where the tiny Gulf emirate was a major force behind Muammar Qaddafi's ouster and was only belatedly joined by the Emirates, who aimed more to undercut Qatari influence.

Qatar also backed the short-lived but elected Ikhwan regime in Egypt, which was ousted by a strongly Emirati-bankrolled coup in 2013. Where Qatar has tended to back Islamist groups such as the Ikhwan, the Emirates have positioned themselves as an anti-Islamist bulwark of stability – employing largely Western or Russian mercenaries and cosying up to Western-backed governments such as Israel.

In Libya, Qatar and Turkey backed a “revolutionary” camp that overplayed its hand by seeking a complete purge of the Ancien Régime in the mid-2010s. The resultant instability gave ambitious warlord Khalifa Haftar an opportunity to attempt a takeover, strongly backed by the Emirates, Egypt, France, and Russia. The result was two rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruq backed respectively by Qatar and the Emirates.

Both the Gulf states have strong lobbies in the United States, but Trump undoubtedly preferred the latter, whose crown prince Mohamed bin Zayed played to the anti-Islamic sentiment of the War on Terrorism and was sufficiently emboldened by Trump's response to attempt isolating Qatar and splitting the Gulf Cooperation Council.

It is unlikely that Biden will replicate Trump's blunt favouritism; Doha can expect a sympathetic hearing for its pro-revolutionary rhetoric. Yet the Emirates' willingness to go any length, whether in anti-Muslim repression or in diplomacy – such as championing reconciliation with Israel, which even Biden hailed – is likely to give it the edge; dovishness toward Tel Aviv goes a long way in Washington.

#### **Saudi Arabia vs. Iran**

Another area that the Emirates exploited in the Gulf dispute was Saudi unease over the Arab Spring, both supporting the 2013 Egyptian coup. More than Abu Dhabi, Riyadh is concerned about an Iran whose influence holds sway over Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. This has increased Saudi reliance on regional American garrisons on the one hand, and pushed Riyadh to arm itself heavily on the other.

Both policies were pursued by crown prince Mohammad bin Salman, a protégé of his Emirati counterpart bin Zayed. He brutally cemented his supremacy within the royal family, attacked Houthi-captured Yemen, and embarked on a full-throated embrace of Trump encouraged by the more tactful bin Zayed.

Post-revolutionary Iran, meanwhile, has done surprisingly well out of its rivalry with the United States. Sanctions have often been bypassed by Russia, China, and the European Union. Moreover Iran benefited from, and manoeuvred to capitalize on, the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, emerging as an alternative powerbroker to Washington – especially in Baghdad where its praetorian commander Ghassem Soleimany assumed a viceregal position.

Iran intervened directly in Syria, and indirectly capitalized on Riyadh's clumsiness in Yemen to expand influence with the Houthis. Its 2015 Vienna Accord with Obama thus provoked consternation in Riyadh. When Trump scrapped the agreement and assassinated Soleimany, Iran's response in turn assumed an unusual air of panic – from crackdowns at home to the accidental destruction of its own airliner in 2020.

Tehran will thus breathe a sigh of relief at the return of Obama's former deputy. But unlike the Emiratis, who have used Riyadh as a cushion, a Biden regime leaves bin Salman exposed. His rash crackdown provoked revulsion among Islamists, liberals, other Saud family members, and the United States alike, with Biden personally lambasting him.

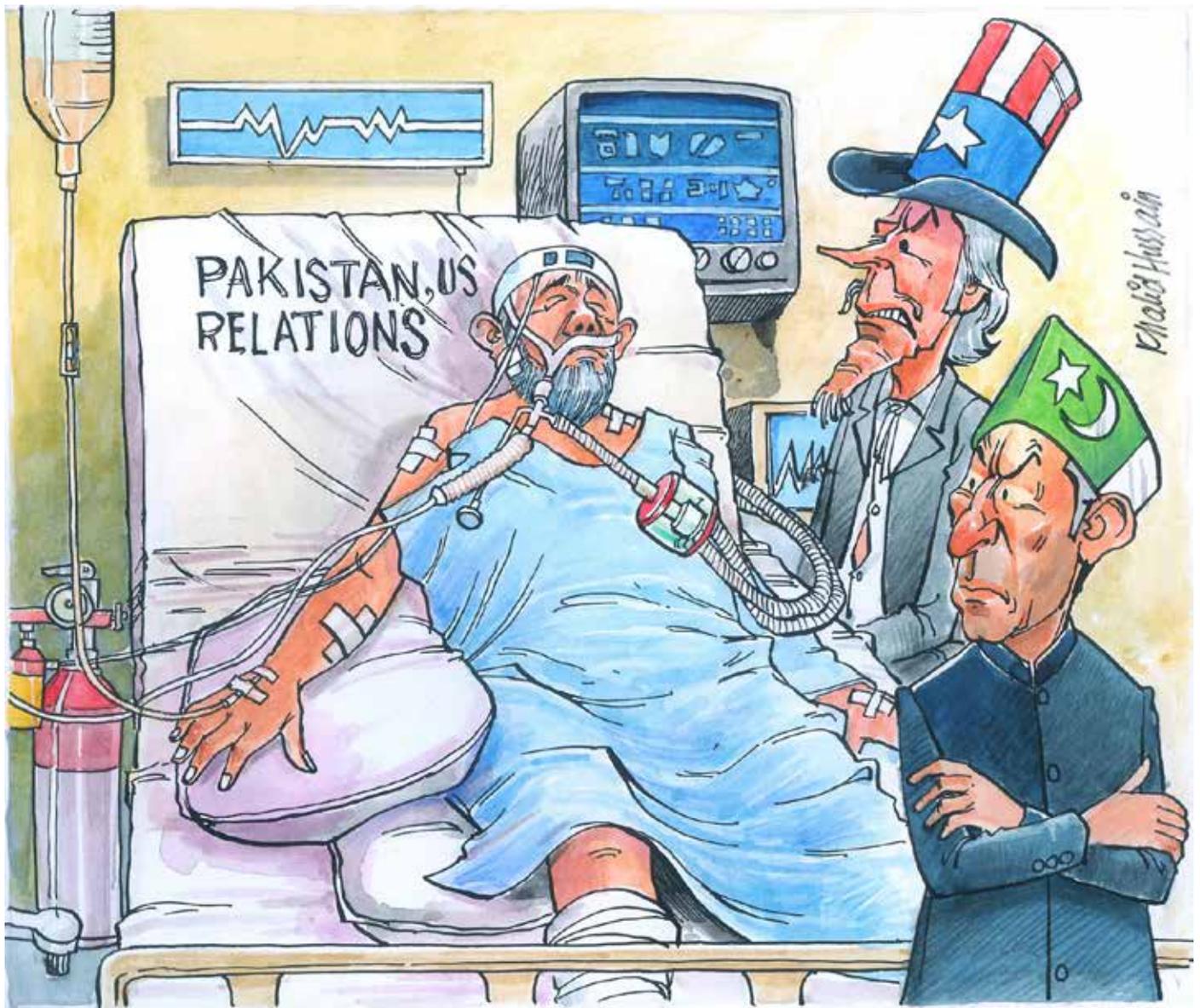
Nor does Saudi Arabia have much control over the Emirates, as evidenced in Yemen where Emirati-backed Intiqali separatists have challenged the Saudi-backed exile government of Abdrabbuh Hadi. A mixture of Emirati puppeteering and Iranian encirclement left Saudi Arabia paradoxically turning to Washington, where a Biden win bodes poorly for a crown prince who had put all his eggs tactlessly into Trump's basket.

#### **Conclusion**

While there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip the Biden presidency promises to usher in a change in the channels and processes of foreign policy. We have traced four regional rivalries that this can be expected to affect. In our analysis, neither Turkey nor Russia, despite their rivalry, can be expected to benefit; nor is there any such prospect for Saudi Arabia, exposed in its rivalry with a buoyant Iran.

The Emirates and India might expect some short-term inconvenience, but should expect no meaningful negative change overall. Qatar and Pakistan will have to manoeuvre to make the most of what minor changes appear.

# What Will a Biden Presidency Mean for Pakistan?



By Umer Farooq

The good news is that Washington will be back into the world of international alliances and bridge building. Antony Blinken, nominated by President-Elect Joe Biden as his Secretary of State, is a known advocate of liberal international order—that places America into a situation where it has to sacrifice a lot for making liberal international order work.

The days of the combative “America First” policy pursued by President Trump are over. Now allies will find America more willing and ready to sacrifice its narrow interests for keeping the international alliances in place to confront the rising menaces like financial and military strength of China.

But maybe this is not a very good news for Pakistan, as this would mean two things for America’s regional policies: First a perceptibly

declining United States would do its best to revive international alliances, mostly comprising of its western alliances and Middle Eastern Kingdoms, to confront the growing power of China, thus making it more difficult for Pakistan to navigate through the international system—a system which is already extremely unloving to Pakistan.

Secondly there is a growing possibility that the Biden Presidency will grow cosier to India. There are already reports that the new Secretary of State would do his best to strengthen relations with India as a counterpoise to the rising financial and military strength of China. How attractive the Pakistani military and political establishment finds the prospect of stronger and closer ties with Washington moving into a closer embrace with India remains to be seen.

The Pakistani security establishment sees security and diplomatic situation in the South Asia region through the prism of military developments. This means that any enhanced military cooperation between New Delhi and Washington would be seen as a direct threat in Pakistan. There are a number of agreements on the table that call for enhancing close military cooperation, military information sharing, and technology transfers to India from the United States, and these agreements have already caused a lot of concern in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

The American media is clearly reporting that Secretary Blinken will base his foreign policy on proactive diplomacy on the part of Washington. “The world does not organize itself,” New York Times quoted Secretary Blinken as writing in 2017. “In the absence of an engaged, diplomatically energized America, others will set the agenda, shape the rules and dominate international institutions — and probably not in ways that advance our interests or values.”

He will probably try to build an international coalition to put pressure on China. The Trump administration battled Beijing largely alone, using tariffs as weapons. But Mr. Blinken is expected to build closer ties with India and other Asian countries to focus on trade and tech investments as an alternative to partnering with China, reviving the pre-Trump game plan behind the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Secretary Blinken is hardly a known figure in the political and military circles of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. He is an old time policy advisor of President-Elect Joe Biden and is known for his diplomatic skills. South Asia would be a new experience for him but not for the President-Elect himself as he is considered an experienced and old Pakistan hand in Washington.

During his time as senator and Vice President he had developed enduring friendship with political and military leaders in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. His diplomatic engagement with Pakistan involved extending policy advice to Islamabad, devising a multi-billion dollar financial and military assistance program for Pakistan and ensuring democratic transition in 2008 when the military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf was on his way out.

Public diplomacy record of the period doesn't indicate that Biden was ever enthusiastically engaged in bringing Pakistan and India to the negotiating table. But this area generally has been a forte of liberal internationalists in Washington that they advocate resolution of outstanding disputes between Pakistan and India through talks and negotiations.

It is not yet clear what the Biden Administration would balance promoting India as a counterpoise to China and bringing Pakistan and India to the negotiating table. Only time will tell what will be more important for Washington: ties with New Delhi or ties between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Pakistan's ability to influence Afghan Taliban to come to some kind of peace arrangement with the US backed government in Kabul clearly gives Pakistan's military and political leaders some leverage with the new Administration in Washington. There will be no difference between Trump Administration and Biden Administration on this point—both would want the Pakistani military and intelligence services to use their influence with Taliban to bring

down violence inside Afghanistan and to reach an understanding with the Kabul regime for the smooth functioning of government machinery in the war torn country.

Pakistan's relations with Biden Administration will largely depend on two factors. The first if these will be the degree to which the Pakistani intelligence services are successful in convincing the Taliban to bring down violence inside Afghanistan and reach an agreement with the Kabul regime. The second is Pakistan's ability or willingness to go after the groups inside Pakistan that Washington perceives as threats to its security. Security experts believe that Washington's old mantra of “do more” might revive with renewed vehemence.

President-Elect Joe Biden has been a known supporter of democracy in Pakistan. It would be interesting to see how he approaches the current political imbroglio in Pakistan where a grand alliance of opposition is arrayed to bring down a government that is nearing half of its five-year term.



Some of the opposition members are directly accusing Pakistani military of involvement in the country's politics. Biden has in the past eased Pakistan's transition from military rule to democratic setup in Pakistan. He has also attempted to devise legislation that would put an end to military manipulation of the political and judicial processes in Pakistan.

The selection of Biden's national security team has already been reported in the American media. The new names suggest one pattern: The President-elect is determined to put the toxicity of the President Trump Era behind him. This would mean American diplomacy which is more proactive and more sensitive to liberal internationalist values.

Ironically, there are people in Islamabad who think that Pakistan's interests were better served with President Trump was in control. They think that Prime Minister Imran Khan had developed close rapport with President Trump which would stand Pakistan in a good stead.

# What does the US election result mean for Brexit and the EU?

By Syed Humza Imam

Donald Trump previously called himself "Mr Brexit" and aligned himself politically with figures like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. In many respects, Prime Minister Boris Johnson could not hope for a more sympathetic ally in the White House than the one currently occupying it. Joe Biden's instincts, however, are in many respects the opposite, and he's already shown himself capable of intervening to criticise the UK over its relationship with Europe. Last month, he took time out of the presidential election campaign to admonish Boris Johnson over the internal market bill.

The Democratic President-elect warned that the Good Friday agreement, which delivered peace in Ireland after decades of conflict, could not become "a casualty of Brexit", explicitly warning: "Any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the agreement and preventing the return of a hard border. Period." He was reacting to the prime minister's back-peddalling on the question of the Irish border, which has enraged Brussels and Dublin. Washington could soon be added to that list. Biden is a politician with a strong sense of his Irish heritage, and his intervention should be seen in the context of his predecessor Bill Clinton's active role in brokering the Good Friday Agreement. Where they register, interventions like his play well in the US: they look statesman-like, they project American power, and they are viewed by the public as standing up for Ireland, which has vast cultural capital and popular goodwill in America. Reports that Biden is considering a visit to Ireland to stress his support for the European position will send a shiver down spines in Downing Street. It is a sign that the would-be president wants to be seen to lead on the issue and is willing to make a fuss about it.

A Biden intervention would blow a hole in the picture Boris Johnson has been painting for Brexit voters: Britain breaking out of a petty, insular European club to stand with the rest of the world. An important part of the rest of the world would in fact be revealed to be standing with Europe on this issue. Of course, it's one thing to lay out your views during a campaign, especially when they resonate with voters. Things can look very different from the Oval Office when your job is to act in US interests. Take Trump, for instance, a strong supporter of Brexit. Even this, however, did not stop him humiliating Theresa May over her EU withdrawal agreement during a state visit, warning that he would pull the plug on trade deals if she didn't drop her plan. Ultimately it was the interests of the United States driving the president, rather than any sense of being on the same team as his ideological bedfellow. He wanted access to British markets on favourable terms.

Boris Johnson will be hoping that that's what's driving Joe Biden too, and that if he becomes president he will believe the US interests lie in striking a trade deal with the UK. However, that seems unlikely, as a US-UK trade agreement's economic benefit would be utterly minimal for either side. In the UK, the Treasury calculates that 0.16% of GDP is dependent upon US trade, while for the US, as the larger partner, the benefit will look even smaller.

Politically, a trade agreement is only important in the UK. A US agreement would be something Boris Johnson could call a 'political win', a supposed example of the deals Britain can do outside the EU. But if he is emphatically told he cannot have a trade deal, then opponents could point and deride him. No such dynamic exists in the US, where barely anyone outside of policy and lobbying circles is even aware of the prospect of an agreement with Britain.

For Donald Trump, whose entire brand was built on "doing deals", whatever they may be, an agreement was of some interest. But this is not the case for president Joe Biden, who could certainly take or leave it. As such, he would be free to wield the prospect of one as a carrot and stick. This would not be a comfortable position for Boris Johnson.

Interestingly, France and Germany don't envisage plain sailing with a future Biden administration either. He already has lots of contacts in Europe from his years as Barack Obama's vice-president. EU leaders welcome his multilateralist mindset. They appreciate his calm and collegiate manner. They never got used to Donald Trump's angry outbursts and his unpredictability. That said, they are unsure about Joe Biden's precise intentions. Foreign policy wasn't discussed much during the presidential campaign.

Under President Trump, Germany was often in the line of fire. He obsessed about Berlin's trade surplus and railed against German military spending. He threatened punitive tariffs against German car makers. It is unclear whether Joe Biden would change all of that. The French economy minister commented last week that the US hadn't been a "friendly trade partner for years". Additionally, European military spending has been a cause of anxiety for US presidents far before before Donald Trump. A poll by Pew Research Group this September suggested only 26% of Germans and 31% of French citizens viewed the US favourably. Another Pew survey found only 2% of Germans asked thought their country had a very good relationship with the US.

Like the UK, Berlin and Paris have now grasped at climate change as a topic where there definitely will need to be close co-operation with Team Biden. He's promised that re-joining the global Paris Climate Accord will be a top priority when he gets to the White House. Emmanuel Macron and a number of other key EU figures argue that Donald Trump was a lesson for Europe. Going forward, they say, the continent should be less reliant on Washington - economically, in terms of the environment, and on security. President Macron wants the EU to create its own defence force, to work alongside Nato, though that project is fraught with political and practical difficulties. And while there is a real desire in Europe to become more self-reliant, it would be difficult to find an EU leader who won't admit to being far happier when they know they can reliably count on the American president.

# Glimmer of Hope: Are we heading towards a COVID vaccine?

By Oroba Tasnim Siddiqui



For almost a year now, the world has been engulfed in a constant worry due to the coronavirus. With over 1.41 million deaths across the world and the number increasing by the day, the entire year has been a source of misery for the global populace. However, amidst this air of doom and despair, the year end has provided fodder to heave sighs of relief. With news coming in regarding possible vaccines, there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel.

The first positive news came from Pfizer who along with their German partner BioNTech SE released initial data suggesting the concoction of a vaccine with an efficacy rate over 90%. However, these vaccines must be shipped and stored at -70 degrees Celsius, significantly lower than the average 2-8 degrees Celsius of other vaccines.

This was then followed by Moderna Inc's statement which said that interim data from a late stage trial calculated an approximate 94.5% efficacy in the prevention of the virus and will be made ready for use soon. Perhaps, the greater advantage of this vaccine is its ability to survive without the freezing temperature requirement of the other vaccine.

Similar news emerged from China where there has been announcement of Sinovac Biotech vaccine coming to the fore. However, it has come to common knowledge that these testing trials are further being conducted in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Indonesia and Brazil. As per estimates given by officials, around 60,000 people were recipients of this vaccine by early November. There is also news from the University of Oxford regarding their vaccine showing a strong immune response even in adults in their 60s and 70s. Moreover, Russia's Sputnik COVID vaccine is said to have shown 95% effectiveness.

In an interview with BBC Urdu, Dr. Faisal Sultan, the SAPM on National Health Services stated that the government of Pakistan had allocated funds amounting to \$100 million for the procurement of the vaccine. Terming the priority of preserving healthcare workers, he reiterated the fact that the availability of vaccines would most probably be delayed until the second half of 2021.



In addition to these vaccines, a clinical trial at the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff is investigating the probability of mouthwashes combatting the virus. It is believed that those mouthwashes consisting of at least 0.07% cetylpyridinium chloride showed hints of combat against the virus.

In Pakistan, a series of clinical trials are being conducted of COVID-19 intravenous immunoglobulin (C-IVIG) which is a therapeutic exercise developed by Dow University of Health Sciences. As per initial data, it has shown a 100% recovery rate in extremely severe patients alongside 60% recovery in critical patients at the ICU.

However, it is important to note that without proper measures, none of these vaccines or alternative measures can be put to use, which is why the world remains at a standstill. But the brighter side is that following a year of worrying news, there is hope that things might blow over and we can finally revert to some form of normalcy – albeit an everchanging new dawn.

# Highly Effective Covid Vaccines: Hopes Rise despite National Lockdowns across Europe

By Syed Humza Imam

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has declared the coronavirus vaccine developed by the University of Oxford "incredibly exciting news" as it suggests 70% protection, but the researchers say the figure may be as high as 90% by tweaking the dose. The UK government has pre-ordered 100 million doses of the Oxford vaccine and AstraZeneca says it will make three billion doses for the world next year. The results will be seen as a triumph, but come after Pfizer and Moderna vaccines showed 95% protection. However, the Oxford jab is far cheaper, and is easier to store and transport to every corner of the world than the other two. Hence, the vaccine will play a significant role in tackling the pandemic, if it is approved for use by regulators.

This encouraging news around a vaccine comes as the UK, Germany and France all continued national lockdowns. France began its strict lockdown on Friday, October 30, with people banned from leaving their homes without a special certificate. By November 16, the French Health Minister Olivier Veran declared the worst to be over. "Over the last 10 days, there's been a decrease in the number of new Covid-19 cases, and the positivity rate has been declining so everything suggests that we have passed a peak of the epidemic," he said during an interview with regional press group Ebra on Sunday. "It is the fruits of labour and a result of the measures we have taken to achieve this," Veran said, adding that the positive development doesn't mean the country has defeated the virus yet.

Germany, meanwhile, took a softer approach to lockdown. It closed restaurants, bars and clubs, but shops remained open and people were only advised, rather than ordered, to stay home and limit their social contacts. The country didn't see the same slowdown in new cases as France. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said this week that the situation in her country was still "very serious." She pushed for a stricter set of nation-wide restrictions, but was unable to get enough support for that measure from state governments. On 20th November, Germany reported a new record number of daily coronavirus infections over the past 24 hours.

The success of a lockdown also depends on the willingness of people to follow the rules. "If the rules are very very strict, then it's a lot harder for people to sort of 'get around' those rules and if the restrictions are a little bit more mild, then it opens the floodgates potentially for people to be not compliant by the rules," said a leading German scientist.

Germany and France were seeing similar spikes in their reproduction number in mid to late-October. Known as R, the number indicates how many other people each infected person passes the virus onto - in this case, both France and Germany reported the number went as high as 1.5. After the lockdown went into effect, France's R rate fell significantly, dropping below 1 - a crucial level that indicates the epidemic is shrinking - on November 6 and



dropped further since then, according to data from the French Public Health Agency. In Germany, meanwhile, the number has dropped to 1, but continued to hover around that level, according to the Robert Koch Institute, Germany's Center for Disease Control.

But while R is useful, it doesn't tell the whole story. Dr. Oliver Watson, an infectious diseases researcher at Imperial College London said that another reason why France is seeing a reduction is because the country had a much higher transmission rate to start with. "This includes the much larger first wave but also their second wave started taking off earlier, most likely because their infection levels were larger during the summer," he said.

Watson and his colleagues at Imperial modeled the impact of lockdowns of various lengths and strengths on ICU capacities in Germany, France and Italy and found, broadly, that from an epidemiological point of view it is more beneficial to impose lockdowns early, rather than wait and then make them last longer.

Germany had also experienced a milder first wave of the virus, meaning there might be more people still susceptible to it. The problem: despite their earlier experiences, many governments are still making decisions based on politics, not science. "I remember the situation with the Czech Republic, that was an indicator that other countries needed to be on guard and start to prepare for early controls ... and we can go back to the first wave and we can again see that there were early warning signs that we needed to consider greater controls and they were there probably about two weeks before the UK government introduced lockdown," Watson said.

Politicians are reluctant to impose lockdowns because of their undeniable negative effects, be it on the economy or people's mental health. But scientists like Watson say the repeated European experience shows the effect of this is even more damaging. "It's essentially Groundhog Day," he said. "The scientific community is pushing for this and by the time the governments decide, it's two to three weeks after we were pushing for it and the waiting makes it much worse. Lessons really, really do need to be learned."

# More masks than fish

By Eric Shahzar

In a bid to flatten the COVID-19 curve, this year - more than half of the world was under lockdown. The World Economic Forum (WEF) stated that global carbon emissions dipped by 17% during this time. Our planet witnessed clear blue skies and drastic reductions in air pollution levels — a sight promising for the sustainability of our ecosystem.

However, today - with the second COVID-19 wave becoming more ferocious than the first one – it really does come with a hefty cost for our marine life. With all eyes on protecting our health systems and reviving our deteriorating economy – the health of our marine life has been historically neglected. As the production and demand for face masks and gloves quadrupled, Covid-19 waste is ending up in our oceans and threatening the marine life's ecosystem, which has already been struggling to cope with pre-existing plastic waste. If no urgent action is taken, we will soon have more face masks than fish in our oceans.

Covid-19 waste has become a new source of pollution as single-use personal protective equipment (PPE) floods our fragile oceans. While conducting a litter exercise in France's Cote d'Azur coast, Operation Mer Propre, a French non-profit organisation, found numerous gloves, masks and bottles of hand sanitisers in the Mediterranean along with the usual litter of plastic waste. This worrying discovery should be very appalling and embarrassing for us.

Covid-19 waste is not only visible in the Mediterranean, but it has become a global problem. The other side of the world faces the same predicament. OceansAsia, marine conservation organisation, discovered a huge number of single-use PPE waste during its plastic pollution research. Millions of masks were found on the Soko Islands, near the coast of Hong Kong.

The existing plastic pollution already remains one of the most pressing ecological challenges we face. Already, around 8 million tonnes of plastics waste enters our vulnerable oceans' every year adding to the estimated 150 million tonnes already circulating in marine environments for decades. But the rise of COVID-19 waste in oceans is an ecological timebomb for marine life.

It takes one face mask 450 years to decompose in water. Today, millions of tons of single-use PPE are making their way to the oceans' seabed. Countries are exploring different avenues to strengthen their existing healthcare infrastructure and they should not turn a blind eye to the ocean's deteriorating health. Our oceans are on a ventilator but still produce almost 50% of the world's oxygen and absorb 50 times more carbon dioxide than our atmosphere.

While COVID-19 waste is piling up on our ocean bed at an alarming rate, let's not forget how accelerated climate change is disrupting the marine life's fragile eco-system. For decades the ocean has been absorbing more than 90% of the sun's heat which has resulted in intense ocean acidification. As a result, half of the world's coral reefs have disappeared, which hold the key in balancing marine biodiversity. For how long will we neglect these grim warnings?

In Pakistan too, our seas misery has now been exacerbated with an unprecedented scale of COVID-19 waste. Face masks, gloves and empty sanitizer bottles are ending up on our oceans. Not to forget, sewage water is being directly dumped into our seas since decades and the authorities have taken little or no action. It's alarming that 400 million gallons of untreated sewage is dumped into the sea daily — a silent killer for marine life. According to the Adviser to CM on Environment, Murtaza Wahab, the coastline is controlled and supervised by the federal government and CBC. We must keep politics aside and urgently reverse marine life's misery here.

Environmentalists have already raised their voices against the medical and plastic waste found at our vulnerable coast lines. All eyes and attention right now is on containing the spread of the pandemic but we should not let the ocean's misery go unnoticed. Even though our beaches have been in a better shape since the lockdown has been imposed, the new wave of COVID-19 waste is adding fuel to fire.

What we urgently require is a strategic and proper functioning Solid Waste Management (SWM) programme in Pakistan. Provinces have started SWM initiatives but unfortunately, lack of political will and resources have hampered progress. Our actions have not measured up to the challenge. Authorities must understand that creating an eco-friendly waste disposal plan will inevitably benefit everyone in the longer run. Constructive recycling techniques have been introduced and implemented all around the world. So what is Pakistan waiting for? In this moment of crisis, where COVID-19 and plastic waste is ending up at our shores and sea beds – revisiting our SWM policies is the need of the hour.

A recent programme in Australia, called Net Technology, has been globally acknowledged. These drainage nets, also called "trash traps", placed at the point where the drainage meets the ocean, are designed to prevent pollutants and plastic debris from flowing into the sea. Once the nets are full, they can be emptied into landfills for recycling. It is high time for authorities to install these drainage nets. Last year, on Twitter, President Arif Alvi also quoted it as an "interesting solution", but nothing has been done since.

More than anyone else, the civil society must play a pivotal role in eliminating Covid-19 waste. Citizens must become responsible in disposing off single-use PPE. We need to improve the way we manage our waste. Today, we see face masks lying on the streets, stuck on trees and inevitably ending up in our vulnerable oceans. We are endangering the lives of our marine world in attempts to save our own.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given us an opportunity to not only build our health infrastructure but also invest in climate action, cleaner cities and sustainable oceans. For decades, human activities and accelerated climate change have endangered the marine life. Our oceans are drowning with COVID and plastic waste. Today is the time to reset our attitude towards our fragile oceans and consider its environmental impact on human survival. Let's learn from our previous mistakes and reverse the ocean's misery.

Testing times ahead for nation already reeling under COVID impact

# Total Lockdown on Cards to Stop PDM Agitation

Kid Gloves Off on Both Sides in the Political Arena

PDM under Pressure to Rethink Strategy as Bilawal tests COVID positive

By Khalid Wasim

Fighting a raging pandemic, picking up the pieces of an economy in ruins, pacifying his edgy political allies, and staring down an increasingly combative opposition are just some of the challenges on the hands of Prime Minister Imran Khan – whose PTI-led government is yet to reach the halfway mark of its five-year term – and the last mentioned of these may just prove the toughest of them all.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf supreme has now conjured the prospect of total lockdown to stop the opposition PDM.

Khan holds the politicians and parties that are now part of the Pakistan Democratic Movement responsible for all ills of the country, and believes their current political activities threaten to sabotage the nation's COVID-19 safety.

The Prime Minister has now indicated that the government will be compelled to enforce a total lockdown unless the opposition calls off public gatherings. Arrests in Multan already started.

The opposition, on its part, is equally eager to up the ante. If the speeches made by PDM leaders at Peshawar are anything to go by, the political temperature is up. Perhaps their humiliation in the history's most hotly-contested Gilgit-Baltistan elections was the reason bitterness was their speeches at the public meeting in the PTI's stronghold on Nov 22.

The prime minister said the PDM would be responsible for the consequences if it continued with public gatherings despite a surge in Covid-19 cases.

The prime minister, who had already cancelled his party's planned public meetings in response to the opposition's rallies, said by continuing with public gatherings the PDM was deliberately endangering lives and livelihoods of the people. And now with Bilawal testing positive, the PDM leadership will definitely be under pressure to re-think its strategy. However, the PDM is so far determined to go ahead at least with its Nov 30 Multan rally coinciding with the foundation day celebrations of the PPP and Bilawal has already announced that he would make the address via a video link.

“Let me make it clear: They can hold a million jalsas but will not get any National Reconciliation Ordinance-like concession,” the premier said, hinting a possible action against the opposition leaders for continuing with their agitation movement.

The PDM leaders call Khan's government without legal or constitutional basis because it was rigged into power by the country's top and his spy master

At the Peshawar meeting, they said Khan's government was more dangerous than coronavirus, and rejected the government move to ban their activities. They vowed to hold their remaining planned public meetings before a final long march to the capital in January aimed at ousting the government.

The PDM held the Peshawar event defying a ban by the local administration and despite warnings of a possible act of terrorism.

It was perhaps out of frustration after losing the elections in the GB despite running a hectic one-month-long campaign that Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari in his speech at the Peshawar Jalsa directly attacked the establishment, almost in the same language that had previously been used by PML-N's supremo Nawaz Sharif in the previous public meetings.

“Citizens would decide the fate of this country, not those in Pindi or in Aabpara,” declared Bilawal, adding: “We will hold accountable the puppet government and their selectors as well.” The PPP chairman further said corruption could not be rooted out until the law of the land applied equally to “judges, generals and politicians”.

The bitterness in Bilawal's tone must have surprised many who claim that the PPP was in contact with the establishment for a behind-the-scenes plea bargain settlement. But they can say that such statements are part of putting pressures on the negotiators from other side as did by Nawaz Sharif after exhausting all his backdoor channels.

On the other hand, PDM president Maulana Fazlur Rehman directly asked the establishment to withdraw its support for the “illegitimate and puppet” government and “publicly disown” it. He said the PDM respected the “constitutional role” of the army in securing the border of Pakistan, but “if the military dabbles in politics, it will have to face criticism”.

Earlier, the two BBC interviews of Bilawal and Maryam in Gilgit had exposed fissures within the ranks of the PDM. Despite being part of the opposition alliance, the two parties contested the GB elections against each other, but most of the time their leaders succeeded in restraining themselves from targeting each other during the campaign. Former GB chief minister Hafeezur Rehman during a news conference, however, bursted and alleged that the PPP had utilised all resources of Sindh in the GB elections and at the end, it got nothing.

Giving an interview to the BBC Urdu, Bilawal had said that he was ‘shocked’ when he heard PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif



naming the military leadership in his address at the PDM's rally in Gujranwala for allegedly orchestrating his ouster from the office.

Bilawal, who always takes credit of being the inventor of the term "selected prime minister" for Imran Khan, had stated in the same interview that Nawaz Sharif had served three times as prime minister and "if he has said something he must have said that on the basis of evidence".

A number of government spokespersons and some media analysts were quick in interpreting Bilawal's interview as a "clear divide" within the two major component parties of the PDM on the issue of anti-establishment narrative.

On the other hand, PML-N Vice-President Maryam Nawaz downplayed the discussion on Bilawal's remarks about her party's narrative and said the party had no reservations over it. She said Bilawal's statement was being misinterpreted by those who wanted to create 'cracks' within the opposition's alliance.

The two parties, however, were again seen taking different positions when in a rare move, the Pakistan Army announced removal of officers of the premier Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Pakistan Rangers from their current assignments after finding them acting "overzealously" in the alleged kidnapping of the Sindh police chief in the backdrop of Oct 18 Karachi incident when PML-N's retired Captain Muhammad Safdar, the spouse of Maryam Nawaz, was picked up from a hotel room on charges of desecration of the Quaid's mausoleum.

The PPP welcomed the report of the inquiry which took less than three weeks to complete after Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa vowed to look into the matter following complaints from the opposition and police officers' en masse request for long leave in protest.

Hailing the inquiry, Bilawal termed it a step to "fortify the prestige of institutions". On the other hand, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif REJECTED the report and termed it a "cover-up scapegoating juniors and shielding the real culprits."

The day after their varying reactions over the army's inquiry report were aired, Maryam and Bilawal held a one-on-one meeting in Gilgit in an effort to quell misunderstandings between the two parties. The meeting had reportedly taken place at the initiative of Maryam after she got reports that the PPP was unhappy over Nawaz Sharif's tweet in which he had rejected the inquiry report.

The pair of young politicians demonstrated maturity and decided not to talk on the matter publicly, thus providing no opportunity to their opponents to exploit the situation.

Later, Maryam Nawaz in her interview also to the BBC showed her party's readiness to hold talks with the army, but with certain conditions, including packing up of the present PTI government.

"The army is my institution. We will definitely talk with it, but within the limits of the Constitution and within the limits prescribed by the Constitution," she said, adding that the talks would be held in the public eye, not in secret.

Commenting on Maryam's interview, a senior PPP office-bearer reportedly said it seemed that a "rethinking process" was currently underway within the PML-N over its "extreme anti-establishment narrative". The ruling PTI termed it an effort by Maryam to

become relevant by offering an olive branch while hinting that her party was open to dialogue with the army.

Some political analysts, however, are of the view that both Bilawal and Maryam had intentionally avoided taking a tough anti-establishment stance during their stays in Gilgit-Baltistan hoping a favourable return for their respective parties in the GB polls.

Another significant decision taken collectively by the PDM component parties was to boycott the parliamentary leaders' meeting which had been convened by National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser for "a briefing by military officials on the current issues of national security".

Reportedly, the main objective of the briefing was to make an effort to develop a national consensus on granting "provisional provincial status" to the strategically-located Gilgit-Baltistan. Although there was no official confirmation from the government or the ISPR, media reports quoting unnamed sources said army leadership were to conduct the briefing.

The PDM decision to boycott the meeting was announced by the alliance's Information Secretary Mian Iftikhar Hussain through a statement, in which he accused the speaker of being biased and "suppressing the opposition's voice in the National Assembly".

This was the second time in six weeks that the speaker had to cancel such a meeting as previously he had to nix a similar meeting which he had convened on 28 September to discuss the GB elections. ODM even boycotted Speaker's meeting to discuss covid 19 threat.

Amid the opposition's movement against his government, Prime Minister Imran Khan found himself in hot waters when he faced criticism on his government's economic policies from the allies during a lunch he hosted for the coalition partners. The meeting was not attended by the PML-Q, the PTI's key ally in Punjab, and PML-Q's Monis Elahi later in a tweet said his party's alliance with the PTI was "for the vote and not for lunch".

During the meeting, the government allies reportedly piled on the prime minister for non-provision of development funds, price hike, missing persons, and not keeping them in the loop when taking decisions.

Housing Minister Tariq Bashir Cheema later appeared in a TV talk show and said the PML-Q had nothing to show to the people what achievement had so far been made by the government. He said it would become quite difficult for them to further go along the PTI, "if the party does not mend its ways".

Another coalition partner MQM expressed disappointment over the government's attitude towards fulfilment of the party's demands and its members during the meeting raised the issue of missing party workers and slow pace of implementation on PKR 1.1 trillion Karachi Transformation Plan. JWP (Jamhuri Watan Party) chief Shahzain Bugti also reportedly raised the issue of missing persons in Balochistan.

The prime minister assured the allies that he would address all the problems mentioned by them.

With both the government and the opposition taking extreme positions and COVID-19 pandemic returning, small wonder most Pakistanis see testing times ahead as a nation.



# Sore Winner Joins Sore Losers to Tarnish Largely Fair GB Polls

PTI Set to Form Government as Opposition Decries Procedural Lapses

By Abbas Khaksar

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party may just have advanced the opposition's agenda of putting a question mark on the integrity of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly election by attempting to overturn the result of a seat of symbolic importance through apparently questionable means.

The dispute concerns the GBLA-II (Gilgit-2) seat where the contenders included three heavyweights: Jameel Ahmed of the PPP (Pakistan Peoples Party); Fatehullah Khan, the General Secretary of the local PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) chapter; and Hafeezur Rehman, former GB Chief Minister aligned with the PML-N (Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz).

Unofficial tallies at the end of polling put the PPP candidate in the lead. However, the unofficial result announced the next day declared the PTI man victorious – with the PPP and PML-N candidates in the second and third positions respectively.

This led to a disquiet among PPP workers who termed the polling results rigged and held a protest demonstration. As tempers flared, violence erupted and protesters clashed with police officers and set on fire a government building and four vehicles on 23 November 2020.

Independent observers and PPP workers see this alleged rigging in light of a federal minister's earlier avowal to "not let Fathullah down in the constituency". The remarks are attributed Federal Minister of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit Baltistan Ali Amin Gandapur.

"The result of this particular constituency has apparently become an issue of the minister's ego", a local political worker was overheard remarking to another.

"Contrary to the allegation of major opposition parties, the election held in Gilgit Baltistan was largely fair and transparent", another analysts said. "However PTI's bid to win a particular seat through apparently using government machinery has provided the opposition an opportunity to question the integrity of the whole election".

Both PPP and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) candidates from the constituency are accusing the Election Commission GB and administration of becoming puppet of PTI and federal government.

Chairman PPP Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, referring to the same constituency, had earlier claimed that his seat was stolen. He had extended his stay in Gilgit to get the result of the constituency while joining with protesters of his party.



Notably, the PPP has not questioned the results for other constituencies where other political parties and independent candidates have won. However, the party is not prepared to accept the result for GBLA-II (Gilgit-2).

The official result for this particular constituency is yet to come out as after recounting of votes a returning officer of the constituency has suggested a forensic audit of postal ballot papers as the PPP candidate Jamil Ahmed, had serious concerns about the suspicious increase in postal ballot papers from 1,300 to 1,700.

The unofficial results shared by the returning officer put Fatehullah Khan ahead of PPP's Jamil Ahmed by 96 votes.

According to a local senior journalist Shabbir Hussain, PTI has unnecessarily created the mess as after joining at least six independent candidates, the party has already secured a clear majority in the 33-seat Assembly.

"By saving its General Secretary from losing the seat in Gilgit, PTI has made the entire election in GB controversial," he said adding that the PPP candidate had clearly won the seat. The results of the particular constituency could be challenged in the court as PPP is said to have enough evidence to prove that the election was rigged.

The consolidated results of the constituency prepared by the returning officer recognised forensic verification as a viable option to ascertain the legality of postal ballots. As per the agreement of the candidates of the constituency, the validity of postal ballots may be ascertained before issuance of the final result by Election Commission, Gilgit Baltistan.

Apart from this particular constituency, the elections in other 23 constituencies were largely fair and transparent as the losing candidates have accepted the results.

Political analysts in the region are of the view that the success of historic number of independent candidates in this election while defeating electables of PTI and PPP proves that the government



had not interfered in the election process. “By rejecting the electables of even the ruling party, the people of GB has also negated the impression that the ruling parties in power at the centre usually win elections in GB and AJK,” a political analyst Jafar Ali said.

More than 300 candidates, including four women, contested on 23 seats. At least 1,26,997 fresh voters had used their right of vote in general elections of GB.

**Procedural Lapses Galore**

Like the general elections in the country in 2018, PPP and PML-N complained that the Form 45 (the Result of the Count) and Form 46 (the Ballot Paper Account) had not been provided to polling agents in a number of polling stations.

As the election Act-2017 has been extended to GB, the provision of this form to polling agents was mandatory. The officials of the election commission of GB, however, claimed that since the act was new in GB there must be some deficiencies.

Instances of allocation of more than the legally prescribed number of voters per polling booth led to overcrowding and disorder at some polling stations.

Similarly, the ECGB did not consistently ensure the provision of Form 45 and Form 46 to all polling agents present at the polling stations during the vote counting process, which would have helped to enhance the integrity of the election results management.

Officials say the problem was largely due to insufficient numbers of these forms available at the polling stations. The presiding officers had to issue polling stations’ results to the polling agents on plain papers under their stamps and signatures, the legality of which has yet to be established.

The voting and counting processes were mostly transparent, with FAFEN observers reporting initially the presence of polling agents of major political parties and independent candidates in most polling stations. However, instances of polling agents seated at a place from where they could not observe the voting process were reported from six constituencies.

FAFEN also noted as “more serious” reports that candidates and their agents were barred from ROs’ offices during the preparation of the preliminary results in at least three constituencies, and delays in the release of provisional results on Form-47 (Provisional Consolidated Statement of Results of the Count) in more than 10 constituencies.



These problems shaped the political discourse on an otherwise orderly and peaceful electoral exercise conducted according to the law, which requires finalization of provisional results by 2:00 am on the day following the polling.

**PTI to form Government in GB**

According to unofficial and unconfirmed results, the ruling PTI’s local chapter grabbed nine seats while the PPP came second with three victories. Meanwhile, PML-N won two seats and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and Majlis-e-Wahdat-ul-Muslimeen (MWM) won one seat each while Independent candidates secured seven seats.



Interestingly out of the seven independent candidates, at least five candidates who had earlier joined the party, were denied tickets by PTI. The party, instead of honouring these potential candidates and ticket aspirants, had granted the ticket to electables of other political parties like PML-N and PPP.

To form government the party was left with no option but to co-opt these rejected candidates. The ruling party secured a majority in the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly after six victorious independent candidates joined the party.

Raja Nasir Ali Khan in GBLA 10-Skardu-4, Wazir Saleem of GBLA-9, Skardu- 3, Javed Manwa of Nagar-5 and Mushtaq Hussain of GBLA-22 Ganche-1 and Abdul Hameed of GBLA-23 Ghanche-II were denied the tickets as PTI preferred electables poached from other parties.

PTI had given party tickets to electables, including Wazir Hassan, former Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) leader, Fida Nashad, GBLA speaker and former PML-N leader, Ibrahim Sanai (former minister of PML-N) and Amina Ansari. Instead of Javed A Manwa, the party had made seat adjustments with MWM candidate (Haji Rizwan).

Wazir Muhammad Saleem, Raja Nasir Ali Khan, Mushtaq Hussain, Haji Abdul Hameed and Javed A Manwa and Haji Shah Baig have joined the party on Thursday. However another independent candidate, who is also a nationalist leader, has refused to join PTI as he has previously avoided joining any national political party.



# FAFEN Reports on GB Polls

Voters Turn Out in Droves Braving Chilly Weather

By Palwasha Khattak

The mid-November polling for Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly was marred by irregularities including suboptimal access for candidates and polling agents and unavailability of the legally requisite forms for issuing provisional tallies, according to a report compiled by FAFEN (Free and Fair Election Network).

Undaunted by the chilly weather conditions, voters turned out in droves to have a say in the affairs of the mountainous region vying for full provincial status in the Pakistan federation.

The preliminary report issued by FAFEN on the evening of the polling day (15 November 2020) says over 60 percent of the voters of Gilgit Baltistan practiced their right to vote in the third consecutive election to the Assembly.

In such areas, female voter turnout has always been a matter of concern considering the cultural barriers despite various provisions in Pakistani legislation. The Returning Officers (ROs) only provided the gender disaggregated turnout data for thirteen out of twenty constituencies where the female voter turnout was 53.8 percent as compared to the male voter turnout of 59.6 percent.

And yet gender gap widened from 6.6 percent for the last elections to 8.8 percent. Along with many sociocultural and administrative factors, the distance of the polling stations, transport difficulties, lack of awareness about electoral rights, and patriarchal customs bar the electoral and political participation of women. In this context, it is important to address these matters urgently and collectively through an inclusive and participatory process.

Some 320 candidates contested for the twenty-three constituencies of Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly, including women, political parties' ticket holders, and independent candidates.

Undoubtedly, there is always a fair chance of disturbance in election campaigns and the slightest negligence on the part of the administration can devolve into violence and protest. The election day also witnessed intense campaigning in the end due to the stirring controversy against Federal Ministers who violated certain legal limitations.

From amongst these constituencies, Gilgit, Ghanche, Ghizer and Diamer reported unfortunate incidents, primarily in response to the delay in issuing results. By the same token, the presiding officers did not provide the Form 45 to the polling agents. However, on the whole the ECGB was able to enforce the law on the Election Day.

The long term observers deputed by FAFEN interviewed a significant number of voters in 23 constituencies and recorded their experiences and opinions. A majority of the contestants used holy places for their campaigns. Four percent of the respondents observed some new development projects in the neighborhood, seven percent witnessed food and goods being distributed by the contestants, and five percent were forced to support a specific contestant.

As per the Preliminary Election Observation report compiled by FAFEN, majority of the polling stations failed to follow the proper procedures in maintaining the secrecy of the vote, authenticity of the stamping ballots, voters being turned away from their registered polling stations without voting despite having their National Identity Cards (NICs), and over-crowding. Naturally, the authenticity of the stamp is suspicious when it is not done by the voters themselves.

The ECGB failed to provide Form 46 along with Form 45 which proved to be an obstacle in maintaining the probity of the election results. The insufficient number of Form 46 at the polling stations forced the presiding officers to provide results on plain papers with their stamps and signatures, which has no legal standing so far.

Another problem that emerged was the seating arrangement for polling agents from six constituencies where they sat at a place where they could not observe the voting process easily. The resolute reports suggested that during the arrangement of the preliminary results in the last three constituencies, the RO office was off limits for the candidates or their agents, and the delay in providing provisional results on Form 47.

According to the law, these provisional results are supposed to be completed by 2:00 AM on the day following the polling day. Not only did this fray the political scene but also raise questions upon the reliability of the results and point towards electoral fraud.

The report also suggests that the observers deputed by FAFEN did not face any restriction in observing voting process in the beginning, however, objections did come up in Skardu. Taking advantage of the law, major contending parties formally asked ECGB to allow the independent observers to view the counting process which resulted in the timely presence of FAFEN observers at many locations.

Pertinent to note is that proactive measures by the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) using his powers could have reinforced the confidence in the integrity of the process.

Media personnel and other observer groups did not face any restraints in observing the proceedings. Again, some efficiency by ECGB could have saved the media and other observer groups from the confusion in tallies of vote count since a parallel system was used to gather information and report unofficial results. This will be clear once the official results are released on the ECGB website.

Generally, the ECGB was able to take the COVID-19 safety measures and follow the requisite SOPs. Still, FAFEN observers reported disregard for the SOPs in 15 constituencies, amounting to over one tenth of the observed polling stations.

The preliminary report was compiled by 529 non-partisan observers trained and deployed by FAFEN, 30 percent of them women observers based on the summary observation of 436 polling stations.

# Break the status quo to rescue economy

Mr. Prime Minister, address micro-economy on a personal and war-footing basis. Don't leave it to Tigers and Wolves.

By Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri

Notwithstanding a jittery state of governance by Prime Minister Imran Khan – at least to this day, I'm a firm believer in his capabilities to turn around! I nurse this faith in him as I have idolised him since my days of childhood, as he was a celebrity-at-heart. He is upright and impeccable in his public career. Now, while he reigns supreme at the helm of affairs, what people like me -- who hail from the downtrodden and middle class -- expect from him is to deliver in the common man's context by uplifting the state of economy, and ushering in a new spirit of reinvigorated lifestyle.

The vision for a New Pakistan is still in the woods, at least after two years in power. The point of concern is the economy. It is showing signs of stagnation. But there is a flip side, too. The State Bank, FBR, SECP, FIA, and other auxiliary governmental bodies stand empowered. This is no small achievement. The government has rectified its foreign policy direction to a great extent, and geo-political security is at all times satisfactory.

But the problem lies in micro-economic management, and it is tatters! In the macro-economic context; corrective measures include foreign exchange regulations, buoying the confidence of expatriates, and boosting exports. The debt-servicing enigma too has been dealt prudently.

The point is there is a severe imbalance as far as issues of the common man are concerned. Inflation is persistent at neck-break speed; unemployment is rampant, and prices of essential commodities are at all time high. There is no monitoring of market forces, and the so-called mafia-cum-cartel is playing havoc.

Imran Khan had ingrained this fear, and was quite conscious of before coming into power. It is surprising to note that he and his able-Cabinet now sit pretty confused and inundated as from petrol to kerosene oil, and from sugar to wheat, as well as fresh vegetables and fruits see a price spiral. Lest to talk of cement and water hydrants (in Karachi, at least)!

A cartel continues to have the last laugh. The so-called 'truth commissions' and 'investigations' are uncalled for! The truth is quite ugly and blatant: the mafias (vultures) are scot-free and unfortunately drive power from the orbits of governance.

**The status quo of the 42nd largest economy of the world in terms of GDP:**

\*The country is indebted under an external debt of around \$98 billion.

◆ Around 58 percent of Pakistanis are illiterate.



- ◆ More than 50 per cent live in abject poverty; and that too with an income of less than \$2 a day (Rs320 average).
- ◆ Inflation is 8.91 per cent.
- ◆ Unemployment, too, is now in double digits.
- ◆ Seventy percent of people are denied safe drinking water (World Bank estimates).
- ◆ 25 per cent live with unsanitary drainage and contaminated water.
- ◆ 70 children die per 1000 newborn (child mortality and midwifery problem).
- ◆ Less than 24 per cent have access to government hospitals; rest at the mercy of the private sector.

**So much so for a country** which is a nuclear power, an agrarian economy, rich in grain basket, four-prospective seasons, abundance of water flow down the stream, stuffed with minerals and precious stones of all kinds; and last but not the least that sits on a basin that is rich in oil and gas beneath its shores and mountainous southwest. Yet we are out eagerly looking for bailout packages from the international lenders, at the cost of our sovereignty and self-respect.

The reason for this dismal state of affairs is corruption, misappropriation of resources and an ad hoc system of outsourced governance. This is where Prime Minister Imran Khan, the heartthrob of the millennial, is supposed to act. Though he has a vision for a better tomorrow, and is selflessly working on it; it won't be a success story until he shuns the extra-baggage around him, and meticulously differentiates wheat from chaff!

**It's high time for him to listen to critics; and not to sycophants.** A learned fellow like him must indulge in

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introspection. He stood for change; and change is indispensable. What he is doing at the moment is smart governance against all odds. Imran Khan – the one youth voted for – was not supposed to rule, but to rewrite a new social contract. Irrespective of his wafer-thin majority, there are hundreds of steps that he could take well within his executive powers to ensure a renaissance of sorts.

#### Let's take a stock of few humble suggestions:

- ◆ Pakistan faces a severe foreign exchange reserves problem. Thanks to Non-Resident Pakistanis (NRPs), the country is time and again able to save its skin because of the remittances that come its way. This confidence of overseas Pakistanis needs to be protected and pampered.
- ◆ Do away with luxury imports of all kinds for the next 10 years; be it automobiles; food and beverage, undesired electronic gadgets, edibles, fabrics, and even plastic and iron products. This can only be done by declassifying the taste of the nation, and rationing its requirements. A rough estimate says that Pakistan footed a staggering bill of \$40 billion last year in imports. This import fascination should come to an end; and rest assured we will not die without it!
- ◆ The country is in need of industrialisation, and there is no dearth of local talent, expertise and raw material. Pakistan is among the few of the rich countries in the country that could conveniently boast agrarian-industrial production. But we lack infrastructure and local production units, and taxation on industries is draconian. GST and other surcharges on industrial produce should be scrapped in order to follow the Chinese module of mass production. The country will turn rich in essence and become an export hub.
- ◆ Austerity should go beyond lip-service and find a place in our national ethos. Pakistan has an undesired non-developmental budget, and most of it is meant to retain the status quo. That includes a number of unwanted ministries and divisions (many are name-sake); a gang of white and blue collar civil servants (deadwood by any means), and a dozen-or-so allocations in budget that are borne out of a culture of despotism.
- ◆ Through an executive order backed by law, the state should immediately attaché properties and bank assets of convicts in corruption cases, and realise their money for retiring foreign debt. Enough of this cat and mouse game of trial and crying foul. The law should take its course, and all those who had looted and misappropriated national wealth should be held accountable. No two arguments in it!



- ◆ There is no need to be irked or kick-start a debate in nationalism if one goes on to ask for a review in the defence budget. We are a nation together; and high time to be realistic. There is a scholarly need to bifurcate the defence budget in combat and non-combat expenditures. While there can be no compromise in national security, thus there is no point in discussing the allocation for defence that goes into safeguarding the frontiers and retaining our vibrant and rejuvenated armed forces. But at the same time, a poor country like Pakistan should review the on-service kingly perks and privileges, and other post-retirement deals that the civil and military bureaucracy is laden with.



- ◆ A nation of 200 million cannot go on for ages with its wheel-of-economy being rotated on imported oil. We have to seriously ponder over alternate sources of energy in our developmental index. Oil and petrol imports (irrespective of subsidies and deferred payments from our foreign friends) take away our hard-earned greenbacks. The paradigm of commutation, logistics and production needs a critical reassessment.
- ◆ Time to ask why our mineral deposits in Balochistan, Sindh and Gilgit-Baltistan, especially, not being excavated to this day? What about our oil and gas channels (proven By World Geological Survey) beneath the barren Balochistan terrain? When will they be tapped? What happened to the euphoria of oil discovery off the shores of Karachi? What nexus of conspiracy is hindering its exploration?

**The above submissions should elicit a response from the Prime Minister.** They are up for perusal and good judgment under his legitimate powers!

Prime Minister Imran Khan should realise why many of his standing orders end up in limbo! Why is price-control an enigma? Who are the cahoots trying to fail the illustrious agenda of change? Are they inside the Cabinet, well-cushioned in bureaucracy or wheel-dealers in the corridors of power? Time to unmask and dethrone them!

Mr Prime Minister, address the micro-economic indicators on a personal and war-footing basis. Don't leave it to Tigers and Wolves. It would be a joke in bad taste! The nation has reposed trust in you: curb inflation, boost employment and ensure two square meals for all well within their means. No need to lecture the destitute on history and evolution. Do whatever you want in your powers, but please break the status quo. Time is on your side.

# CAA Takes It Easy with Aviation Caught in Turbulence

No End in Sight to Woes Brought on by Minister's Remarks



By Hamza Qureshi

With the Pakistani aviation sector still caught in the turbulence in the wake of last June's unfortunate remarks by the Federal Minister for Aviation, the Civil Aviation Authority is yet to set the ball rolling on vital time-bound aviation regulation requested by ICAO in early November, TTI can report.

The International Civil Aviation Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations that fosters the planning and development of international air transport to ensure safe and orderly growth. An ICAO electronic bulletin on 3 November 2020 put Pakistan under a 90-day deadline to resolve all flight safety concerns.

The development is rooted in remarks made by Ghulam Sarwar Khan on 24 June 2020 in his National Assembly speech regarding preliminary investigation report of the PIA Airbus PK 8303 crash that took place in Karachi on 22 May 2020. More than eighteen months later, the Pandora's Box opened by his remarks continues to haunt Pakistan.

The Aviation Minister told the floor that 40 percent of PCAA flying licenses issued to pilots were fake. An inquiry into the matter later found twenty-eight of the 860 licenses dubious – less than four percent of the total. However, industry sources say no more than six of these could be called 'fake' as the rest were tainted by procedural issues.

However, the damage had already been done as the damning accusation continued to echo in the international media for days on end. As of now, the Pakistani airlines are not permitted to fly to any destination in Europe, UK and USA.

In the wake of Khan's remarks, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) was the first to ban all Pakistani airlines to operate in European Union for 6 months, starting from June 2020. In July 2020, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration downgraded the international safety rating of Pakistan's CAA to category-2 and subsequently barred Pakistani airlines' operation in the United States. The UK's Civil Aviation Authority soon followed suit.

## CHARTING A COURSE TO SAFETY

A Safety Management System (SMS) is what Pakistan's aviation industry has long been missing. SMS is a top-down and organization-wide approach for formal management of safety risks in air operations, maintenance, air traffic services and aerodromes.

The PCAA and PIA must work together to develop a Safety Management System (SMS) as per ICAO directives issued on several occasions in past. As per the ICAO standards, there are two main stakeholders of SMS, the state and the airlines operators. PCAA is representing the state of Pakistan in implementation of Safety Management System.



Pakistan International Airlines' spokesperson told this correspondent that PIA shared its response to EASA concerns on 30 October 2020. The spokesperson claimed that all EASA concerns were addressed in detail and every attempt was made to address the apprehensions raised. EASA's rejoinder to PIA's response is awaited.

At this point, only a positive determination by EASA can earn Pakistan the permission to operate in Europe. PIA sources claim that PCAA is yet to take the first steps to develop SMS policies and procedures as the sector's regulator representing the state.

ICAO's Electronic bulletin dated 3 November 2020 called out Pakistan for unresolved Significant Safety Concern (SSC) pertaining to personnel licensing and training (PEL) regarding licensing process of pilots. Pakistan's category has since been downgraded below the level of Iran and Afghanistan.

Other countries on a similar footing with ICAO are Eritrea, Bhutan, Antigua and Barbuda, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

ICAO had given a 90-days period for Pakistan to take the requisite measures. Consequently, PCAA has stopped issuances of new commercial pilot licenses.

Deputy DG regulatory Nadir Shafi Dar told this correspondent that PCAA has tremendously work in line of EASA and FAA safety concerns and that the sanctions will be soon lifted. PCAA does not directly communicate with EASA but with European Union, as EASA deals with airlines and operators.

Dar said PCAA is in close coordination with European Union officials for the last three months and has shared relevant documentations such as State Safety Program (SSP), over which PCAA is currently working.

Dar further confirmed that PIA has submitted its Corrective Action Plan (CAP) to EASA. EASA held meeting over PIA's CAP on 17-18 November 2020 and will announce their decision soon. PCAA has also submitted the PIA's assessment report to EU Headquarters, Brussels.

Dar further shared that ICAO performed PCAA audit in December 2011 and the next audit is due in 2021. PCAA has invited officials from ICAO and EU to visit Pakistan. However, the COVID-19 threw a spanner in the works. For same reason, Pakistan's officials have also not visited Brussels.

Aviation sources agree with Dar to an extent but they feel that a lot more needs to be done to escape sanctions. Pakistan needs to work in depth and breadth to fulfil the criteria. With anti-Pakistan lobbies in general and Indian influence in particular actively contributing in strengthening the sanctions against Pakistan, industry sources do not see the ban being lifted any time soon.

## DODGING THE BULLETIN

Pakistan needs to work on war footing on various fronts. Aviation experts says that ICAO can't impose direct sanctions on a particular country but an electronic bulletin over flight safety concerns is enough for its members states to not allow certain airlines to enter airspace. Unless the PCAA takes action soon, the 11/3 ICAO's bulletin has set in motion a train of events that can lead 185 countries to stop PIA from entering their airspace.

If EASA's 6-month period starting from 1 July 2020 and ICAO 90-days deadline starting from 3 November 2020 are not taken seriously and compliance is not ensured, Pakistan's aviation industry could be in for a disaster.

Experts say that this could force Pakistani airlines to operate domestically only with none of their flights allowed to ascent above 29000 feet. The control of international air traffic passing from Pakistan's airspace could be taken from Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority and attributed to neighboring authorities, translating to billions of rupees of lost revenue.

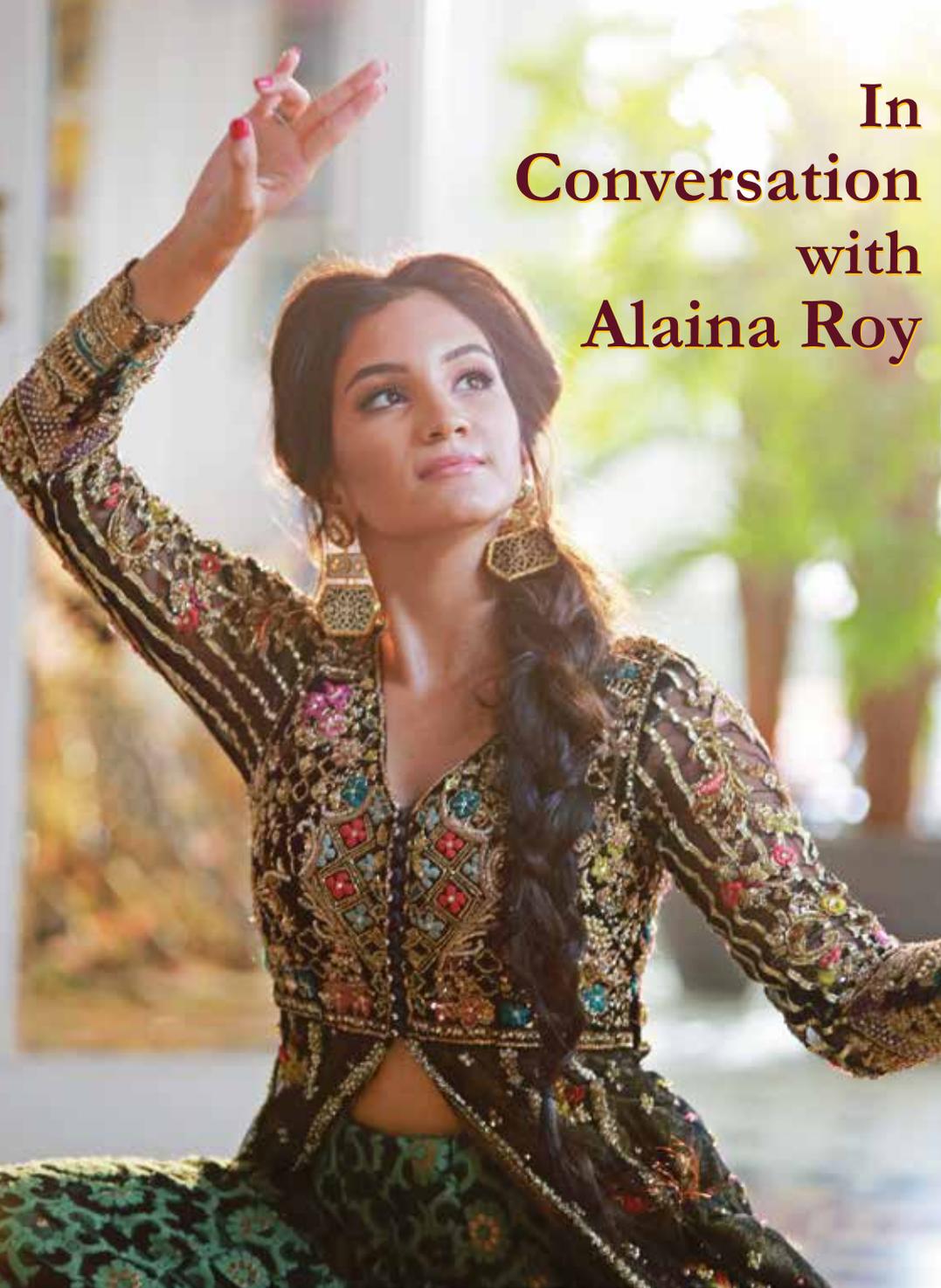
## COLOSSAL DAMAGE TO AVIATION

Business has shifted to foreign airlines. The passengers to Europe and USA are not travelling with PIA anymore. Turkish, Qatar and Emirates, Etihad and Saudi airlines have generated a huge sum of revenues from Pakistani passengers who have no choice. PIA's income from UK, USA and Europe routes has now come to a halt. This was the immediate result of the sanctions imposed by international agencies.

Implementation of State Safety Program is responsibility of PCAA which aviation experts say is reeling under the ill effects of adhocism. Pakistan Air Force personnel fill critical PCAA posts including DG and regulatory department heads on a 3-year deputation. They have no prior experience of civil aviation, which obviously takes time for a new person to learn.

However, by the time an official has learned the ropes, it is time for them to return to PAF. A new officer is deputed and the cycle starts again. Experts emphasize that deputation culture must end and let the institution run professionally.

# In Conversation with Alaina Roy



## **Wardrobe:**

Sana Safinaz Couture  
HSY  
Asma Akbar  
Tena Durrani

## **Hair and Makeup:**

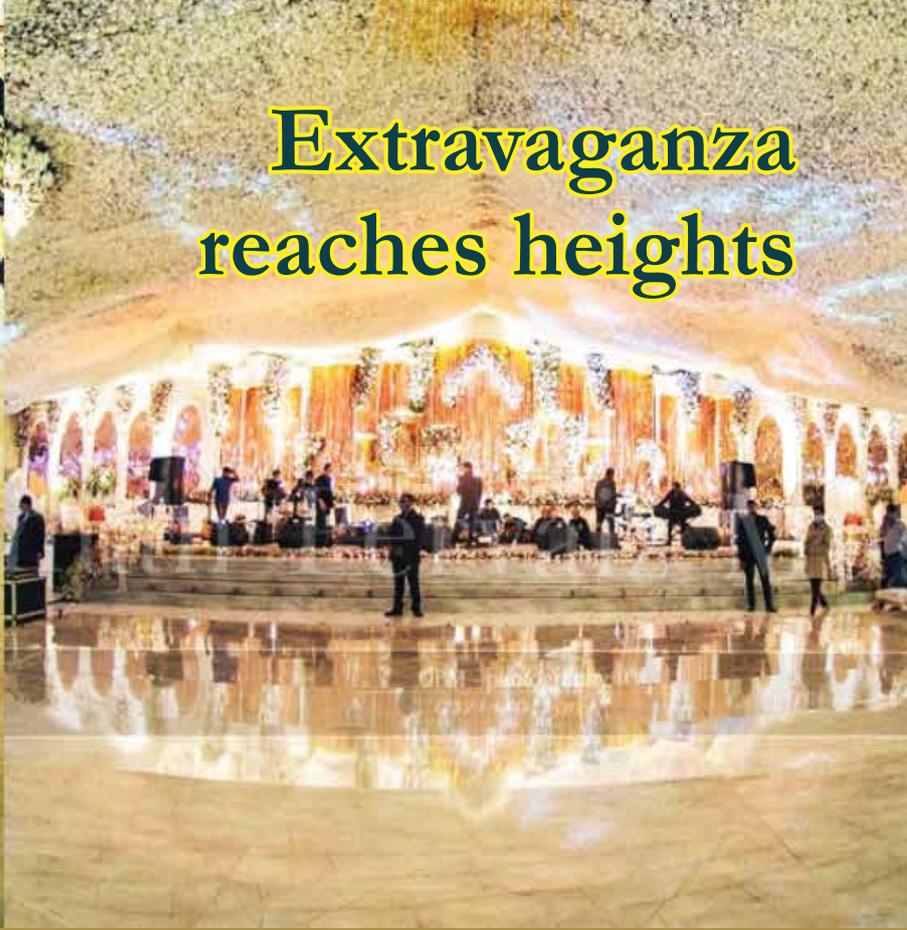
Kamran Bhatti  
Samaviya Asghar  
Nabilas

## **Photography:**

Sibte Hassan Azad  
Ali Baig



# Extravaganza reaches heights



Continued on page 26

# Of an Obscene Wedding and a Wild Goose Chase

Who Will Make the Filthy Rich Pay Taxes?

By Azeem Waqas

Every so often, something happens to remind us all over again that every system in Pakistan favours the rich in every possible way. This time, it was the obscenely lavish celebration of nuptials of the son of a bakery and deli king with the daughter of a tiles tycoon.

The wedding between the grandson of the founder of Jalal Sons Limited and the daughter of the Director of Master Tiles that went viral in the second week of November took place in the suburbs of Lahore. Videos and pictures from the wedding went viral on social media and several people dubbed it as “the 2-billion-rupee marriage”.

The FBR (Federal Board of Revenue) promptly ordered a probe into the various contractors who rendered services at the event. And sure enough, the vendors to the PKR 2 billion event are not even registered to pay their taxes.

The wedding took place in Rosa Blanca Country Club Lahore. The structure for the function was built in the sprawling lawns of the club. This club was paid PKR 150 million and remained booked for 120 days.

According to SECP records, Rosa Blanca Country Club is a privately owned company registered in 2018. The FBR seems to have never issued an NTN certificate to any company by that name. There is strong reason to suspect that the entity is not paying taxes at all.

Proceedings for their compulsory registration have been initiated by Corporate Tax Office Lahore, and their audited accounts have been requisitioned from the SECP.

Through anonymous physical inquiry, it has also transpired that the actual business is being carried out by the United Events and Services, as the receipts and bills are issued under the name of United Event City, described as subsidiary of Rosa Blanca Country Club.

Both United Event City and Rosa Blanca Country Club are owned by the owner of Lake City Mr. Gohar Ejaz, a former chairman of APTMA (All-Pakistan Textile Mills Association).

According to the FBR, Bahria Grand Hotel and Resort was booked for Waleema. FBR is investigating the proof of payment received and tax deducted as a withholding agent for FBR and Punjab Revenue Authority (PRA).

At the Lavish Mehndi night celebrities performed and were paid in millions. Famous singer Rahat Fateh Ali Khan was paid 5.5 million, Atif Aslam was paid PKR 5 million.

Décor and event management was done by the leading companies. According to the inquiry report KS Concepts managed Barat décor and was approximately paid around



PKR 15 to 20 million. The exact price tag for their services is still being probed.

Despite preliminary efforts FBR could not trace the person behind KS Concepts. Anonymous physical enquiries revealed that Rosa Blanca, KS concepts and United Event City are associates and neither is paying any taxes.

Décor for barat was done by Qasim Yar Tiwana who was paid approximately PKR 15 to 20 million. According to RTO Rawalpindi he is a most high profile event manager who declared PKR 216,743 as income from business in the tax year 2019 and is not member or partner in any other company. Business capital declared is PKR 500,000.

While Sundas Mustafa of whimsical parties, lesser known than QYT has declared PKR 9,500,000 decoration related as business and declared PKR 18,578,870 in income.

Whimsica was paid PKR 10 million for décor and fireworks for Barat and Mehndi.

The most high profile photo studios and videographers like Mobeem Studios, Osman Pervaiz Mughal, Irfan Ahsan and Ahmad Fayyaz photography made millions from this wedding alone, but have declared paltry incomes.

On the other hand, a serving FBR official who spoke to TTI on condition of anonymity termed the probe a wild goose chase. “FBR has made a fictitious report of Elite Wedding”, he said. “It has no proof of a PKR 2 billion expenditure, and no paper trail of millions paid to service providers”.

He points out how FBR has been unable to even trace some well-known service providers, adding, “Pakistan’s tax problems are beyond weddings. Taxation is truly captured by the Elites”.

The officer said that “The report prepared by the corporate office of the FBR on the wedding is based on assumptions, which shows how tax officials are working in haste”.

“Lavish weddings are an integral part of our economy; billions are spent on marriages every year. The rich book huge marquees and hotel and resorts just to show off their status in Pakistan. The FBR should bring them under the tax net according to the law instead of playing to the galleries”.

FBR sources say Master Tiles has a record of tax evasion. In 2015 FBR Inland Revenue and Intelligence made an investigation of 100 kanals farmhouse in Bahria Town Lahore purchased for PKR 250 million by three directors of Master Tiles Company. It was found that three residential houses were built on this farm house by these Directors at a cost of about PKR 423.60 million.

The inquiry revealed that these properties were not declared in the wealth statements of the three directors. These properties were purchased through baynaami accounts of the employees by the undeclared sales of PKR 10 billion of Master Tiles and Ceramics Industries Limited.

Background interviews reveal FBR could be sitting on actionable data involving millions of Pakistanis while the country has one of the lowest Tax to GDP ratios in the region.

Officials say FBR has acquired authentic information related to income and expenditures of all filers and non-filers. Among these are one million filers claiming to have non-taxable income although evidence to the contrary exists.

More than 3.5 million NTN holders and 7.4 million wealth tax payers, both of who are required to file tax returns under the law, are failing to do so

More than half of the over 100,000 registered companies and over 100,000 STRN holders are not filing returns as required under law.

Tax expert Mr. Ashfaq Tola says that “it’s an old story based on NADRA database”.

It is increasingly clear that tax evasion is ubiquitous among the ruling elite. The open letter from former chairman FBR Mr. Shabbar Zaidi is evidence enough that the FBR is in the clutches of mafias existing in and outside of the FBR.



In his letter Shabbar Zaidi explains his reasons of failure while pointing out the “state sponsored corruption” of the ruling elite. He states that the ruling elite sitting in Parliament does most of his business activities in undocumented sectors like agriculture, textile, real estate, and sugar. Their wealth statement does not match with their lifestyle.

Says Dr Muhammad Iqbal, a former member policy at the FBR: “The neoliberal or free market economic system being followed in Pakistan promotes elite capture in all facets of the economy and tax system is no exception”.

Tax structure is full of mechanisms and modalities that operate in favour of the big taxpayers and put small and medium enterprises at a disadvantage. Small taxpayers lack the lobbying and advocacy power that big businesses can wield with ease.

Dr Iqbal says, “Concessions are sought and achieved in the guise of laudable objectives such as export promotion and consumer support but end up further enriching the already affluent segments. All tax incentives and concessions are designed in a way that only big taxpayers can benefit from these.

“The complex tax systems also favour organised taxpayers who can afford expensive tax advisers and elaborate in-house tax departments. The degree of compliance required for availing tax concessions or even observing routine tax obligations become unmanageable for small and medium enterprises.

“Even if the tax machinery tries to go after elite tax dodgers the efforts are set to naught by launching legal challenges through expensive and best counsels adept at exploiting legal loopholes and technicalities in law and procedures”.

Former Chairman FBR Dr Muhammad Irshad says, “Since its inception, the major power players of Pakistan were elites or the famous 12 families. Elites don’t pose a threat to society as long as the government machinery is working effectively.

“Unfortunately, in Pakistan this culture transformed into a threat when the economic elite captured the parliament and started moulding the economic laws and policies especially tax laws and policies to protect their personal interests. For instance, SROs are issued to allow the items of elite and immediately taken back after delivery of those items”.

He is of the view that with the strengthening of democracy, the sway of these elites has waned to some extent. This can be validated from the fact that in the previous government the SRO and exemption culture was almost eliminated.

In other words, tax evasion at policy level due to elite capture has gone down. On the other hand, weak tax machinery is still promoting tax evasion through underhand means such as money laundering, under reporting etc., and ultimately giving rise to new type of elites, or in layman’s terms, mafias.

Effective tax enforcement is a pre-requisite for eliminating tax evasion. The day tax enforcement becomes effective, the elites would no longer be a threat to the society.

Some will nevertheless lament that Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led government failed to deliver on its promise of an autonomous, independent, and friendly FBR during the two years of its rule.

Our tax machinery shows no signs of developing a proactive approach to stopping tax evasion in the country. Its action in reactive mode based on anonymous reports often leads to allegations of political victimization.

# Pakistan's relationship with IPPs: An unfinished tale



By **Khalique Ahmad**

ISLAMABAD - Pending conversion of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) into formal legal contracts, the government is unable to derive more than Rs10bn monthly savings secured by a negotiation committee from private power producers without any litigation in August this year.

Through extensive engagements, a negotiation committee led by former federal secretary Babar Yaqoob Fateh Muhammad and represented by relevant ministries and intelligence agencies, persuaded about 47 or so independent power producers (IPPs) to surrender some of their contractual rights. Six others were mostly foreign funded and already skewed by their profit margins for original project delays and have not agreed to offer similar relaxations until finalization of this report. They include China Three Gorges, Liberty Power, Uch Power, Star Hydro, Zephyr Wind Power and Laraib.

The MOUs signed by these IPPs including thermal, wind, solar, bagasse etc. required upfront payments of (about Rs425bn) stuck up in about Rs2.3trillion circular debt to become formal contracts to be made part of their original power purchase agreements (PPAs) and Implementation Agreements (IAs) within six months. The deadline legally expires in the second week of February 2021.

As they say, too many masters also sometimes result in delays. While an implementation committee led by Dr Hafeez Shaikh is working on financial arrangements to convert MOUs into formal contracts, the cabinet committee on energy (CCOE) led by

planning minister Asad Umar has sent the MOUs for vetting by the law ministry and were cleared by the Cabinet early this month – almost three months after their signing around August 12.

As a consequence, a host of follow up steps have remained outstanding like filing of petitions by IPPs for revision in tariff and resultant revised tariff approval by the regulator for future and its formal notification by the government in Gazette and any suggested changes to PPAs.

The government has now drafted standard contracts for four or five different categories of IPPs to turn MOUs into contracts for amendments of PPAs and IAs but these had not been shared with IPPs until this report went to press. However, dates were being finalized with IPPs to discuss the draft contract and seek further relaxations on payment schedule. This is creating unrest among the IPPs who had signed the MOU with the condition that they sign formal contracts at the time of upfront payment of Rs425bn.

The government now wants all the dues payable to IPPs spread over two years through a special government paper to be guaranteed for payment by the State Bank of Pakistan after payment of first tranche at the time of signing of contracts and remaining two installments with a gap of 12 months each. This arrangement is already reported to have been shared with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank even though they are not yet in the final shape.

There were some mix-ups and unease among the key players since the signing of MOUs. Shahzad Qasim, the former SAPM, was given key role in power sector and then removed leading to his resignation, minister for energy Omar Ayub Khan then became the head of the implementation committee and was subsequently removed as some cabinet members talked about conflict of interest, his replacement being Dr Hafeez Shaikh.

While an entire team of bureaucrats led by then secretary power Irfan Ali was removed before the MOUs were finalized, another secretary power Omar Rasool called it a day in protest over interference of too many players in an area of which he was principal accounting officer. Ali Reza Bhutta has since taken over as secretary power. Mr Bhutta and Tabish Gohar obviously needed time to absorb the challenge.

As part of counter-balance between two senior cabinet members – Dr Shaikh and Asad Umar – had already changed hands as head of the CCOE that formally cleared MOUs signed by the Babar Yaqoob led negotiation committee. Given the fact that his self-believed seniority, Mr Asad Umar had been abstaining from ECC and other committees led by Dr Shaikh (an outsider to the PTT's cabinet), the chairmanship of CCOE was given to Mr Umar with Dr Shaikh as member to give a message that none was senior. Now Mr Shaikh heads the ECC and Mr Asad is a member while the latter heads the CCOE and former is a member.



On October 10, Dr Hafeez Shaikh replaced Energy Minister Omar Ayub Khan as head of the implementation committee while Tabish Gohar replaced Shahzad Qasim. All other members of the committee have remained unchanged and include Babar Yaqoob Fateh Muhammad who led the negotiations with IPPs, secretaries of power and finance and Barrister Qasim Wadud and Chief Executive of Central Power Purchasing Agency Guarantee Ltd. The committee has not met formally since but Dr Shaikh has assigned some work to his own team at the ministry of finance and to Mr Tabish Gohar.

To understand what this committee is required to deliver include undertaking all actions required to give effect to the MoUs and their conversion into binding contractual agreements, within the timeline (six months) agreed in the MoUs. It has to coordinate with all relevant ministries, institutions, authorities and other stakeholders for the IPPs which have not signed MoU, as provided

in the report while the committee will have powers to make contractual arrangements on the same principles and lines as for the IPPs which have signed the MoUs.

The committee is also responsible for devising a mechanism for settlement of outstanding dues of IPPs and in case of the matter under litigations, the relevant MoU would be forwarded to relevant entity for its comments and feedback and recommend a way forward to close out such disputes, possibly including a previously agreed settlement that was not put into effect and for settlement of outstanding tax issues of the industry. Moreover, it should also make attempts to reach closure on the subject.

The committee will also take necessary actions for revision of tariff through NEPRA pursuant to relevant terms of MoUs and monitor amendment of the Power Purchase Agreements and other relevant agreements pursuant to MoUs and revised tariff determination.

In its official summaries to CCOE and the Federal Cabinet, the IPPs negotiation committee and power division have been claiming about Rs836-866bn savings over up to 28 years remaining life of the 47 IPPs.

To materialize these savings, the government was required to clear about Rs400bn outstanding dues to IPPs at once. The negotiation committee had talks with IPPs under and before 1994 policy, 2001 policy and Renewable Power Policy 2006 (including bagasse plants under the 2018 Co-Generation framework). IPPs under the 2015 policy were not included in the mandate of the committee.

The negotiation had reported that Hub Power Company (Hubco) which had the remaining life of seven years agreed on removal of dollar and US CPI indexation on returns. Its fixed O&M will be reduced by 11pc with a financial impact of Rs62bn.

Under the 1994 Generation Policy seven IPPs, including Kapco, had a remaining life of 6-10 years, while Kapco's life is one year. The MoUs reduced by 11pc in capacity payments & variable O&M and dollar delinking for 50pc of remaining Capacity Payment. This is reported to have Rs92bn financial impact.

Likewise, 12 IPPs under the 2002 policy had a remaining life of 14-21 years. Their MOUs involved 12pc dollar-based return for foreign investors, 17pc return at Rs148 per dollar with no further indexation for local investors with a clawback mechanism for fuel and O&M savings and recovery of past excess payments. Its financial impact was estimated at Rs322bn.

Also, 19 IPPs under the RE 2006 (Wind and Solar) policy have a remaining life of 12-19 years. The MOUs envisaged a reduction to 13pc dollar based return, reduction in O&M cost by 15 to 25pc and 50pc reduction in tariff above agreed benchmark. This is reported to have a financial impact of Rs206bn.

The 2013 bagasse based eight projects (under 2006 RE Policy) had a remaining life of 4-28 years. Their MoU involved a reduction to 12pc dollar based return for next 5 years and shift to rupee-based 17pc return at Rs168 per dollar and 70pc clawback mechanism for agreed benchmarks. Their O&M cost had been reduced by 10pc and they would return past excess payments. This will have an estimated financial impact of Rs150bn.

# PTI's 1st Year in Power Saw Trillions of Rupees Stolen from the Federal Kitty

In Report Covering a Fifth of Federal Government, AGP Finds Rampant Financial Impropriety Wherever It Looks

By Ashraf Malkham

ISLAMABAD - Elite public auditors have found financial irregularities to the tune of PKR 5,287 billion within the federal government over the first year in the saddle of Prime Minister Imran Khan, who rose to power blaming corruption for all ills and promising clean governance.

The report, compiled by the Auditor General of Pakistan (AGP) and laid before the Parliament, concerns the audit year 2019-20 (fiscal year 2018-19) and covers about a fifth of the federal government. This means the magnitude of financial impropriety for the whole government is likely much larger – comparable if not worse than PKR 15.67 trillion recorded for the previous year.

Laid before the Parliament with the approval of President of Pakistan, the report highlights a series of violation of rules and regulations, non-production of record, weaknesses of internal control, misappropriation or overpayment of public funds, and negligence.

The DG Audit has the mandate to conduct audit of 150 formations working under the Power Division. Out of these, 95 formations were audited for the report and audit objection, embezzlement, misappropriation, fraud, theft, irregularities, violation of regulation and recoveries to the tune of PKR 2,960 billion were unearthed.

The second most irregular Ministry mentioned in report is the Ministry of Water Resources where cases of financial impropriety stood at PKR 1,142 billion.

Cases of financial impropriety in the FBR (including Inland Revenue and Customs) come to PKR 196.6 billion. The Petroleum and Natural Resources Ministry also figure prominently in the list with irregularities amounting to PKR 140 billion. Pakistan Railways is another giant where AGP reports cases of irregularities of PKR 23.50 billion.

The report, a copy of which is available with the TTI (The Truth International), further shows that AGP has the mandate to audit 2,723 formations of sixty PAOs (Principal Accounting Officers) of the federal government. But the audit of 325 formation comprising forty PAOs was conducted having total expenditure of PKR 346.754.

In terms of percentage, the audit coverage (compliance audit) was 19.34 percent. According to report, cases of misappropriation and embezzlement and fictitious payments and irregularities were highlighted to the tune of PKR 381.4 billion.

The situation in ministries dealing with construction work is no better. Audit of 76 formations of SPAOs/Ministries was conducted in entities like National Highway Authority, Capital Development Authority, Civil Aviation Authority, Public Works, Estate



Office, Pakistan Housing Authority Foundation, Higher Education Commission etc. In total cases of PKR 31.7 billion have been highlighted in the report prepared by AGP.

About the Defence Services the report stated out of 3,882 formations working under tow PAOs, audit of 27 formations was conducted and amount of cases highlighted was PKR 130.7 billion. Cases to the tune of PKR 97 billion have been highlighted in Social Safety Programs like Benazir Income Support Programme, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, Pakistan Baitul Mal, Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resources, Employees Old Age Benefit Institution, Overseas Pakistani Foundation, Overseas Employment Corporation, Workers Welfare Fund, NIRC, Bureau of Immigration, and Zakat Collection and Controlling Agencies.

Financial impropriety in Public Sector Enterprises unearthed by the AGP stands at PKR 52.6 billion. Among the institutions covered were PASSCO, Korangi Fisheries Harbour Authority, Pakistan Tobacco Board, Pakistan Stone Development Company, Pakistan Gems and Jewellery Development Company, Pakistan Steel Mills, Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works, Pakistan Ordnance Factories, National Fertilizer Corporation, PIA Company, House Building Finance Corporation, National Insurance Company Limited, NLC, NESPAK, NADRA, Biological Production Division, Pakistan Television Corporation, PBC and Pakistan Science Foundation.

The report should give the Pakistani citizenry something to think about, many of whom voted PTI in the 2018 general election in the hope it would steer Pakistan towards transparency and financial accountability. In practice, the PTI government has shown a clear lack of capacity as well as political will to tackle such weighty matters.

This should also serve as food for thought for the Pakistani political class: The promises you make on the campaign trail become the yardsticks against which your performance is measured once you are in power.

# Recovery of Trillions in Pilfered Funds Mired in Procedural Issues

PAC Running Huge Backlog, Reframing Rules to Enhance Clout vis-à-vis Top Civil Servants



By Asad Malik

A mysterious paralysis seems to have gripped Pakistan's constitutional instruments of financial accountability including the PAC (Public Accounts Committee) of the Parliament – the apex forum of financial accountability of government functionaries and departments.

The PAC has more than 24,000 outstanding audit paras to process – in other words, a decade's worth of work. Compare this number with the one hundred or so audit paras outstanding in India, a much bigger country and government.

In Pakistan, we still have audit paras for 2011 and 2012 pending. This long delay in the law taking its course means by the time retribution catches up with a wrongdoer, he is already retired or deceased.

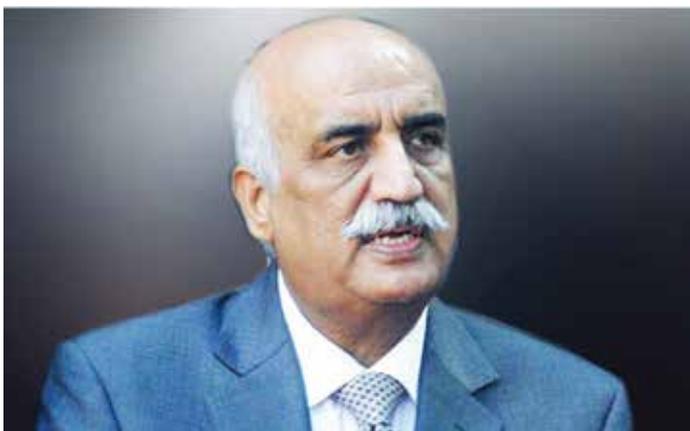
The PAC, however, is not the only bottleneck. Audit paras pertaining to the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) and Petroleum Division related to the recoveries of PKR 3.6 trillion (PKR 18.56 trillion of FBR and PKR 18.5 trillion of Petroleum Division) are stuck up to litigation. The PAC has to stop pursuing recovery when a private party goes into litigation and the matter becomes sub judice.

By August 2018, the PAC had a total 18,500 of audit paras pending. With roughly 2000 to 2200 new paras arriving every year, the total has since rose to somewhere between 23,000 and 24,000.

In November 2019, the incumbent PAC chairman Rana Tanveer Hussain had replaced PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif and he vowed to improve committee's functioning. A year down the line, he blames the ministries and the federal secretaries for piling up the backlog.

In order to make PAC effective, it was decided during the tenure of Pakistan Peoples Party that it would be headed by the opposition leader. Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan became the PAC chairman but he resigned after a row with the judiciary over the jurisdiction of PAC over the audit reports of Supreme Court. Nadeem Afzal Chan was then elected to succeed him as PAC chair.

When Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz rose to power, the opposition leader Syed Khursheed Ahmed Shah became the PAC chairman. However, some say the sweet disposition of the Shahji of Sukkar stood in the way of him pursuing accountability. Then in 2015, Buland Akhtar Rana, the then AGP (Auditor General of Pakistan) pulled a veritable coup against Shah, maintaining Shah



should not be scrutinizing audit reports pertaining to his party's term in power because of a principle of natural justice that says no person can judge a case in which they have an interest.

The audit reports before Syed Khurshid Shah's PAC pertained to the time when the PPP (Pakistan Peoples Party) was in power. The PAC then filed a reference against Rana before the SJC (Supreme Judicial Council).

Although the SJC found Rana guilty of misconduct and recommended his removal from office, the PAC remained unable to convene for almost a year awaiting the appointment of the next AGP.

Together, these circumstances resulted in a huge backlog of audit paras.

As far as the recovery of over PKR 3.6 trillion is concerned, the litigation in the Supreme Court, Islamabad High Court, Lahore High Court, Sindh High Court, Peshawar High Court and Balochistan High Court barred the PAC to take up the relevant audit paras.

Interestingly, several tribunals of the Federal Board of Revenue are also dormant because the PM Imran Khan's government is yet to name their presiding officers.

"These appellant tribunals have been dysfunctional for two years", testified Chairman FBR Mohammad Javed Ghani before the PAC in a recent meeting adding that defaulters also go into litigation in superior courts and secure stay orders.

According to the statistics submitted before the PAC by the FBR authorities, cases related to the recoveries worth PKR 117 billion are pending before the Supreme Court, PKR 136 billion in Islamabad High Court (IHC), PKR 228 billion in Lahore High Court (LHC), PKR 134 billion in Sindh High Court (SHC), PKR 169 billion in Peshawar High Court (PHC), and PKR 602 million in Balochistan High Court (BHC).

The litigation related to the rest of the amount is stuck with the tribunals and their appellate forums of the FBR and majority of them are dysfunctional due to the absence of members and presiding officers.

A couple of months back, the law ministry gave an undertaking to fill up the vacant positions of these tribunals. The summary regarding appointment of members and presiding officers for the tribunals has been forwarded to the prime minister.

A major chunk of the recovery of Petroleum Division is related to the non-realization of Gas Infrastructure Development Cess. The Supreme Court on 2 November 2020 dismissed the petitions filed against the levy and now the Petroleum Division is pursuing the case for vacation of stay orders in the relevant high courts.



Bureaucratic sources say the PAC has become a chit-chat point where lawmakers gossip instead of clearing the backlog, and appear interested in taking up matters related to their respective constituencies with the government officials who attend the Committee meetings to address audit objections raised by the auditors.

On its part, the bureaucracy is hardly keen on this kind of activities. A PAC meeting was convened in the second week of November just to reprimand the secretaries and officials of half a dozen ministries and divisions for holding no or too few DAC (Departmental Accounts Committee) meetings.

The divisions reprimanded by the PAC were the poverty alleviation & social safety division; economic affairs division; narcotics control; federal public service commission; and planning and human rights ministries.

The PAC chairman Rana Tanveer Hussain says the Committee is not to be blamed for such a huge backlog. He said that the Prime Minister Imran Khan was unwilling to accept opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif as PAC chairman – perhaps because he misunderstood the functions of the PAC.

"After an understanding with the PTI, we distributed to the paras related to PPP, PML-N and previous governments to eight subcommittees", says Rana. "The main PAC is left with no paras since then."

Rana says the PAC received the first audit reports for financial year 2019-2020 about a couple of weeks back. "I will ensure the scrutiny of these reports is complete in the next few months", he says adding that as far as the backlog is concerned, a meeting of the conveners of the eight subcommittees has been scheduled by the end of November to formulate a strategy to expedite work.

"We are also working to amend the PAC rules to empower the committee to penalize the delinquent bureaucrats as at present we cannot take any action against them except issuing direction for lowering the Annual Confidential Report (ACR)", he said.

The Principal Accounting Officers of the ministries are BS-22 officers and lowering their ACR does not bother them in the least. Rana said the PAC is seeking the power to make a delinquent officer an OSD.

# Shirin Mazari, Corona Vaccine, and PDM

By Hammad Ghaznavi

Former Chief Justice Jawad S. Khwaja and former Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani appeared free spirits with their ponytails, a hairstyle that defied the regular and safe look of political and judicial elite of the land of the pure. Shirin Mazari's rainbow skull falls in the same league, a statement of independence, and defiance of the norm. Her valour goes beyond her hairstyle for sure. Her multi-coloured top, so to speak, is just the tip of the iceberg.

Shirin, the braveheart, broke barriers last week, as she attacked France, not the way Fuhrer did, but through a tweet. She wrote, "Macron is doing to Muslims what the Nazis did to the Jews – Muslim children get ID numbers (other children won't) just as Jews were forced to wear the yellow star on their clothing for identification..." Nothing of the sort had happened in France, the news was fake. The French foreign ministry and the France embassy in Pakistan reacted to Federal Minister Shirin Mazari's tweet in a manner which reminded one of the phrase 'Excuse my French'.

Later, the source website retracted the news and Shirin deleted her tweet but the damage had been done. Pak-France relations have gone sour for no reason but sheer 'freedom of expression', as Shirin considered it her right to react to an unverified news item without consulting the foreign office or the foreign minister whose domain it happened to be.

The PTI government seems to have drawn the right lessons from the mammoth janazah of Maulana Khadim Hussain Rizvi, and is convinced that, following in his footprints, no opportunity shall be missed to cater to the popular religious sentiments of the masses. Hence, the tweet.

What is the cost of bad relations with yet another country, and that too, France? Our half a billion exports to France and around 125,000 legal Pakistanis living in France apart, France is a strong player in the decision making in FATF. A friend in the government thinks, "if we can have bad or lukewarm relations with almost every country on the map except about half a dozen, and survive, it is okay if France too turns hostile. No worries." Amazing wisdom, indeed!

Another pearl of wisdom that has recently attracted attention is the Government's decision to make its own corona vaccine. Self-sufficiency will touch new heights if the feat is achieved; something that Pakistan has not been able to accomplish even in the wheat crop. What are the vaccines that we have developed so far? Of measles or rubella? Chickenpox or smallpox? But there is always a first time for everything and maybe the moment of truth has arrived for us. That's what we thought when in 2012 a gentleman from Khairpur, Sindh, Agha Waqar 'invented' a water-fueled car which, at least initially, received thunder-

ous applause from the government, media and the scientists alike. Nobody then realized that, unlike the constitution of Pakistan, the second law of thermodynamics could not be held in abeyance.

Science and miracles are two different things. Our budget allocations for science and technology, research and development, Higher Education Commission have been plunging over the years. Our budget allocations for tanks, submarines and fighter jets have been soaring. We are fully prepared to defend every inch of our motherland, but developing vaccines is something we have not prepared ourselves for. Countries prepare for war during peace times and not in the middle of a battle.

Nothing should, however, deter us from trying to develop a vaccine. If we succeed, great. If not, at least there will be political stability in the country, and the government will complete its five year term, as during the pandemic the government has banned public gatherings. But the stubborn PDM is not listening to the sane governmental advice on strict observance of the Corona SoPs. The alliance leadership has a counterargument of sorts that why the Prime Minister's gatherings or tiger force conventions are considered safe, while the PDM's gatherings are being considered The Primary Reason behind the flagrant Corona spread. The PDM, at least in this case, seems to have failed to appreciate the camouflaged recognition by the government of the huge numbers turning up at the opposition rallies, tearing apart the rule of mandatory social distancing.

The opposition rallies would have sounded innocuous and the government wouldn't have bothered at all, but a proclaimed offender by the name of Nawaz Sharif is turning it all into 'too hot to handle.' He has stirred up a new debate – to name or not to name. Even the PDM seems divided on the issue. But Nawaz has never appeared more clear-headed.

The situation reminds one of a famous Jaun Elia qita:

Sharm, Dehshat, Jhijak, Parayshani

Naaz Sey Kaam Kyun Nahin Laiteen

Aap, Woh, Jee, Magar, Yeh Sub Kia Hai

Tum Mera Naam Kyun Nahin Laiteen

# Afghans Hold the Key to Afghan Peace

PM Khan's Visit to Kabul Renews Hopes for Regional Stability



By Ghulam Dastageer

Pakistan's clout with the Afghan Taliban is by turns a blessing and a curse for Islamabad. Both the United States and Afghanistan are quick to appreciate Pakistan's cooperation when something in their dealings with the Afghan insurgent group goes right.

However, both Washington and Kabul are equally quick to turn on Islamabad when there is a foul up – blaming the country's military for 'supporting' the group that has killed and maimed thousands of Afghans since the US invasion of that country in 2001.

This is the backdrop against which Prime Minister Imran Khan's maiden visit to Kabul must be seen – although its immediate context is an impasse on the intra-Afghan peace process initiated under the Doha accord.

The Taliban have set the condition of the formation of an interim Sharia-based government in Kabul, while the Afghan government insists on a comprehensive ceasefire before pushing forward with the peace process.

In Afghanistan there is a strong perception at both official and public levels that Taliban militants, since their launch in 1996, continue to enjoy support from the Pakistani security apparatus.

Pakistan on the other hand holds Kabul responsible for the mayhem and bloodshed its tribal belt has seen over the past two decades.

The day after the massacre of around 150 students and teaching staff at Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, the then Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif had flown to Kabul. Flanked by his Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief, he shared a dossier with the Afghan officials regarding the use of Afghan soil in that attack, and demanded the handing over of the then TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah to Pakistan.

More recently, a visit by Afghanistan's chief peace negotiator Abdullah Abdullah to Pakistan in September aimed at bridging the gap between two neighbours with a history of antagonism was declared successful. But the visitor could not restrain himself from tapping into the decades-old mantra when he urged the Pakistan military to use its influence over the Taliban to reduce the level of violence in Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Imran Khan clearly focused on the positive side of things at the joint presser with the Afghan leadership at the conclusion of his Kabul visit on 19 November 2020 when he said: "Pakistan will do everything possible to help reduce violence in Afghanistan and establish durable peace."

The four-point Doha peace accord lays down a 14-month deadline for US and NATO troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan; assurance by the Taliban fighters not to let their land be used to threaten US security; initiation of

intra-Afghan talks by 10 March 2020; and a complete ceasefire.

Eager to honour his promise of pulling US service personnel out of Afghanistan, President Trump is adamant on a sizable troop drawdown before he hands over reins of power to Democratic President-Elect Joe Biden on 20 January 2021 – although the deadline for the comprehensive withdrawal is 29 April 2021.

With the withdrawal of 2,000 troops from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021, the number of US troops in Afghanistan will decline to 2,500.

The US withdrawal, nevertheless, hinges on a complete ceasefire and success of intra-Afghan dialogue, originally scheduled to start on 10 March 2020 but was delayed for six months and was finally held in Doha on 12 September 2020.

The main hurdle in the way of intra-Afghan dialogue was the release of six Afghan Taliban prisoners, believed to be involved in killing ISAF troops. The Taliban seem to have had the upper hand of the haggling as they finally succeeded in getting their six men released from the captivity of Afghan government. The insurgent group came to the negotiating table only after their men were shifted to Qatar to remain in their custody instead of the Afghan government's.

The ceasefire clause of the Doha Agreement seems to be of little consequence to the Taliban. Just three days before the intra-Afghan dialogue, Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh narrowly escaped a deadly roadside bombing in Kabul that killed ten people.

On the other hand, unlike President Trump, the US President-Elect Joe Biden seems in no hurry to withdraw the forces from Afghanistan. In that case, the law and order situation in Afghanistan would remain the same, if it does not deteriorate further.

Biden clearly expounded his view of the matter from the campaign trail: "Americans are rightly weary of our longest war; I am, too. But we must end the war responsibly, in a manner that ensures we both guard against threats to our homeland and never have to go back."

If the Biden presidency does indeed push the pull-out further into the future, the Taliban fighters may also intensify their guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan, dashing hopes for peace and prosperity in Afghanistan.

Recently, talking to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg assured: "We support the Afghanistan peace process and as part of it we'll continue to adjust our presence."

The visit of Imran Khan has been welcomed in Afghanistan and the people have pinned high hopes on Pakistan's role for restoration of peace in Afghanistan. How far it goes towards overcoming the traditional Afghan mistrust of Pakistan – especially after renewed reports of Islamabad's efforts to install a friendly Taliban government in Kabul – remains to be seen.

From all appearances, Pakistan is set to come under immense international pressure in the days to come to convince the Taliban to soften their demands and take the intra-Afghan dialogue to a logical end. If Pakistan is unwilling or unable to deliver on that



count, the game of allegations and counter-allegations is sure to start all over again.

Pakistan would be demanded to distance itself from Taliban, and Islamabad's unwillingness to do so may compound its problems. In particular, Pakistan can ill afford to displease Washington given its dependence on US for its dealings with both the IMF and FATF.

No matter how the circumstances unfold, the warring sides of Afghanistan would do well to realise that the key to peace in that country is held by Afghan hands. There can be no peace in Afghanistan unless both Kabul and the insurgent group are prepared to make compromises for peace. There is nothing the US or Pakistan can do to change that.

The sooner the Afghans realise this, the better.

Co-hosted by the governments of Finland and Afghanistan and the United Nations, the two-day 2020 Afghanistan Conference concluded in Geneva on 24th November with a commitment by the international community to support the Afghan shared development objectives for 2021-2024.

The Afghan government succeeded to get the pledges from the international community to the tune of \$3.3 billion for the first year which will continue in the upcoming four years.

The communique issued at the end of the conference, however, called for "an immediate, permanent and comprehensive ceasefire." In addition, it also underlined the need for a meaningful peace process with the participation of women and youth, as well as ethnic, religious and other minorities.

"Preserving democratic pluralism, the constitutional order, institutional transparency and accountability, and the rule of law, further promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially for women, children and minorities and including freedom of media, and pursuing sustainable peace, development and prosperity, are essential for Afghanistan's future", it said.

# Al-Qaeda Ready to Honour Afghan Peace Deal

Foreign Fighters' Loyalty to Taliban Unwavering, says former Bin Laden Aide Dr. Muhammad Amin

## TTI Exclusive Interview

By Tahir Khan

Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other foreign militants in Afghanistan are prepared to abide by the peace deal made by the Taliban leaders with the United States, a former aide to the late Al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden has told TTI (The Truth International) in an exclusive interview.

TTI approached Dr. Muhammad Amin, who according to the United Nations once coordinated security for Osama bin Laden, for his take on the Al-Qaeda presence on the Afghan soil and the prospects of these stateless warriors honouring the Doha peace deal.

The Taliban have guaranteed in their deal with the United States to “prevent any group or individual, including Al-Qaeda, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.” Observers believe holding Al-Qaeda remnants and affiliates to this deal would prove a herculean task for the Taliban leadership.

In July, the US Department of Defense said in a report Al-Qaeda’s regional affiliate in Afghanistan maintained close ties to the Taliban and had an “enduring interest” in attacking US and foreign troops.

“AQIS (Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) routinely supports and works with low-level Taliban members in its efforts to undermine the Afghan government, and maintains an enduring interest in attacking US forces and Western targets in the region,” the Pentagon said in a security assessment compiled for the US Congress.

Earlier in May, a United Nations report said the senior leadership of Al-Qaeda remained in Afghanistan along with hundreds of armed operatives, as well as elements of AQIS and other groups of foreign terrorist fighters aligned with the Taliban.

Taliban dispute these claims, insisting the majority of Al-Qaeda members have already returned to their native countries. Also, there have been reports of the Afghan Taliban issuing instructions to foreign militants in their controlled areas to live in accordance with their agreement with the US and referred their affairs to the intelligence commission.

Spokesman for the outlawed TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) Mohammad Khorasani has confirmed that the TTP had received the instructions for the post-conflict Afghanistan, although he would not say if his outfit was prepared to comply with those instructions.

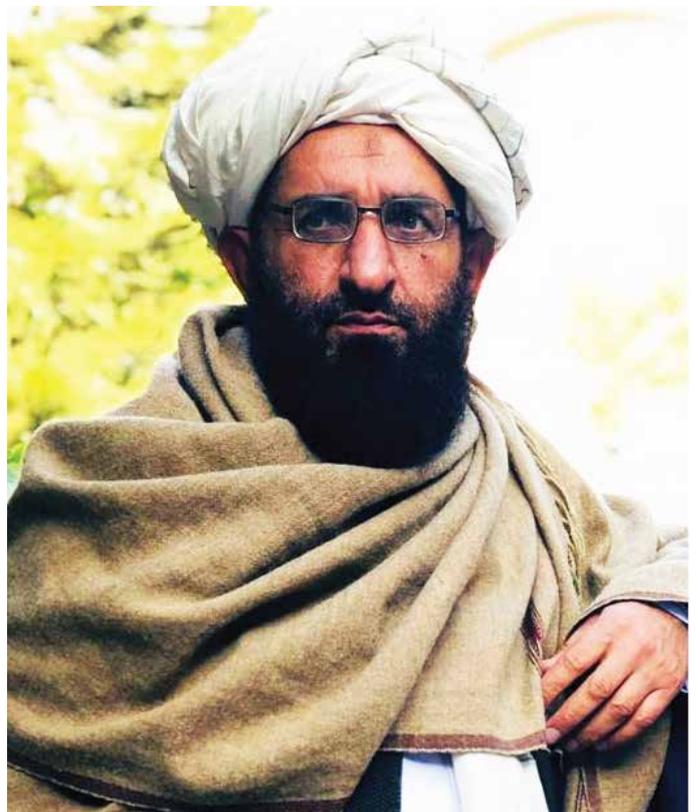
Dr. Amin, who belongs to Afghanistan’s eastern Nangarhar province, served in several official positions during the Taliban

rule from 1996 to 2001. He communicated with TTI from an undisclosed location through WhatsApp. The following is the transcript of the interview:

**TTI:** Will Al-Qaeda remnants accept the Taliban agreement with the US to stop them and other militants from using Afghan soil against the US and its allies?

**Amin:** This is a reality that all those attached to the Islamic Emirate will accept whatever the leadership tells them. There is no precedent of such loyal people in the world. When the emir (leader) orders them not to act against anyone, I am sure they will [comply]. I can also say that the Emirate will take action against every foreigner like they would against their own fighters who disobey orders. [It is well known how] the Taliban took action against Mansoor Dadullah, who was expelled along with his supporters from the Islamic Emirate.

[Mansoor, the brother of senior Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah, was executed along with dozens of his Afghan and Uzbek militants in Zabul in November 2015 after he declined to recognise the leadership of former Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour.]



**TTI:** The UN and the US insist that the Taliban still have ties with Al-Qaeda. What is your opinion regarding these reports?

**Amin:** I doubt the authenticity of the UN and US reports. I am of the firm belief that the UN itself favours continuation of the conflict so its officials can benefit financially. There is no Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan as in the past. It poses no serious threat to anyone, but the UN and several other countries have made it an issue. Their claims are exaggerated. There is no Afghan in Al-Qaeda but it will not be incorrect to say that Al-Qaeda members [in Afghanistan] call themselves Afghans. Many Afghans like me had connections with [Arab fighters] during the Jihad against the erstwhile Soviet Union and the relationship continued later when the US-NATO invaded Afghanistan.

All Arabs in Afghanistan were not Al-Qaeda [as Al-Qaeda membership was limited to] only those who worked with Sheikh Osama bin Laden.

The US exaggerates the presence of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. It is neither in [such large numbers] nor is it as big of a threat as is being propagated. I think even now that the US is not sincere to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. I am one of the supporters of the peace negotiations, but the Islamic Emirate entered the negotiations early and that is why there is no progress in intra-Afghan negotiations currently going on in Qatar. I am talking about the negotiations that began four to five years ago by Syed Tayyeb Agha [the former head of the Taliban political office].

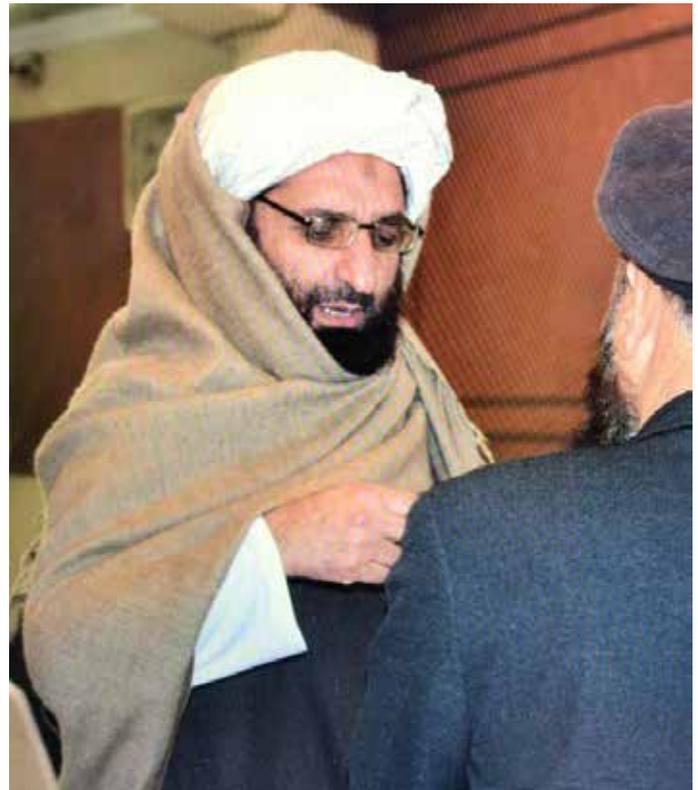
All that is spouted by the UN, the Kabul Administration, Europeans, or Americans about Al-Qaeda is not true. All these different mouthpieces relay messages from a common source. Americans seek protection for the lives of their troops through the Doha agreement but continue to kill the people of the other side. Casualties of Taliban have increased.

**TTI:** The US and the international community accuse the Taliban of sheltering Al-Qaeda. How do you see the Taliban approach?

**Amin:** The Taliban inherited Al-Qaeda, other Arab and foreign fighters from their predecessors the Mujahidin. Groups of foreign fighters were associated with the Afghan Mujahidin leaders including Burhanuddin Rabbani, Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, Ahmad Shah Masoud, Gulbadin Hekmatyar, Maulvi Younas Khalis, Jalaluddin Haqqani. These foreign Mujahidin were everywhere.

Pakistanis, Arabs, Africans and Europeans stayed in Afghanistan during the Mujahidin's government. No one expelled them. No one touched them. Then the Taliban took over Afghanistan who inherited them. The Taliban did not know what to do with them. The Taliban government had no normal relations with the international community. They did not understand if foreign militants would be considered as a threat to several countries.

Then the attacks in Nairobi and Tanzania and later the release of Masood Azhar on the demand of the hijackers of an Indian passenger plane attracted the world's attention to the foreign militants. So, the world then focused on the Taliban as well as the foreign Mujahidin. Later, the Taliban refused to hand over foreign nationals to their respective countries as the Taliban would say they are guests in Afghanistan and they inherited them.



**TTI:** Do you think the Taliban still need Al-Qaeda? The UN and the US in their latest reports say the Taliban regularly meet Al-Qaeda for consultation.

**Amin:** I think the Taliban do not need Al-Qaeda either spiritually or physically as the Taliban and Afghans are carrying out all operations themselves. No foreigner takes part in these operations. The Taliban are fighting without any support from foreign fighters. To live in Afghanistan is a compulsion for some Arab Mujahidin as they faced threats in their respective countries. So the people shelter them here because they consider them former Mujahidin and guests.

**TTI:** How did Osama launch Al-Qaeda?

**Amin:** Osama used this name during an interview, a media interaction in Afghanistan's eastern Khost province in a light mood when a journalist asked him as to what the name of his organization is. Osama smiled and said Al-Qaeda. So, the people started calling supporters of Osama bin Laden Al-Qaeda.

I am not sure about the number of Al-Qaeda militants who were fighting against the Americans and their NATO allies but they all call themselves as members of the Islamic Emirate. They do not call themselves Al-Qaeda. [Former Afghan President] Ustad Burhanuddin Rabbani granted them citizenship. If anyone has an iota of doubt, they can study a decree issued by Rabbani that is available in the archives.

[Rabbani, who had served as Afghanistan's President from 1992 to 1996, was killed by a suicide bomber in September 2011. At the time of his killing, he was the head of the High Peace Council, a body formed by former President Hamid Karzai to negotiate peace with the Taliban, who back then refused to join the peace process.]

# Kashmir: Is there light at the end of the tunnel?

By Dr. Moonis Ahmar

Sumantra Bose, an Indian origin British Professor in his book, *Kashmir: Roots of Conflicts, Pathways to Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) rightly suggested that “the key to breaking the deadlock in Kashmir lies in the metropolitan capitals of India and Pakistan. Concerted, sustained intergovernmental cooperation between India and Pakistan is the essential basis of any Kashmir peace process.” Yet, following unilateral measures taken by New Delhi on August 5, 2019 to abrogate article 370 of the Indian constitution which granted special status to the Indian controlled Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), the very nature of Kashmir conflict has changed dramatically.

The people of J&K who are the real stakeholders of the Kashmir conflict are now marginalized and voiceless. India annexed Jammu, Valley and Ladakh under J&K Reorganization Act passed by the Indian parliament on August 5 whereas, Azad Jammu & Kashmir

concerned? Has Pakistan lost Kashmir once and for all and will India be able to keep its occupied parts of J&K by force? Why the international community has not taken steps to compel India reverse its unilateral steps of August 5? Is Kashmir still a flashpoint after India’s unilateral annexation of its occupied territories of Jammu, Valley and Ladakh? These are the questions which are raised by those who are concerned about the fate of millions of people in Jammu & Kashmir.

The dynamics of J&K needs to be analyzed while keeping in mind that India and Pakistan fought two wars over that conflict in 1965 and 1971 and confronted militarily in Kargil during the summer of 1999. So far around 100,000 people have been killed in occupied J&K since the outbreak of violence in 1989 and India has deployed around 600,000 of its military and para-military forces. The line of control (LoC) dividing the Indian and Pakistani admin-



(AJK), Gilgit and Baltistan administered by Pakistan are also being claimed by India. In the meantime, the government of Pakistan is considering declaring Gilgit and Baltistan as an interim province of Pakistan which has raised several questions about the timing, wisdom and legality of such a step.

Following unilateral measures of August 5, 2019 by India to end special status of J&K one needs to ask if there is any light at the end of the tunnel as far as peace in that volatile region is

istered J&K is a symbol of Kashmiri ordeals and sufferings. Millions of divided families along LoC reflect a human tragedy. It seems following the absorption of J&K by India the ground realities have changed and the Muslim dominated Valley is now a target of Modi regime’s policy of colonizing that land and enslaving the people by repressive means.

While contemplating if there is light at the end of the tunnel one needs to take into account three major realities. First, back to back

steps taken by the Indian government since August 5 tend to cause landmark demographic changes particularly in the Muslim majority Valley of Kashmir. First it was the new domicile act which allowed non-locals living in J&K to seek employment and second was aimed to take possession of thousands of acres of land in the Valley for so-called tourism projects. Settlement of non-Muslims particularly Kashmiri Pandits who left the Valley after large-scale violence in 1990 are to be settled in colonies on the lands seized by the Indian authorities so as to transform the demography of the Valley of Kashmir.



From any standpoint, India is following Israeli model of Jewish settlements in occupied West Bank where systematically it has altered demographic ratio by reducing the Palestinian majority. Presently, in the Valley of Kashmir, Muslim population account for 90% which the BJP government intends to slash in coming 10 years by patronizing non-Muslim settlements and creating conditions which will compel the Muslim population of the Valley to migrate to either Jammu or Pakistan. It is on these grounds that the two former Chief Ministers of Indian occupied J&K Farooq Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti after their release from long detention rejected any possibility of accepting Indian occupation unless the BJP government reverses the abrogation of article 370 and 35-A and restores the special status of J&K. But, it seems it is their wishful thinking because the Modi regime has disregarded protests, demonstrations and other acts of defiance by Kashmiri Muslims against the unilateral acts of August 5, 2019. The Indian Supreme Court where several petitions are laying since months challenging the abrogation of article 370 and 35-A is in no mood to process such cases thus providing New Delhi enough time and space to further consolidate its hold particularly over the Valley.

Second, pessimism and gloom which prevails in J&K may sustain because India is in no mood to resolve the age-old issue of J&K through a process of dialogue. In fact, India argues that dialogue can be held with Pakistan over its alleged occupation of AJK,

Gilgit and Baltistan. Composite dialogue which was an opportunity for India and Pakistan to discuss the contentious issue of J&K is suspended since the last several years and there is no likelihood for their resumption in the near future. In view of intransigent Indian stance on J&K and the failure of international community to exert pressure over India reverse its unilateral acts of August 5, 2019, there is little likelihood of a breakthrough as far as the conflict over Jammu & Kashmir is concerned. Third, the failure of Pakistan to exert pressure over India by rendering practical support to Kashmiri resistance groups including Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (J&KLF) is a case in point. Only by providing diplomatic support to the cause of Kashmir will not make any difference as far as forcing India to capitulate by reversing the revocation of article 370 and 35-A along with withdrawal of its 600,000 military and para-military force is concerned. J&KLF was prevented last year October to cross the Line of Control in order to express its solidarity with their beleaguered counterparts under the Indian occupation of J&K particularly the Valley. If Pakistan is genuinely interested in salvaging the Muslim majority population holed up in the occupied Valley then it should come forward by rendering practical support to them without any fear or consideration. But, the governing elites of Pakistan are aware of the fact that any type of military support to the Kashmiri resistance groups would invite Indian retaliation leading to an all-out war with their eastern neighbor which Islamabad is not willing. Without sacrificing their comfort zones and privileges neither the military nor the political elites can achieve their objective to transform J&K as a part of Pakistan. Third, neither Pakistan nor the Kashmiri diaspora tend to play a significant role to expose India's illegal acts of August 5, 2019 or exerting international pressure on New Delhi. According to the charter of the UN, any member can request to call special or special emergency session of General Assembly if there is a threat to peace. As far as the UN Security Council is concerned, on the request of China an informal closed door session of Council was held few months ago which merely discussed the Kashmir issue but passed no resolution. In the absence of an effective role of UN, International Court of Justice and Organization of Islamic Cooperation to compel India restore the special status of J&K and end repression particularly in the Valley, one cannot see light at the end of the tunnel.

Furthermore, polarization in the Indian occupied J&K reached its peak when on November 17, Home Minister Amit Shah accused the followers of People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration which was signed on August 4, 2019 to safeguard special constitutional of Jammu & Kashmir. He called Congress, National Conference of Farooq Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti of People's Democratic Party anti-state and anti-national by demanding the restoration of article 370. It seems the lives of the people of J&K wouldn't change for the better because of Modi regime's rigid stance vis-a-vis reversing the unilateral steps of August 5 and the stand-off between India and Pakistan on resolving the Kashmir conflict. In that case, the status of J&K would remain in limbo in the years to come particularly when there is no policy change on the part of New Delhi; Pakistan is unable to play a leadership role challenging India's illegal acts of August 5, 2019 and alleviating the plight of the beleaguered Muslim population particularly in the occupied Valley of Indian occupied Kashmir.

# The War of Nagorno-Karabakh: Turkey Regains Primacy in South Caucasus

By Mustafa Moiz

In the backdrop of global events taking precedence in the international eye, a bloody war in the south Caucasus has erupted and drawn to a close. Azerbaijan and Armenia have clashed once more over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and the six week war has seen the most serious fighting between the two nations since 1994. Along with dramatic territorial changes in Karabakh, this conflict has highlighted the shifts in power dynamics in the region, in particular Russian pragmatism in its backyard and Turkey's growing international presence.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a sparsely populated mountainous region located within Azerbaijan to which neighbouring Armenia lays claim. It has been a source of conflict and tension between the two nations for much of the past century. Today, it is internationally recognized as a part of Azerbaijan, but Karabakh and the surrounding areas of Azerbaijan have been occupied by Armenia and Armenian loyalists for the past quarter century. Nagorno-Karabakh has a majority Armenian population but the districts surrounding it have been historically Azerbaijani, from where some 600,000 Azerbaijanis were driven out by the Armenian occupation and escaped to Azerbaijan proper.

In the aftermath of the first World War, the map of the entire south Caucasus was being rearranged, as the Ottoman and Russian empires fell and nations scrambled to lay claim to lands they viewed as rightfully theirs. Armenia was quick to lay claim to all territories it viewed as historically Armenian, invading eastern Turkey, from where they were beaten back by Mustafa Kemal's forces, and fighting a war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, for both Armenia and Azerbaijan, independence was shortlived, as the entire south Caucasus was subsumed into the newly emergent Soviet Union. The USSR assigned the autonomous Nagorno-Karabakh Oblast to Azerbaijan under Soviet authority. It is worth noting that the settlement of the borders of the Soviet republics at this time was left to Josef Stalin, a native of the region and an ethnic Georgian. While the two nations were republics under the Soviet umbrella, peace reigned.

As the Soviet Union approached its collapse under Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika, the ethnic Armenian inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh clashed with the government of Azerbaijan. By 1988, this conflict had escalated into full scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey naturally supported Azerbaijan, as did Pakistan, while Russia and Iran supported Armenia. The Turkish military buildup on the Armenian border in support of Azerbaijan was halted when Russia deployed its own military and threatened a new world war if Turkey were to take military action against its Armenian ally. With Russian support, Armenia was able to take not just Nagorno-Karabakh, but much of the surrounding area, which had an Azerbaijani majority. Over half a million Azerbaijanis were displaced by the Armenians and given refuge in Azerbaijan proper.



In this way the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh has been at a stalemate since 1994, with Karabakh legally being Azerbaijan, but Armenia exercising control over the territory and an Armenian backed government, recognized by no one including Armenia, running the land as the Republic of Artsakh. Occasional bursts of violence and low level warfare has intermittently taken place between Armenia and Azerbaijan as Azerbaijan attempts to make small territorial gains. But a ceasefire has always been mediated by the Minsk Group (Russia, USA and France), with Russia in particular ensuring that the basic status quo is maintained.

This situation took a new turn in 2018, when Armenia elected a new Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan. Armenia is a country which is firmly in Russia's camp, and maintains a reliance on its protector. It is certain that, like most Armenian politicians, Nikol Pashinyan also believes the Russian alliance to be Armenia's most important diplomatic relation. But Pashinyan has also looked to establish closer ties with western Europe and the United States, a development which has not gone unnoticed in Moscow.

Like all Armenian politicians, Nikol Pashinyan is a belligerent supporter of the Republic of Artsakh. Propped up by Armenia and not recognized by any country, this government is heavily reliant on, and therefore influenced by, Armenia. In 2020, Arayik Harutyunyan became the President of Artsakh. Harutyunyan held his inauguration ceremony, attended by Pashinyan, in Shusha, a city of historical, cultural and religious significance to Azerbaijanis, and announced a decision to move the capital of Artsakh from Stepanakert to Shusha by May 2022, which can be understood in the eyes of Azerbaijan to be a move similar to Israel moving its capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This was just one of a list of transgressions and aggressions that the Azerbaijani government placed before Armenia. Others included the Armenian government scrapping proposals for peace and announcing a new strategy, 'a new war for new territories', propagating a 'resettlement program' within the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and announcing plans to settle Lebanese Armenians in Karabakh. Under Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia has taken a far more aggressive position in Nagorno-Karabakh.

There is no doubt that Azerbaijan fired the first shot in September 2020. Nor is there any doubt that Azerbaijan had planned this war in advance or that it was in response to increased Armenian belligerence and fortified military positions in Nagorno-Karabagh. In the week leading up to the war on 27th September, the president of Artsakh, Harutyunyan, had announced that his government intended to move the capital from Stepanakert to Shusha, a clear provocation towards Azerbaijan. Days later, the Azerbaijani government released statements detailing Armenia's aggressions in the weeks leading up to the war. The next day, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev demanded Armenia present a timetable for the withdrawal of its forces from Nagorno-Karabagh and other territories it occupied, something he knew Yerevan would refuse to do. Two days later, Azerbaijan attacked Armenian military positions in Nagorno-Karabagh and the war began.

On the first day of fighting, Russia sent heavy military transport planes to Yerevan in response to Turkish heavy military aircraft having landed in Baku. Azerbaijan began shelling in Nagorno-Karabagh and destroyed Armenian air defense systems while Armenia downed an Azerbaijani combat gunship. It was clear that the fighting would be intense but it also appeared that Russia would step in to support Armenia in the case of Turkish forces intervening. Shades of 1994 seemed apparent. But apart from statements by Russia and the Minsk Group calling for a cessation of hostilities, the war continued unabated. Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan closed their airspace to Russia to prevent Moscow sending support to Armenia, resulting in Russia relying on a circuitous route through Iran, an Armenian ally. However, ethnic Azeris in Iran's northern Azerbaijan province rendered roads unusable for Iran and Russia to send supplies and assistance to their Armenian ally and protests erupted in Tabriz in support of Azerbaijan which were swiftly suppressed by Tehran. Iran also moved a military division to its northern border. Also involved in the fighting were Syrian Turkmens alongside Azerbaijan, and Kurds and Lebanese Armenians on the side of Armenia. However, the Armenian and, ludicrously, Indian claims that Pakistani and Turkish military forces were fighting alongside Azerbaijan has as of yet not been substantiated by evidence. The primary fighting took place in southern Nagorno-Karabagh, and the north saw only limited land changing hands. Within the first week of fighting, Azerbaijani forces had captured the village of Madagiz (Suqovışan). This was to be the limit of Azerbaijani gains in the north. A week later, the city of Cebrayil, in the south, was taken by Azerbaijan. As long as Turkey did not militarily intervene, Russia also stayed its hand. This meant that the conflict did not spread to the larger region.

Many Armenians viewed this as a war of survival, viewing and portraying themselves as victims of a Turkish attempt to wipe them out. For Azerbaijan, this was a very emotional war, as refugees from Karabagh who had joined the Azerbaijani military returned to childhood homes. By the morning of the 8th of November, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev announced that Shusha had been retaken by Azerbaijan. The city which Harutyunyan had intended to make the new capital of Artsakh, and from which 20,000 Azeris had fled to Azerbaijan after the Battle of Shusha in 1992, was now once more a part of Azerbaijan. Apart from the symbolic value, Shusha was also an immensely important strategic point located on a mountaintop less than five miles from Stepanakert, the capital of Artsakh, and an ideal base from which

to besiege the capital. It was at this point that Russia finally stepped in to save Armenia from total defeat.

On the 9th of November, Vladimir Putin, Nikol Pashinyan and Ilham Aliyev signed a ceasefire agreement and the war ended. The terms of the ceasefire spell a decisive, though not total, Azerbaijani victory. They include a return of all seven districts occupied by Armenia back to Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijan also keeps its military gains in Nagorno-Karabagh. Azerbaijan is also guaranteed a route to its western wing, Nakhchivan, through southern Armenia. The crucial Lachin corridor, Armenia's only route to its remaining holdings in Nagorno Karabagh, will be patrolled by Russian peacekeepers.

The mood in Azerbaijan is jubilant, and Turkish, Pakistani and Azerbaijani flags are ubiquitous in the country. For Georgia, a ceasefire is welcome, as it had to walk a diplomatic tightrope to maintain its neutrality and avoid alienating either of its neighbours. This agreement is disastrous for Armenia, and has already led to the downfall of Harutyunyan in what remains of Artsakh. With widespread protests and political discontent in Armenia, Pashinyan's position appears perilous. Many Armenians blame him not only for his mishandling of a war where Armenia was outmatched, but also for displeasing Russia by seeking greater ties with the West. Putin has fanned the flames by saying that Pashinyan had the opportunity to end the war almost a month earlier, that Ilham Aliyev had agreed to a ceasefire with the provision that Azerbaijanis uprooted from their homes be allowed to return.

Turkey has emerged from the war much stronger. The Turkish alliance with Azerbaijan has been radically strengthened and, in the view of many of the region's players, this was Turkey's war, which it won decisively, albeit not totally. Turkey has also shown its growing regional influence and that it is one of the main players in the south Caucasus, and it appears that it was the risk of alienating or provoking Ankara which stayed Moscow's hand for much of the conflict.

Iran faced difficulties in playing a role in support of Armenia, due to its ethnic Azerbaijani population protesting and hindering the path to its northern border. Tehran is wary of rival Ankara's influence in the region, however, it is undoubtedly pleased that the war has ended, and with it the protests of Iranian Azeris. It will also be a relief to Iran that the Syrian Turkmens involved in the fighting will no longer be present near the Iranian border.

While Russian intervention immediately following the capture of Shusha and brokering of a ceasefire, along with the presence of 2000 Russian troops in Azerbaijan for at least five years to protect the Lachin corridor and Armenian held Nagorno-Karabagh gives the impression of a Russian victory in the war, it is not immediately certain that Russia was in control to the extent it appears. What is more probable is that Russia had to improvise a fair bit of its traditional strategy due to Turkish involvement in the war. Moscow would not deem it worthwhile to antagonize Ankara over the issue of Nagorno-Karabagh. As it is, Russia has explicitly stated that its security guarantees to Armenia do not extend to Armenians in Nagorno-Karabagh. Moscow did manage to save Armenia from total defeat, and will most probably see the removal of an Armenian prime minister with whom it was displeased. However, it seems certain that Turkey is the primary power in the south Caucasus.

# Exciting Times Ahead as Pakistan Visits NZ, Hosts England

Rich Tribute Paid to Dean Jones as Karachi Kings Win PSL Glory

By Ali Abdullah



Still basking in the glow of fiercely fought PSL V playoffs capped by a humdinger of a final that went all the way down to the wire, Pakistan is all set to play, watch, and cheer even more cricket with two national sides touring New Zealand about now and the organisers prepping to host the English side in October 2021 for the first time in sixteen years.

Karachi Kings earned PSL glory for the first time earlier this month after downing Lahore Qalandars in a nail-biting finale that was decided in the super over.

The cheering for the PSL V champs was scarcely over when the PCB (Pakistan Cricket Board) announced the selectors had picked the squad for the New Zealand tour. Meanwhile, the ECB (England and Wales Cricket Board) and PCB have confirmed the English side is set to tour Pakistan in 2021 after a sixteen-year hiatus.

## Karachi to Host England

England are set to tour Pakistan in October 2021 for two T20Is in Karachi. This will mark England's first tour to Pakistan in sixteen years with their last visit coming way back in 2005.

Subsequent series between these sides were either held in England or UAE, which became Pakistan's adopted home ground.

## PSL V Glory Goes to Karachi Kings

Karachi, Multan, Peshawar and Lahore were the only four teams left for the PSL V playoffs after the final stretch of the tournament was postponed earlier this year because of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Fast bowler Mohammad Amir lifted Karachi Kings into their first Pakistan Super League final with a victory in the super over against table-toppers Multan Sultans. Multan faced Lahore in the Second eliminator after defeating Peshawar in the first eliminator.

Amir gave away only nine runs in the super over by bowling brilliant yorkers to South African Rilee Rossouw and Englishman Ravi Bopara. West Indian Sherfane Rutherford smashed Sohail Tanvir for a six and a four in the super over, eventually guiding Karachi to 13-2.

Earlier, Karachi captain Imad Wasim's unbeaten 27 had pushed the game into the super over off the last ball when he flicked fast bowler Mohammad Ilyas to square leg boundary for a four as the hosts finished at 141-8.

Karachi had restricted Multan at 141-7 after Wasim won the toss and opted to field first with Bopara making a top-score of 40. "Special credit to Amir (for the super over), to me he's one of the best bowlers in the world", Wasim said.



Karachi players wore black armbands in memory of Jones, their late coach. Both teams stood in a 'D' shape to honor the former Australian batsman.

"I want to dedicate this win to Dean Jones. If he was here, he would have been very happy. We're going to play the final for Deano again", he said.

Multan made a stunning comeback during the regulation 20-over game through Tanvir's (3-25) double strike in the 17th over. Pakistan's all-format captain Babar Azam (65 off 53 balls) scored a half century and had Karachi in control at 116-3 before Tanvir had him caught behind.

Lahore Qalandars won the toss and elected to bowl first with Peshawar Zalmi racking up a score of 170/9 although their overall performance was below expectations. Haider Ali got out at the second ball of the first over ending the opening partnership quickly and exposing his the team at the start of the first innings to immense pressure. However, Peshawar Zalmi was able to bounce back in the game with Shoaib Malik scoring highest with 39 runs off 24 balls while Imam-ul-Haq stuck around and helped score 24 runs off 19 balls. Faf du Plessis added 31 runs off 25 balls to the total while Hardus Viljoen scored 37 runs off 16 balls.

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Even though Lahore Qalandars had a weak start to the match, they quickly gained momentum with the help of Mohammad Hafeez who scored an impressive 74 runs off 46 balls, eventually helping the team to victory. Lahore Qalandars progressed to the second eliminator by beating Peshawar Zalmi on Saturday by five wickets as their experienced batting line-up remained calm after falling to 33/3 with Mohammad Hafeez, Ben Dunk, Samit Patel and David Wiese guiding them to victory.

The second eliminator was played between Lahore and Multan. Multan remained the table toppers throughout the tournament but unfortunately lost their form towards the end of the tournament, losing both the Qualifier and the second eliminator. Lahore made it to the final at Multan's expense.

The HBL PSL V final had two new teams and anointed a new champion. It was the biggest competition of Pakistan's cricketing history. It was KARACHI VS LAHORE – pitting cricket fans from (and for) Pakistan's two most populous metros in a frenzied emotional tussle every bit as epic as the match itself.

One of the world's leading batsmen, Babar Azam knocked a commanding half-century to help his side win their first championship in five years at Karachi National Stadium.

Azam smashed seven boundaries in his 49-ball 63, but it was skipper Imad Wasim who hit the winning boundary to help the Kings overhaul a modest 135-run target in 18.4 overs.

The final — one of the most anticipated in PSL's short history given the rivalry between the country's two biggest cities — was played after a gap of nearly eight months after the PSL's fifth edition came to a halt due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Kings took home a glittering trophy plus a \$500,000 purse, while Lahore received \$200,000.

The Kings began their innings on a high note, with openers Babar Azam and Sharjeel Khan both hitting two boundaries each in the first two overs. Qalandars had their first breakthrough in the fourth over, however, with Sharjeel (13 off 12) getting caught splendidly by Fakhar Zaman off Samit Patel's first ball.

Dilbar struck again in the 16th over, bowling out Walton (22 off 27), while Haris Rauf sent both Iftikhar Ahmed and Sherfane Rutherford packing on consecutive balls.

Imad Wasim hit a stylish four to end Kings' innings at 135-5 and lift their maiden PSL trophy. Lahore Qalandars, who opted to bat first after winning the toss, earlier finished at 134-7 in the show-down against Karachi Kings. President Arif Alvi congratulated Karachi Kings on winning the title, terming it "a good win".

### Pakistan & Pakistan A Touring New Zealand

The Pakistani selectors dropped veteran all-rounder Shoaib Malik and pacer Mohammad Aamir from a 35-member squad for the upcoming New Zealand tour. The cheering for the PSL V champs was scarcely over when the PCB (Pakistan Cricket Board) announced a 35-member squad for the New Zealand tour – the selectors conspicuously dropping veteran all-rounder Shoaib Malik and pacer Mohammad Aamir.

Interestingly, it is a combined squad that includes players for both the senior team and the Shaheen side – with no hard and fast

allocations to one or the other side. The squad that left for New Zealand 23 November, is to spend fourteen days in quarantine after reaching New Zealand in line with global COVID-19 safety protocols.

Pakistan play three T20Is on 18, 20 and 22 December 2020 before their ICC World Test Championship fixtures to be held in Mount Maunganui and Christchurch from 26-30 December and 3-7 January respectively. The schedule for the Shaheens is yet to be confirmed by New Zealand Cricket although it is expected to be played concurrently.

The squad departs for New Zealand on 23 November. Babar Azam has already been announced Pakistan captain in all formats. His vice-captain in Tests will be Mohammad Rizwan in the tour which will be staged in a bio-secure environment in view of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PCB said both 38-year-old Malik and 28-year-old Amir were left out as the selectors prefer youth over age. The dropping of former captain Malik, who now plays only T20 cricket, could mean that the selectors don't have him in mind for next year's T20 World Cup in India. He played in the T20I series against England in September but was not in the Pakistan T20I team in the just-concluded home series against Zimbabwe.

Left-arm pacer Aamir was also not considered for the recent white ball home series against Zimbabwe. He last played a Test in January 2019. He, however, played in the T20 International series against England in August-September this year.

Another senior player, Asad Shafiq, who has played 77 Tests, was left out 'due to lack of form' after 10 years.



Uncapped Amad Butt, Danish Aziz, Imran Butt, and Rohail Nazir were named, as also Abdullah Shafique and Usman Qadir in the squad which has an average age of 27.4.

“Test players not involved in the T20Is in the first half of the series against New Zealand will be available for selection for Shaheens – Pakistan A, who are expected to be playing four-day matches against New Zealand A during that period,” the PCB said.

“Likewise, when the national side is involved in the ICC World Test Championship matches against New Zealand, national men's team players not part of those matches will be available for selection for the Shaheens, who are expected to be involved in 20-over games against New Zealand A during those days.”

# Alaina Roy and Her Love for Kathak

*“Kathak connected me with my roots”*

British-Pakistani Kathak dancer Alaina Roy translated her hobby into a full blown profession at a young age. Professionally trained under the mentorship of Guru Pali Chandra and Guru Nitesh Saraswat, Alaina is changing our view on classical dance and the stigma that surrounds it in Pakistan. In an insightful interview with Haider Rifaat of The Truth International, we get to learn about the origins of Kathak and the importance it holds in Pakistan.

By Haider Rifaat



**What pulled you towards Kathak?**

I started learning ballet as a child but didn't like it very much. I think it just wasn't for me. So, my mum enrolled me at Gurukul Dubai – a Kathak academy where I began learning under the artistic guidance of Guru Pali Chandra.

Initially, it was just another extracurricular activity after school but it soon became an art form that got very close to my heart. I think it was because I had lived abroad all my life, first in the U.K. and then the UAE. Kathak connected me with my roots. It felt like home. It just felt right!

As a child, I always visited Pakistan but Kathak was something that drew me to my culture so much more. I started falling in love with the intricacies of qawwalis, ghazals and was mesmerized by the art of our culture. Soon, Kathak became my life!

**Where does Kathak originate from?**

Kathak is one of the eight Indian classical dance forms, stemming from the Northern areas of India. The word Kathak originates from the word Katha, which in English means a story. Thus, Kathak is the art of storytelling.

It began as a folk dance but then Kathak dancers began to narrate stories in temples. Kathak was then less driven by mythology and went into the Mughal era. The content of Kathak changed as it became more about entertainment than spirituality, like it was before. That is when Urdu was introduced into Kathak.

**What is the art of perfecting Kathak?**

I don't think you can ever perfect an art form, but the key behind strengthening your technique and becoming a better artist is practice. Riyaaz is the most important part of your training.

**Is Kathak limited to women only or do men also perform this dance type?**

There are no restrictions regarding age, weight, gender or religion. Nothing! The only restriction is accessibility. If one does not have access to a teacher then of course Kathak is not possible to learn.

**How is Kathak freeing for you as a person?**

I love being able to let go and express myself without judgement and restriction. I feel free when I dance. It allows me to be me. I am able to express all my emotions, feelings and anything I wish to through Kathak. It is absolutely freeing!

**Has the scope of Kathak died down in Pakistan, in your view? Do you feel that we do not value this kind of dance as much as the outside world?**

There is a lot of scope for Kathak in Pakistan, however there are a number of small steps that we need to take first. The art form is often frowned upon due to misconceptions about the dance. The lack of understanding and knowledge of the art form have not raised awareness about Kathak. I think its acceptance is vital. When our people realize how beautiful Kathak is as an art form, a number of doors for this kind of dance would open in Pakistan. Many years ago, there were a number of established Kathak artists in Pakistan. Kathak was a part of school activities. It was encouraged and

accepted. I believe we can get there again. It will be a slow but progressive process.

**Is the word Kathak stigmatized in Pakistan for being classified as Indian?**

I have never had anyone comment on the roots of the art. So, no. After all, Pakistan and India were once one.

**What are some misnomers about the Kathak dance specifically in Pakistan?**

Often Kathak artists in Pakistan are referred to as naachnay waliyan or are told they are performing a mujra.

**Do you feel that dance was still something you wanted to pursue despite belonging to a country where women and their professional choices are questioned?**

Yes, a hundred percent. Fortunately, my family and friends have always encouraged me.

**How does Kathak promote Pakistan's arts and culture?**

I try my best to collaborate with Pakistani artists and musicians to help promote them, be it through Urdu ghazals or thumris. By celebrating and practicing these traditional art forms, we can revive and promote our Pakistan's rich heritage.

More often than not, I use musical compositions that Pakistani artists have created. I love supporting our singers, musicians, bands and all of our artists in general. That way, artists support artists and help each other even when others don't recognize us.

**What would you like to say to young women who are into Kathak and want to pursue it but their parents and extended families are negligent of this career choice?**

I always encourage young people who have a passion for Kathak to pursue it as we can keep our culture alive through our art forms. Young people who have the courage to become dancers can end the stigma around Kathak, which can open doors for so many more aspiring artists. I also believe it is the duty of parents to support their children and be accepting of the drive and the passion their children may have, especially when it is celebrating such a beautiful art form.

Unfortunately, as the acceptance is not inherent in our people, it is harder for elder generations to encourage youngsters to actively seek opportunities in dance in general. However, with growing knowledge comes acceptance. So, I encourage my students to educate their parents and grandparents whenever possible. Word of mouth spreads greatly in our culture, so why not spread the beauty of our art form too?



# Should Zee 5 be banned in Pakistan?

By Hassan Kazmi

Pakistani Entertainment industry showed its concerns regarding the decision of the cabinet division of Pakistan that bars Pakistani citizens to acquire subscription of video streaming app Zee5. In the first week of November, State Bank of Pakistan issued a notice to all Pakistani banks, clearly directing them to block all forms of payment to Zee5 in particular credit card payments as per the orders from cabinet division.

Zee5 is a video streaming service (just like Netflix) which offers an annual subscription for PKR 1500 annually. For an already financially stressed Pakistani entertainment industry, Zee5 provides something more than just entertainment. Last year, the Zee5 management, in order to cater to the demand of South Asian diaspora, hired 5 prominent Pakistani directors to make original web series for the Zee5 app namely, Asim Abbasi, Mehreen Jabbar, Kashif Nisar, Anjum Shehzad and Haseeb Hasan.

The first of those series *Churails*, directed by Asim Abbasi was released in August this year while the second one *Aik Jhooti Love Story* was released last month. *Churails* is a story of four women who rebel against the patriarchal mindsets prevailing in the society, whereas *AJLS* is a story about the toxic rishta culture of match-making problems faced by young boys and girls in the subcontinent.

In early October, a slightly controversial scene from *Churails* went viral on social media containing talk about a sexual activity. Government of Pakistan though did not show any reaction but Zee5 removed the series initially only to be reinstated again within 36 hours without any censors and cuts.

The three remaining web series include: *Man Jogi* by Kashif Nisar starring star cast of Saba Qamar and Noman Ejaz, *Dhoop Ki Deewar* by Haseeb Hasan starring newlywed celebrity couple Sajal Ali and Ahad Raza Mir, *Abdullah Pur Ka Devdas* by Anjum Shahzad with the ensemble cast of Sarah Khan, Sarah Nadeem and Anoushay Abbasi.

Haseeb Hasan while talking to the scribe said he was really disappointed by this ban when he was very enthusiastically waiting for his work to go worldwide. "I believe that art has no boundaries and it was an honour for us that our creations were supposed to be watched in approximately 190 countries."

He mentioned that Zee5 should be considered a global platform rather than Indian. As far as watching Indian content, it is also available on Netflix and Amazon in bulk. Haseeb added that he was watching Zee5, a gateway to giants like Netflix and Amazon Prime. "We should understand that creative art is like a soft tool and luckily Pakistan is sufficient in this field. This design has also damaged the foreign investment in Pakistan."

Digital rights activist Nighat Dad said that the present government seems fond of banning everything. Moreover, it is happening by those who have used social media for their political gains at its maximum. She said that although the present government encourages opening regional offices of Zee5 and other online companies

in Pakistan but no grounds have been made for it. So, in this situation, why would these international institutions even think about opening their offices in Pakistan? Dad added that there is no law in Pakistan for data protection that is why many online activities are first out into illegal categories and then there is a debate on their protection.

Nighat Dad mentioned that in the past PEMRA tried to take web channels and YouTube under its control but they were already under PTA's jurisdiction which has created a tussle between the two institutions.

"In the current situation regarding online freedom of expressions in Pakistan, not a single international company or social media portal would even think of opening their offices here." Former federal minister for information and broadcasting Pakistan and media analyst Javed Jabbar said the government should not show its narrow vision in this regard.

"This is very irresponsible behavior. Zee5 has released two web series till now and through this platform, Pakistan is getting a chance to present its culture all over the world. Depriving the public of this is wrong."

Jabbar said that the government should show responsibility as barring public from the available app was a step against the right to freedom of expression which he condemned. He added that in recent history even though India has proven its shrewd attitude towards Pakistan like not allowing Pakistani artists to work in India but it has not banned any streaming app from Pakistan. If it was the case, banning Zee5 in Pakistan could have a reason.

Federal Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry while talking to The Truth International said if Zee5 opened its office in Pakistan and pay tax, then there will be no objection. "The subscription money from Pakistanis is going outside without paying tax to government."

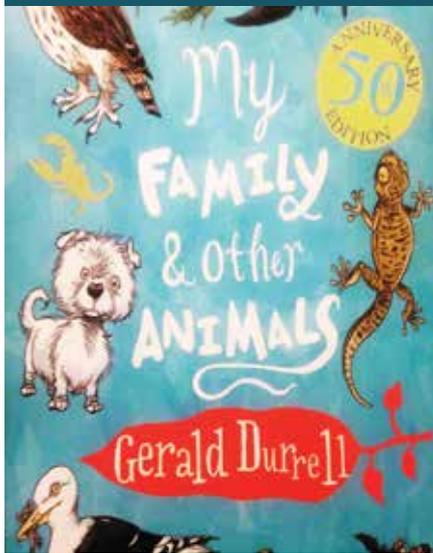
The minister however did not reply to the question of why the government did not stop payments to Netflix and Amazon Prime as both of these platforms too do not have offices in Pakistan nor do they pay any tax. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the federal minister has recently revealed his plans to introduce a Pakistani online video streaming portal like Netflix, about which he is yet to disclose details.

Prominent journalist Mahwish Ijaz said that Pakistani actors and directors are doing great work and should try to reach Netflix and Amazon Prime instead of Indian streaming service Zee5. She said that she was not against any actor or director working outside the country but highly dejected on how India expelled Pakistani artists from its country.

According to Ijaz, "Netflix and Amazon Prime are international platforms while Zee5 presents exclusively Indian content. Zee5 is an Indian platform where no Pakistani writer, director and actor go."

# My Family and Other Animals

Reviewed by: Alizay Ashraf  
 Author: Gerald Durrell  
 ISBN: 9780141321875  
 Publisher: Puffin Book



**M**y Family and Other Animals is the narration of author Gerald Durrell's childhood life in the exotic Greek Island of Corfu. Fed up with the cold, harsh winters of England, the Durrell family gives up on it and decides to move to a country with better weather. And what could be better than a Greek Island with its warm sunshine and sparkling blue waters? So the family impulsively moves to Corfu, a small Island with friendly people and even friendlier fauna. Thus, starts the experience of a lifetime, for the author as well as for the reader, as he takes you through his escapades with turtles and terrapins, magpies and sea gulls, pigeons and dogs, frogs and geckos and so many more.

The book is full of interesting characters. The family consists of a gentle, loving yet unconventional mother, a pompous, self-centered elder brother Larry who loves his books and wants to make it as an author, the acne – faced Margo who has

her fans, the gun-loving Leslie who loves his game and the nature loving Gerry who could pet almost any animal living in this planet.

The author has a natural flair for humor and made me laugh at the retellings of some of the incidents. The author also squeezes in his insights on different animals and their lives in between these incidents that will make you wonder why you never look at an animal the way Mr. Durrell does. The author inveigles his readers with his nostalgic recitation of his heartwarming experiences with his family, his rather unusually named pets (Quasimodo, Puke), and animals in this wonderful book.

The themes of this book are The Natural World. Absurdity and Storytelling, childhood, adulthood, and education, friendship and the care of animals. I would recommend this book for readers above 11.

## Candyfloss

**T**he book Candyfloss is written by Jacqueline Wilson about a young girl Floss who loves spending weekends with her dad. When Floss's mum and her new husband Steve move to Australia, Floss decides to stay at home with dad. He is not good at house chores but the two muddle along on a diet of chips butties and candyfloss from the local funfair. Then a disaster strikes and they find themselves homeless.

This book is very well written. The main theme was to cling onto hope. Even if you are homeless, there is always a way to pick yourself up. But if you don't have hope then you might not get up. This is shown by floss and her dad living together but when the cafe that her dad runs, is shut down due to insufficient customers, they end up living in a friend's home.

The characters of this book include, Floss and her dad, Floss's ex best friend Rhiannon and her best friends

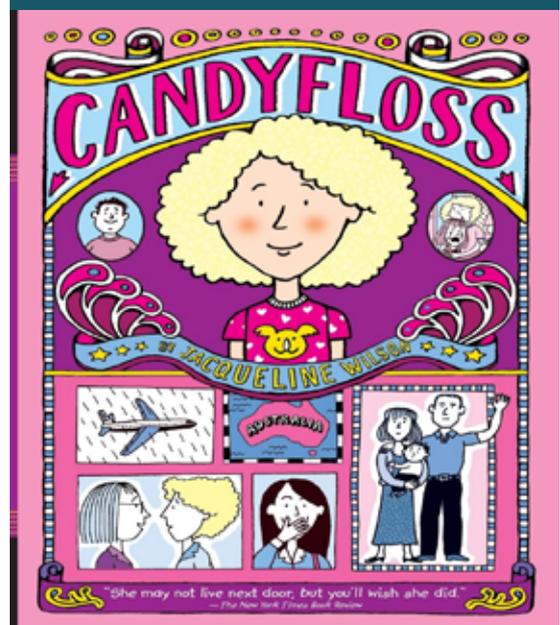
Margot and Ruby, Steve and his wife as well as Mrs. House field.

Many youngsters will relate to the story of Floss, who loves both her parents dearly and desperately wants them to get back together, although deep down she knows this will never happen.

Jacqueline Wilson tackles such thorny issues as debt, homelessness and bullying. She is neither humiliating nor gloomy but strikes a realistic balance in this latest addition to her comprehensive library. This book again is one of my favourite books because I enjoy the way the author writes the story and makes you want to read on to find out what's going to happen next.

It is exciting and emotional which makes it interesting, enjoyable and fun. This is another great book of Jaqueline Wilsons and is definitely worth reading. I think this book is suitable for children above the age of 8.

Reviewed by: Alizay Ashraf  
 Author: Jacqueline Wilson  
 ISBN: 978-0-440-86645-9  
 Publisher: Roaring Brook Press  
 Pages: 346



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