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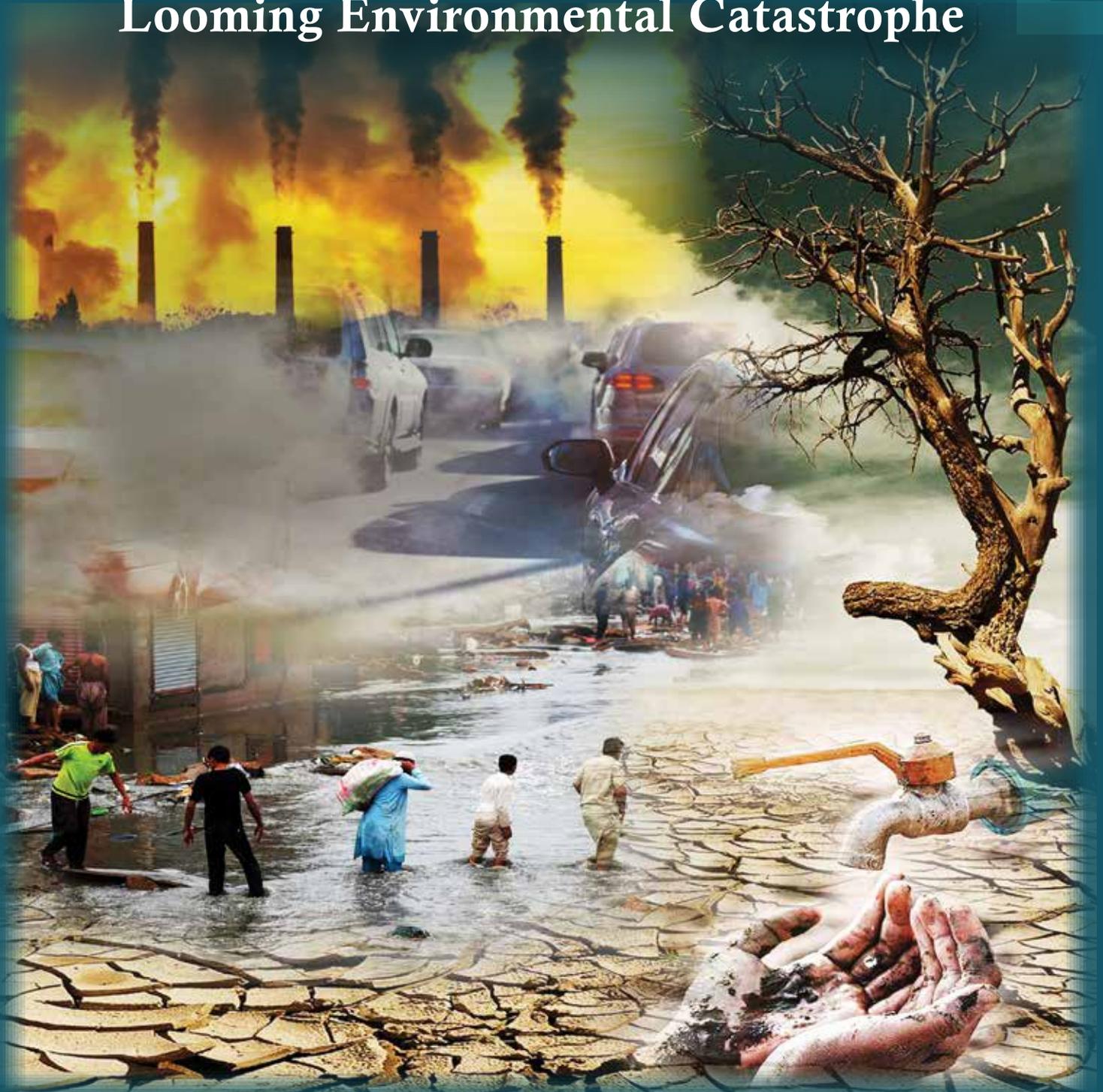
15th - 28th February 2021

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Climate Change: Challenge and Response

By M. Ziauddin



The Global Climate Risk Index has placed Pakistan on the fifth spot on the list of countries most vulnerable to climate change. As per the 2020 report, Pakistan lost 9,989 lives, suffered economic losses worth \$3.8 billion and witnessed 152 extreme weather events from 1999 to 2018.

And paradoxically, despite emitting less than 1pc of the global emissions, Pakistan consistently remains on the most vulnerable category. In GHG emissions Pakistan stands at a level which corresponds to about one-third of the world average, one-fifth of the average for Western Europe and one-tenth of the per capita emissions in the US, putting it at 135 places in the world ranking of countries on the basis of their per capita GHG emissions.

Jacobabad continued to be the hottest place with 51-degree Celsius maximum temperature. Some areas of northern and western Pakistan usually experience below 0 °C temperature. The coldest place in Pakistan can be the glacial parts of Gilgit Baltistan, where in winters the average temperature remains below -20.

Interestingly, the total rain recorded in Sindh province during monsoon season of 2018 was just 1 millimeter (0.039 inches), but the very next year it was 323 millimeters (12.7 inches), and in 2020 it totaled 450-500 millimeters. The Arabian Sea has also been heating up, with the average surface temperature increasing from 29 degrees Celsius to 31 degrees in just two years.

This has fueled the formation of storms that push the sea into coastal communities. The

Indus River delta has been badly affected by sea intrusion and the problem is being exacerbated by dam construction.

Sea level along the Karachi coast is expected to rise by a further 60 centimeters by the end of the century and will most likely affect the low-lying coastal areas south of Karachi toward Keti Bander and the Indus River delta.

Demand for irrigation water may increase due to higher evaporation rates. Yields of wheat and basmati rice are expected to decline and may drive production northward, subject to water availability.

Adapting to these impacts may include: development or use of crop varieties with greater heat and drought tolerance, modernizing irrigation infrastructure and employing water-saving technologies, integrated watershed management, reforestation of catchment areas and construction of additional water storage, diversification of energy mix including investment in renewable and small hydro-power projects, improved weather forecasting and warning systems, retrofitting of critical energy infrastructure, and construction of dikes or sea walls.

Pakistan intends to reduce up to 20% of its 2030 projected greenhouse gas emissions, subject to availability of international grants to meet the cumulative abatement costs amounting to approximately \$40 billion. The country's adaptation needs have been identified to range between \$7 billion to \$14 billion per year.

Pakistan is shifting towards a low carbon economy with a stated goal of shifting 30pc of its energy mix towards renewables and also embarking on an e-mobility transition targeting 30pc shift [to electric vehicles] by 2030.

The phenomenal increase in the population of Pakistan without corresponding expansion in basic amenities of life and infrastructure has exposed a majority of people to conditions, which are far from satisfactory.

In spite of tremendous efforts for reclamation, large tracts of irrigated lands are still lying waste as a result of waterlogging and

salinity, mainly in the area where canal irrigation is practiced.

The low share of the forest area taken in association with the large population of Pakistan gives only 0.033 hectares per capita compared with world average of one hectare. The challenge is being attempted to be met by planting one billion trees in the shortest possible time.

Thirty-seven species and 14 sub-species of mammals in Pakistan are said to be internationally threatened or near threatened. Among birds and reptiles 25 and 10 species are internationally threatened respectively. Some 500-plant species are also believed to be nationally rare or threatened.

Pakistan's aquatic resources are also under pressure. As a consequence of reduced water flows, the natural ecosystem of the Indus Delta has been seriously affected by saltwater intrusion due to backwash from the sea.

The country's current water storage capacity is only 9 per cent of the average annual flows compared to the world average of 40 percent. Therefore, increasing storage capacity to conserve floodwater must form an important part of the water policy/strategy.

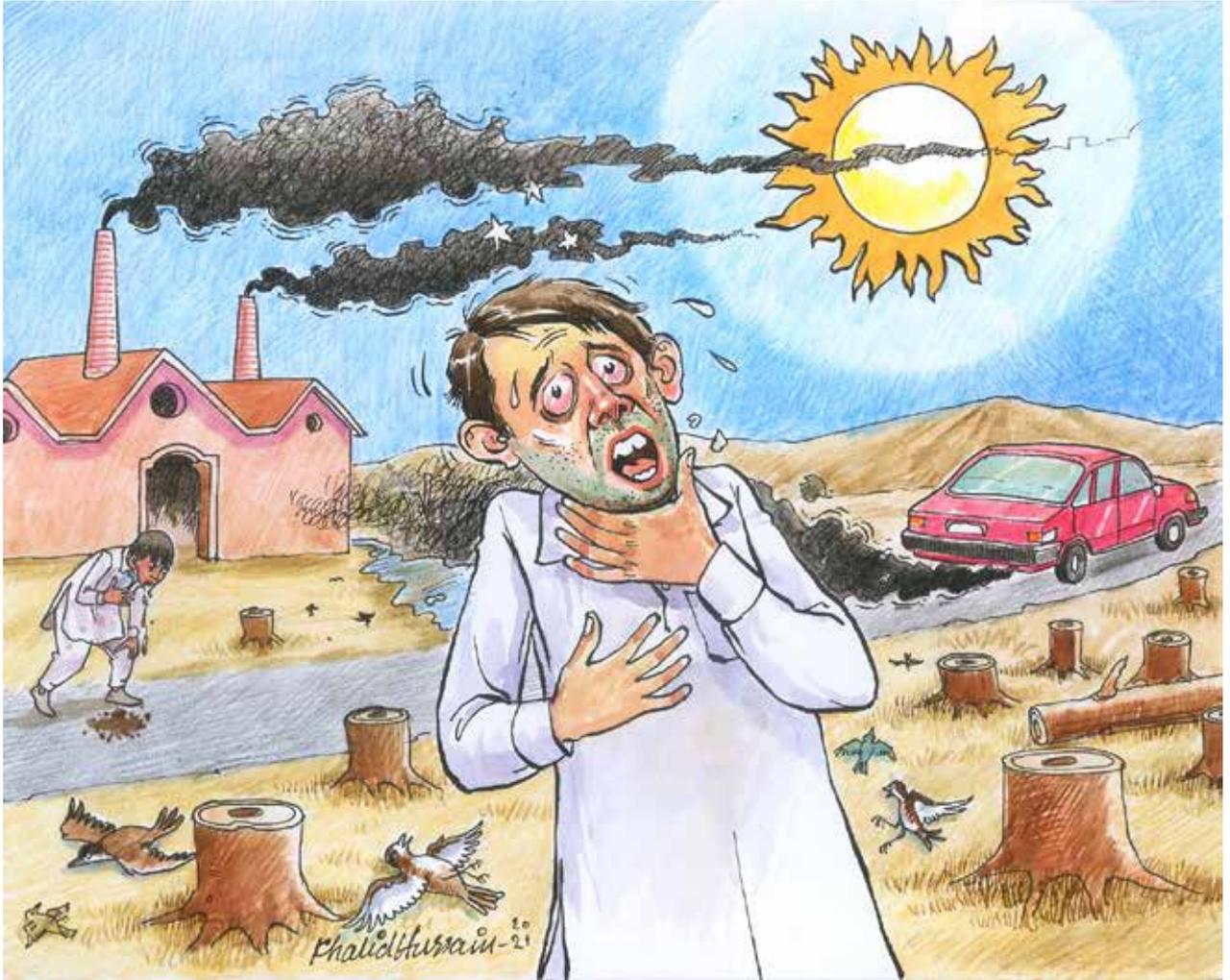
Based on existing air quality monitoring data, particulate matters (PM) are the main sources of air pollution. Heavy concentrations of PM cause a high burden of respiratory diseases.

Balochistan is said to be the most vulnerable region with high sensitivity and low adaptive capacity followed by low-intensity Punjab (mostly consisting of South Punjab) and Cotton/Wheat Sindh.

Greater incidence of flooding, which may occur due to climate variability, poses the risk of diarrhea and gastroenteritis; skin and eye infections; acute respiratory infections; and malaria. Exposure to drought poses the potential health risks in the form of food insecurity and malnutrition; anemia; night blindness; and scurvy. Increases in temperature pose health risks of heat stroke; malaria; dengue; respiratory diseases; and cardiovascular diseases.

Why We Need Climate Stewardship by Civil Society

Among nations most vulnerable to climate change, Pakistan needs climate stewardship by civil society to ensure a steady hand at the tiller



By Umer Farooq

In March 2017, when the parliament passed the law on climate change, the concerned minister told the Senate that although ranked 153rd in terms of greenhouse gas emitting countries, Pakistan was the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change.

This dispelled all illusions that climatic change was an issue for the rich and wealthy countries and that poor and developing countries like Pakistan had other concerns and issues to deal with.

The United States and China top the ranking of countries emitting greenhouse gases, which are leading to

heating up of the atmosphere, in turn causing irreversible changes in the earth's climate. There is a consensus among international scientists that the new climate changes that are taking place primarily because of carbon emissions are not reversible and could lead to a situation where human species itself could be endangered.

Thanks to our low level of industrialization, Pakistan ranks 153 on the list of those countries which are responsible for carbon emission and hence climate change. But there is no doubts that we would be worst affected by climate change.

Pakistani narrative with regards to the threat of climate change usually revolves around the description of extreme weather conditions that could afflict Pakistani society and territory as the planet earth heats up – water shortage, droughts, submerging cities, ecological changes or agro-based crises.

These are the buzzwords in the vocabulary of Pakistani experts and officials while describing all the possibilities that could result from the impact of climate change. The world, however, has come to a stage where experts and scientists are predicting a doomsday scenario for the human kind.

“Now for the bad news: 2.5 degrees of warming will still be catastrophic for many people and countries, and 3 degrees even more so”, reads a report of an international organization on climate change. “Heat waves will become unbearable without air conditioning, even in high latitudes. All coral reefs will probably die. Many major cities will be drowned. Even just 2 degrees of warming, which will be exceeded in any business-as-usual scenario, will have very serious global repercussions”.

But this doomsday scenario is not simply for the top polluters like China and the United States and the industrialized Europe. This is as true for the poor, less carbon emitting countries like Pakistan.

Extreme weather conditions and natural calamities caused by extreme weather conditions have become a new normal in the area that forms Pakistani territory. Torrential rainfall in Pakistan claimed hundreds of lives in the flash flood since 2014 across Pakistan while causing widespread property and infrastructure damage. Unprecedented floods in Karachi threw the port city into chaos. Residential and commercial areas were submerged, and power outages disrupted life for days.

Climate scientists say Pakistan is especially vulnerable to wild weather and other effects of climate change including sea intrusion, unusual rain patterns, glacial melting, rising temperatures and drought. The federal government says it plans to take action to meet these challenges but Pakistan's climate change challenge is formidable.

For one thing, the country has been experiencing stronger monsoons than what has been seen in the past. “In 2018, the total rain recorded in Sindh province during monsoon season was just 1 mm (0.039 in). But in 2019, it was 323 mm (12.7 inches), and so far this year we have seen rainfall totalling 450-500 mm,” says a climatic expert.

The Arabian Sea has also been heating up, with the average surface temperature increasing from 29 degrees Celsius (84.2 Fahrenheit) to 31 degrees in just two years. This has fuelled the formation of storms that push the sea into coastal communities. “The Indus River delta has been badly affected by sea intrusion that harms people's livelihoods,” reads a report.

In a recent conference on climate change and environmental protection a senior official of the Federal Environmental Ministry told the audience that there were developing hotspots around the world due to climate change, where existence of human life would become impossible, “And six of these hotspots are developing in Pakistan” he said.

The official didn't mention the names of those places where these hotspots were developing. Nor did he mention what the government of Pakistan was doing to cope with the situation. This however is an extremely depressing situation as it would possibly involve migration of a large segment of Pakistani population.

Experts also point out that Pakistan will either face continuous drought or sudden heavy rainfall as we witnessed in Karachi last year. It will affect the annual pattern of rainfall. It could cause six months of rain to fall in one or two days, leading to devastation, as happened in Karachi last monsoon. This could possibly destroy the agriculture sector of Pakistan's economy.

“Global warming will result in glacier melt. Pakistan has more glacial ice than anywhere on earth outside the Polar Regions with 7,253 known glaciers. Though these glaciers seem a blessing, since they provide about 75 percent of the stored-water supply in the country, they can easily turn into a great natural disaster due to global warming.

There are signs that glaciers in Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral are slowly melting down. This will cause sea-level rise, landslides, avalanches, and glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF). The creation of Attabad Lake in Gojal Valley Hunza in 2010 and the death of 140 soldiers and civilians in the Siachen glacier region in 2012 were a result of landslides and avalanche, possibly caused by climate change.

The new climate change law that was enacted in March 2017 put Pakistan's name in the list of countries which have their own legal framework for meeting the international standards in coping with the challenges of climate change. The new law established three important institutions, the Pakistan Climate Change Council, the Pakistan Climate Change

Authority and the Pakistan Climate Change Fund.

The Pakistan government still is in the process of establishing a bureaucratic structure to become the official infrastructure for the enforcement of climate change laws. At present national institutions like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have been a miserable failure in this connection.

Experts and scientists agree on the point that Pakistan would be made to pay for the sins of industrialized nations like United States, China, Japan, and Western European states. But our own decision to carbonize our energy options by constructing coal plants in Punjab will by no means play a small part in bringing these calamities on us.

There is a very little opposition at the popular level against construction of coal plants in Punjab and this, experts say, is part of the problem. There will be no popular opinion opposing the construction of coal plants in the largest province of the country and will play no small part in determining the future of our environment.



Equally important is how Pakistan balances its climate change and energy policies. While electricity is imperative for the daily functioning of human life in the contemporary time, carbonising its production by choosing coal-powered plants is a death sentence to climate change mitigation.

A lot of work needs to be done to mitigate these concerns, but climate stewardship by civil society is by far the most impactful factor, which alone can guarantee sustained policy and action through political transitions.

The writer is an analyst based in Islamabad.

Green Recovery from COVID-19

By Eric Shahzar



Accelerated climate change is disrupting weather patterns, causing economic losses worth billions and deteriorating our already paralysed eco-system at an alarming rate. Scientists and environment experts have categorically stated that ecological disruption in the next calamity – which we are not ready for. The COVID-19 crisis caused damage of unprecedented scale and nature. If recovery from the COVID-19 crisis is to be sustainable - if our planet is to become more resilient - we must do everything in our power to promote a green recovery.

It is high time to revamp how we generate energy in the country to meet our escalating needs. Countries all across the globe have invested heavily into green energy. While new coal sources have been recently discovered in Thar – Pakistan possesses ample potential for renewable energy - which is clean, affordable and sustainable at the same time. However, it is shocking that Pakistan generates only 1% renewable energy from solar, while the global average is 15 to 20%. Our largest solar PV park, the Quaid-i-Azam Solar Park in Bahawalpur, has a total installed capacity of 1,000MW. This is very encouraging but we can still do so much better.

Pakistan has at least 50,000 MW of potential. We are fortunate to have something many other countries do not - which are high wind speeds near major centres. Despite the 10 billion tsunami tree project launched by the PTI government, our forest cover is only 5.7% - while the United Nations (UN) recommend at least 10% of forest cover for total land.

Policymakers must understand that trees act as carbon eaters, and are extremely pivotal for a sustainable ecosystem. It is estimated that 60% of all infectious diseases in humans and 75% of all emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, originating from the transfer of pathogens from animals to humans. Zoonoses typically emerge when natural landscapes, including forests, are cleared for other use such as agricultural expansion and human settlement. This habitat loss results in a

reduction or loss of traditional buffer zones that separate humans from animals or from the pathogens that they harbour.

With all the toxic air across the country – we cannot expect a green recovery until this neglected issue is resolved on an urgent basis. Annually 135,000 deaths are attributed to air pollution in Pakistan. 5.88% of Pakistan's GDP or a whopping \$47.8 billion is the estimated economic burden of air pollution in Pakistan. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment report, carbon emissions are expected to rise by 300% in the coming years.

According to United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Barcelona managed to curb air pollution levels by 38% solely due to climate friendly concepts, setting an example for other big cosmopolitan cities. Many countries have initiated special congestion charges to discourage citizens from using cars in congested zones. Not only this minimizes carbon emissions in our eco-system but also generates revenue for the government.

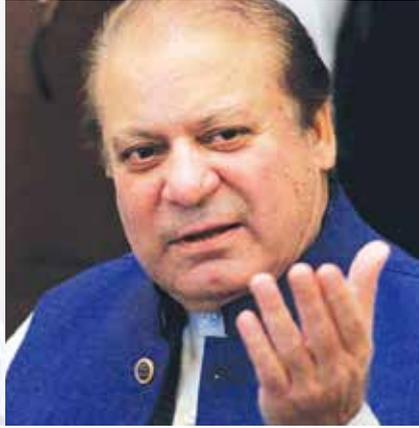
For green recovery to become a reality – we require national unity in the country. The World Health Organization's (WHO)'s Director General stated that national unity is key in containing the COVID-19 pandemic. The same applies to mitigating the climate crisis and promoting green recovery. All provinces, regardless of their political differences, must be on the same page when it comes to the greater good of the country.

Green recovery is indeed essential to ensure the security of the planet and also mitigate the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pakistan's green recovery is indeed possible, once we start trusting and investing in nature.

The writer is an environmentalist and a PhD candidate for climate change and ecological disruption in Pakistan.

The Creaky PDM and Its Long Overdue Long March

Beset by internal strife and demoralised by a lack of tangible success, the opposition PDM needs until late March to prep its major offensive against a jittery government



By Khalid Wasim

Reeling under political pressure and struggling to hold together, the 10-party opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) has finally announced 26 March as the date for its long overdue long march as part of its anti-government campaign kicked off in October last year.

Where this long march will culminate and what will be its objectives, nobody knows even in the PDM, at least for now.

The date of the long march was announced by a visibly shaky Maulana Fazlur Rehman after presiding over a nearly six-hour meeting of the opposition alliance at Islamabad on 4 February in which the participants spent most of the time haggling over a PPP proposal to use the option of bringing a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan in the National Assembly.

Why the Maulana did not provide any further details of the plan while announcing the date of the long march? The answer is “he didn’t have it.” The PDM leaders now admit that they are yet to discuss and finalise their strategy and modalities of the long march which they will do after taking part in the upcoming Senate elections in the first week of March. The PPP is against the idea of converting the long march

into a sit-in whereas the JUI-F and the PML-N believe that the long march will not serve the purpose on its own.

There are reports that the Maulana wanted to hold the long march on 15 March, immediately after the Senate polls, so that they could have a month time for a sit-in before start of Ramazan, but his proposal was not supported by the PPP at all.

PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari while speaking at a news conference in Islamabad on 6 February called it a “Mehangai March” (march against price-hike), indicating that the march was merely aimed at registering a symbolic protest against inflation and the government’s economic policies.

It was after the first phase of their anti-government campaign which failed to dent the ruling alliance that the PDM parties – which had once announced to submit en masse resignations from the legislatures and hinted that they might do it before the Senate polls – decided to jointly contest the elections to the upper house of the parliament.

Of course, the credit for this politically astute move goes to the PPP which managed to convince the hardliners within the opposition alliance that by staying away from the democratic

process of election, they would provide an opportunity to the ruling alliance to attain a huge majority in the parliament which otherwise seems almost impossible.

Bilawal made a point of claiming credit for the PDM decision in a news conference. According to him, some parties in the PDM wanted to boycott the Senate elections. However, the PPP convinced them not to do this on the basis of its own experiences of boycotting the non-party-based general election held under the military rule of Gen Ziaul Haq in 1985.

The young PPP chairman, who was not even born at that time, told the senior and veteran politicians like Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Mehmood Achakzai, and Aftab Sherpao that it took more than 25 years for them to restore the 1973 Constitution to its original shape which had been defaced through the Eighth Amendment by the members of the 1985 parliament.

Bilawal also defended his proposal of using the no-confidence motion option, terming it the only democratic way to oust the government and completely in line with the joint declaration issued at the time of the formation of the PDM during an All Parties Conference (APC) hosted by the PPP at Islamabad in September last year.



Reportedly, the PPP has suggested moving a no confidence motion first in Punjab as a test case where it believes that the ruling coalition is in tatters. On the other hand, the opponents of the idea believe that a no-confidence motion cannot succeed without the support of the establishment-backed parties.

Sources with knowledge of the situation said the Maulana asked Bialwal if he had received any positive signal from the real political game setters in the country in this regard. The question offended Bilawal who in return asked the Maulana as to why after taking a hard-line position, he in his recent news conference in Peshawar stated that the opposition was against the government, and not the establishment.

starting their planned long march, if the PPP fears any negative backlash for its government in Sindh.

When fissures are visible within the PDM ranks, the situation is not much different in the ruling alliance either. There is total unrest within the ruling alliance over the reports that the PTI leadership wants to give Senate tickets to some of the people who are considered to be persona non grata and outsiders. It is perhaps due to this fear that taking another U-turn, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced PKR 500 million development fund for each lawmaker.

Still unsure of the loyalties of its own legislators through the senate election, the PTI first brought a constitutional amendment bill seeking an open Senate vote in the

Another explanation for the jitteriness of the PTI may be the fact that the party, which got representation in the Senate for the first time in 2015, is set to become the single largest party in the Senate after the upcoming elections. But it will certainly not be able to gain control of the upper house of parliament and it will still have to rely on its allies and opposition parties even for carrying out simple legislation.

After carrying out a careful calculation on the basis of the party position in the National Assembly and all the four provincial legislatures, which form the electoral college for the elections of the members of the upper house, the constitutional and parliamentary experts believe that if all the MPAs vote strictly in accordance with the



The PDM leaders have agreed to defer the matter for the time being because they cannot afford the breaking up of the alliance at a time when the Senate polls are only weeks away. Moreover, the outcome of the Senate elections will also help them make up their mind whether the use of no-confidence option is viable or not.

The reported ongoing internal discussions within the PDM have not only exposed the differences in the narratives of the component parties, but have also clearly demonstrated that the PPP is in no mood to take on the establishment head-on and risk sacrificing its provincial government in Sindh.

The PML-N and the JUI-F, the two hardliners in the PDM with no stake in the present set-up, reportedly suggested to the PPP in the last meeting that they might consider the option of resigning only from the National Assembly at the time of

National Assembly. After failing to get it through, it introduced a controversial presidential ordinance to achieve the purpose without waiting for the decision of the Supreme Court in the presidential reference filed by it in December last year seeking the court's interpretation of Article 226 on the matter.

These hasty, confusing and desperate actions by the government clearly indicate that all is not well within the ruling alliance.

The previous Senate elections in 2018 had created an unsavoury situation for the PTI, whose members in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly appeared to have voted in a couple of candidates against the party line. It is believed that the same ruckus may be re-enacted on rather wider scale now that the PTI has substantial representation in all the provincial assemblies as well as the National Assembly.

party line during the elections, then the country is going to have a completely hung Senate as both the ruling and opposition alliances are expected to have almost equal number of seats.

Presently, the focus of all the parties is on the upcoming Senate elections, the outcome of which will definitely have much impact on the future political scenario in the country.

Now when the PDM has announced a specific date for the long march, it has no choice but to hold it at all cost. The question is: Will the PDM be able to infuse new life into its anti-government campaign, which lost all steam after the December public meeting at Lahore? Failing that, the long march could well be the last major activity of the opposition parties from the platform of PDM.

The writer is senior journalist.



Cowed or Coopted?

PDM's public narrative has veered towards mundane issues like price-hike. Gone is the revolutionary ardour on display at Gujranwala, Quetta, and Peshawar. What gives?



Addressing their first public meeting after announcing their long march plan in Hyderabad on Feb 9, the PDM leaders lashed out at Prime Minister Imran Khan over the alleged failure of his government at all the fronts and vowed to continue their movement till the dismantling of the present set-up.

In their hard-hitting speeches at the PPP-hosted show, the PDM leaders continued to call Imran Khan a "puppet, selected, incompetent and illegitimate" prime minister and accused him of once again looking towards the "establishment" for a help in the upcoming Senate elections.

Bilawal said people from across the country would leave for the PDM march next month to oust the present government.

Bilawal alleged that Sindh province had been given Rs160 billion less than its due share in the NFC last year and Rs200bn less this year.

In their speeches, both Bilawal and Maulana Fazlur Rehman also referred to the statement of the DG ISPR in which he had denied reports about backdoor talks with the PDM and said that army should not be dragged into politics.

Bilawal said there was a talk not to drag the establishment into politics.

"Let the people know who is dragging it into politics? Those who say that every institution should work within its constitutional domain or those who hold their finger in politics and contest elections; those who ask it to stand inside and outside the polling stations; or those who ask the establishment to take care of the media, get the budget approved, and go and take care of the angry

friendly countries for or on behalf of the selected government," the PPP chairman said.

The PPP chairman said no prime minister could say that Sindh was not his province, "but the selected prime minister says that Sindh is not our province but he only needs Sindh's islands, gas, coal, and tax revenue."

The PPP chairman said the present "selected" rulers had destroyed the economy, eroded democracy and restricted the media and the judiciary.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman welcomed the statement of the DG ISPR but said "mistakes have been made in the past which will have to be accepted and forgiveness will need to be asked of the nation."

He said the PDM's movement would continue and reach its destination. He said the government was totally confused which was evident from the fact that first it brought a constitutional amendment bill in the National Assembly for an open Senate polls even before the Supreme Court's ruling on the presidential reference on the same subject and then promulgated an ordinance. He called it a conspiracy against the judiciary.

The Maulana also lambasted National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and challenged that it could not hold them accountable without the accountability of the present government.

Speaking on the occasion, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi criticised the rulers for increase in the prices of wheat and sugar. He said the PDM would fight for the people's rights. He said the government had "crippled" the parliament and it was not allowing the members to speak on the public issues, including price-hike.



Bad Omen: Tussle Over Ballot Mode Ahead of Senate Polls

The opposition cries foul as the government introduces an ordinance to provide for senate elections through open balloting



By Ahmad Waleed

The lobbying for the Senate elections picked up momentum in December after the government floated its plan of holding Senate elections ahead of schedule in February through open ballot against 48 seats going to fall vacant on March 11, 2021. The February plan of Senate elections proved a counter move to foil the resignations strategy of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM). The very announcement, however, created quite a stir in the opposition parties who have earlier been accusing the government of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) of rigging in the no-confidence motion moved by them to oust the chairman Senate Sadiq Sanjrani in 2019. The opposition had alleged that despite having the clear majority in Upper House they failed to oust the chairman Senate. Major political parties in Senate PPP and PML-N announced to investigate and find out senators who ditched party. This remained just an announcement and no inquiry committee was established. Insiders repeatedly said both parties' (PML -N and PPP) leaders having connexion with establishment had consented not to vote against Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani. Because of

this fact no effort was made to find out senators who apparently ditched party.

In 2019, the government used the secret ballot to parry the no-trust motion while the opposition cried foul. The resolution to move the no-confidence motion against the Chairman had been passed very easily with 64 senators voting in favour. However, the opposition had fallen apart as the voting count surfaced. It had 67 seats in the Senate at that time and it needed only 53 out of the 64 senators present during the session to oust the Chairman. But, it fell short of the majority and lost the battle.

The opposition resorted to making hue and cry over their defeat, blaming the 'hidden hand' who played its part in besmirching the sanctity of the vote. It was the moment of extreme disappointment for the supporters of democracy in the country.

Now, the question is why the government is in a haste and wants open ballot option in place of secret ballot? What are the fears? Or it wants to belittle the opponents to the lowest level? Has the prime minister smelt a rat and got wind of the disgruntled elements

in its ranks who might betray the party and vote for the opposition candidates? Therefore, they have found a way to avoid this embarrassment and win maximum Senate seats and make an effort to put in place the Chairman Senate of their choice.

The government believes it intends to make the Senate election process more transparent suggesting that the move is aimed at discouraging floor crossing and stopping the use of laundered money to buy votes which is tantamount to insulting the public mandate.

The leaders of two major political parties – Pakistan Muslim League (N) and Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), signed a Charter of Democracy on May 14, 2006 in London to stop floor-crossing and corruption. It was decided to hold all votes for the Senate and indirect seats will be through open identifiable ballot with the names of the members, failing which they will stand disqualified by a letter from the parliamentary party leader to the Speaker or the Senate chairman while a notice will also be sent to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), making the ECP binding to notify the disqualification of defectors. However, this



time the opposition is opposing the government move since they want the government to sit with them for the whole electoral reforms process instead. The opposition leaders believe the government has failed to bring about electoral reforms during its two-and-a-half year tenure and why this reference is being introduced in haste.

The opposition thinks the Senate elections should be held according to the procedures prescribed in the Election Act 2017. The government rejected the criticism by the opposition and tabled the 26th Constitutional Amendment Bill in the National Assembly the other day for open balloting in the Senate election amid ruckus and uproar caused by the opposition. "We are amending the Constitution, not stealing the elections," remarked the Law Minister Farogh Naseem while presenting the Bill. The opposition, however, strongly opposed it surrounding the Speaker and the Bill could not be approved.

The government, however, went for an Elections (Amendment) Ordinance 2021 to amend Election Act 2017 in order to hold Senate elections through open ballot. Now

the ordinance has been signed by the President and it shall come into effect at once and extend to the whole of Pakistan though it has explained that the ordinance will 'die' if the Supreme Court does not support it.

Meanwhile, a reference has already been moved in the Supreme Court seeking an open ballot and the SC is yet to take a decision on the reference. It has been contended in the Supreme Court that had the framers of the Constitution intended to apply the principle of secrecy of ballot for the Senate elections, they could have easily provided so in the Article 59 of the Constitution as had been done in the case of election of the president where the secret ballot was specifically mentioned in Clause 12 of the Second Schedule to the Constitution. It has been explained that the malaise of vote buying had damaged the purity of the elections.

The way the government has floated the idea of open ballot without seeking support of the opposition shows the present regime does not seem to value the democratic norms where the issues of legislation are handled

amicably. It is crystal clear that the government wants to gain the political mileage on the pretext of putting an end to horse-trading and corrupt practices in the Parliament while the opposition, the government alleges, is opposing the government effort to guard their own interests and it does not want the system to be more transparent.

There are chances that the PTI is going to get a thin majority in the Senate after elections. But, still it will need opposition support for the key legislation to have a smooth passage.

Instead of taking all the stakeholders into confidence for electoral reforms, the government has shown no interest in forming a national consensus to bring about a positive change in the Parliament that would be acceptable to all in the future. It is not a good omen.

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Normalcy Returns to Machh Coalmines

The authorities have delivered on most of the demands of the ethnic Hazara coalminers including removal of top administrative, police, and military officials

By Shahzada Zulfiqar

After a month's break, the coalminers including ethnic Haraza workers have returned to the Machh area of Balochistan to resume their wearying work, suspended after the gruesome slaughtering of 10 coalminers in early January this year.

Over a dozen armed persons broke into the compound of Hazara workers in the wee hours of 3 January 2020 in the Machh town surrounded by mountains. The gunmen woke up the workers and slaughtered all of them in cold blood after tying their hands behind their backs.

Some 8,000-10,000 coalminers fled Machh and surrounding areas for want of security as a result of the massacre.

During the six-day sit-in on the Western Bypass, various political and religious groups particularly Majlis Wahdat Muslimeen (MWM) and Hazara Democratic Party (HDP) which has two members in Balochistan assembly including one minister in the provincial cabinet engaged in jockeying for political advantage by fanning public sentiments, ignoring the woes and mental agony the bereaved family members were suffering from.



The HDP alleges the MWM of following Shia Ulema beholden to Iranian policies and exploiting sectarian and religious sentiments for its political ends.

"It is good that for the first time the victim families received compensation at their doorstep and appropriate security measures were taken for the Hazara coalminers, but there is a race among Shia Ulema to prove themselves better than each other for the Shia



community by exploiting sectarian and religious sentiments”, said provincial Sports minister Kaliq Hazara.

He says that he doesn't see any justification for the MWM demands for removal of top officials like IG FC, IG Police and Commander ISI Balochistan in connection with the Machh incident.

On the other hand

The MWM vehemently rejects the HDP allegations, and reciprocates in kind. “These elements who were voted to power by the community failed to resolve the genuine problems of the people and have now started levelling baseless allegation”, said Arbab Liaqat, the Secretary General of MWM Balochistan.

In a first, a six-point written agreement was signed between MWM-backed Shuhada Committee and Home and Tribal Affairs Department of the government of Balochistan brokered by federal Minister Ali Zaidi and PM's advisor Zulfi Bokhari.

The six points include fixing responsibility through a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) and action against those found guilty of negligence in Much incident; constitution of a high-level commission headed by Balochistan Home Minister with inclusion of senior police and government officials, parliamentarian and two members from Shuhada committee to follow up investigation of Much incident as well as other such incidents during the past 22 years against Hazara community; to expedite the pending cases of punishment/execution of terrorists arrested in terrorist activities; and a probe into missing persons' cases belonging to the Hazara community; PKR 1.5 million as compensation for each family of victims of Much incident by the government of Balochistan; to review the security plan for Quetta-Karachi highways and for mine workers of Hazara community; to constitute committee of NDARA and Passport cell to address the grievances of Hazara community in issuance and restoration of blocked CNICs and passports; and employment for the legal heirs of victims of Machh incident in government departments.

Besides that the federal government granted PKR 3.5 million for each family as compensation while some religious and private organizations also contributed in this regard that made the compensation amount PKR 8.6 million for each victim.

Besides Prime Minister Imran Khan, Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa also visited Quetta and met with the Shuhada Committee and victim's families and gave a patient hearing to their grievances.

Later, first time in the history, IG Frontier Corps Maj Gen Fayaz Hussain Shah, IG Police Mohsin Butt, Commander ISI Balochistan Brig. Shoib, DIG Police Naseerabad Division and administrative Officials of Bolan District and area FC commanders were removed and replaced. Army and FC personnel were deployed in Machh and surrounding areas, who established new checkpoints and put in place a new plan for the security of Hazara labour.

Shia religious and ethnic groups and HDP seem satisfied over the measures taken by the government for the security of the Hazara community and its labourers working in the mining sectors as well as the compensation paid.

However there are some demands which take time to be implemented that include the progress of high level commission to follow up investigation of Much incident as well as other incidents happened during the past 22 years against Hazara community, to expedite the pending cases of punishment/execution of terrorists arrested in terrorist activities and to probe into missing persons cases belonging to Hazara community.

A few days before of the Machh massacre, the coalmine owners had suspended mine excavation in the nearby Margut area after a group of banned Baloch Liberation Army demanded PKR 220 per ton tribute on production, threatening of dire consequences.

The mines are already paying a like amount to both Frontier Corps Balochistan for security and BLA as extortion for years. Suspending their operations, the mine owners refused to pay extortion money and sought help from security forces.

According to the mines department, some 70 out of total 250 mines are located in the Machh and Margut areas, employing 8,000-10,000 coalminers out of a total of 35,000-40,000 coalmine workers in Balochistan.



About 70 percent of the workers are Afghan national because of being cheap labour and less demanding and can easily be tackled even at the time of death in mine accidents. Seven out of ten victim of Machh incident were Afghan national as mentioned in the letter from Afghan Consulate General Quetta asking the local authorities to hand over their dead bodies.

Commissioner Naseerabad through an official order put a complete ban over Afghan labour in coalmines. However, the ban was relaxed later in the wake of a verbal understanding with the coal mine owners' association, although the mine owners were required to provide all data about foreigners to administration.

“In fact mine owners and their contractors (who hire mine workers) prefer Afghan nationals as the latter have to accept minimum wages, do not demand any extra benefits, have to live under difficult conditions and work under inappropriate safety measures in mine areas and are paid no dues or minimum compensation in case of any accident on work place”, said an official.

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan conducted survey on the living conditions and economic exploitation and lack of safety measures of mine workers and even child labour and their sexual abuse. “The main reason for hiring Afghan labour is their exploitation as well as sexual abuse of youth and we have conducted surveys and plan to do more for highlighting these issues”, said Habib Tahir, Vice President HRCP Balochistan.



Are AJK Assembly's Refugee Seats a Trojan Horse?

With constituents scattered across vast areas of Pakistan outside the remit of the AJK government, these seats have become a tool of control

By Danish Irshad

The Azad Jammu and Kashmir Assembly has 49 seats, which will increase to 53 after the next elections. Of the 49 seats, 42 are directly elected, with seven reserved for women and technocrats.

Of the seats to which direct elections are held, 12 seats are reserved for Jammu and Kashmir refugees residing in Pakistan who migrated to Pakistan in 1947. Out of these 12 seats, six are reserved for the refugees of Jammu Province and six for the refugees of Kashmir Province.

The 12 constituencies of refugees residing in Pakistan are considered to be the biggest obstacle to the transparency of election. The main reason is the non-functioning of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Election Commission and the administration in these constituencies.

According to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Election Commission, the total number of voters in the last general elections of Azad Jammu and Kashmir in 2016 was 2.738 million, out of which the number of voters in these constituencies of Pakistan was about 464,000. The number of voters in the constituencies was around 430,000 while the number of voters in the Kashmir Valley refugee constituencies was said to be around 30,000.

The distribution of constituencies for Kashmiri refugees in Pakistan is extremely complex. In many constituencies, areas of three provinces have been included, which are impossible for any candidate to cover. The problem deepens because the contestant may not know the procedure of the election in those areas.

The role of AJK Election Commission is limited in these areas to delivering the ballot papers. The rest of the election process is supervised by the local administration and then the results are announced. Election in areas outside the remit of the AJK government or Election Commission is inevitably influenced by the government (federal or provincial) that has jurisdiction over it.

On many occasions, these 12 seats have been 'gifted' to the political party of Azad Jammu and Kashmir most closely allied with the party in power at Islamabad. This role of the federal and provincial governments has a direct impact on the governance of Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

On this basis, there is a general impression that the party in power at the federal level in Pakistan can dictate who is elected to rule AJK. If the chosen political party does not get the required number of seats to form the government in Azad Kashmir, then the required number is met through the seats of the refugees.

The Azad Jammu and Kashmir Assembly and its seats came into existence through the Provisional Constitution of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (Act 74)



And That is, under Article Two of the Interim Constitution of the Independent State of Jammu and Kashmir, the jurisdiction of the Independent Government is limited to the administrative affairs of the areas of the Independent State of Jammu and Kashmir (Neelam to Bhimber). The role of the refugees in the AJK Assembly election is therefore an eyewash for federal meddling.

The political parties of Azad Jammu and Kashmir have been expressing their reservations over these constituencies, but in the distant past, no one has openly opposed these constituencies. For the first time, the present Prime Minister of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Raja Farooq Haider, publicly opposed it in public gatherings and openly said that these seats should be abolished.

However, no practical action could be taken on this at the time of enactment. Expressing reservations over these seats, AJK PPP General Secretary Faisal Mumtaz Rathore said that the refugees should be represented in the Azad Kashmir Assembly but other methods should be adopted instead of direct election to these seats. Legislators elected against these seats should not have the right to vote as these are symbolic seats and should remain symbolic till the complete independence of the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

These seats are used by the federal government to muscle in on the formation of government in AJK as whichever party is to be brought into the government is given these seats. Thus, those elected from these seats play a decisive role in forming the government in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, even though they have nothing to do with the governance issues of Azad Kashmir.

Rathore said that there should be a system of proportional representation for the representation of refugees so stamp out the malpractices inherent to the existing arrangement.

AJK PTI Information Secretary Irshad Mahmood said that a plan of action should be worked out for transparent elections in these seats so that the transparency of the elections cannot be questioned.



What's cooking?

By Hammad Ghaznavi

There were four meetings of the troika -- the Prime Minister, the COAS and the DG ISI -- in about 40 days, raising antennas as the frequency of the GTs was a little too much to go unnoticed. Officially speaking, they were discussing the security situation, both internal and external. Nobody believed the official version, goes without saying. Had the official press release read -- The PM briefed the two officers on the Pakistan-South Africa cricket series -- that would have been more plausible.

The venue of the meetings has been the PM House lawns, which means the met office must have been consulted every time for the weather clearance. The selection of the venue certainly goes to show the troika's love for nature, breeze and birds, besides the fact the outdoors is considered bugging free. What did they discuss in the four meetings however remains a mystery. Imran haters insist it was something similar to the message sent out to Nawaz Sharif by the then DG ISI, during the dharna days -- and elicited the same response. If true, it's a good news that Khan saab has something in common with Mian saab. Conspiracy theories certainly do good business in the states that are not in the habit of sharing information with its citizens.

The country definitely is not in an ideal situation at least as for the government's efforts regarding the method of voting in the upcoming Senate polls. The government wants an open and identifiable Senate ballot and has tried three routes so far to achieve it -- the Supreme Court, constitutional amendment bill in parliament, and the presidential ordinance. The opposition is vehemently opposing the open vote, though it is convinced, and rightly so, that the result of the last Senate Chairman elections would have been different, had there been an open vote. Chairman Senate Sadiq Sanjrani, considered a product of the secret ballot, is now aggressively supporting the open vote. The change of heart on both sides is a pertinent specimen of the vagaries of realpolitik. "The opposition stands exposed by opposing an amendment that can ensure transparency in the Senate polls," says Federal Information Minister Shibli Fraz. While a PML(N) former minister quips, "An anti-stray dog drive bill in a municipal corporation is given more thought and debate than the government wants to give to a constitutional amendment".

Likewise, more 'thought and time' should also be given to the proceedings of the London court hearings in a defamation suit filed



Media is not free in the country, Justice Faiz Esa has recently remarked during a hearing in the apex court. He in fact conducted a survey of sorts asking the court reporters present to raise their hands if they disagreed, but no hack moved a limb. The attorney General also kept his mum. Prime Minister Imran Khan, as we all know, has different views on the subject. "Media is more free in Pakistan than in the UK," he said a few weeks ago.

Anyway, Mr Esa may conduct more such free of cost surveys to measure public opinion on the issues such as 'are the courts free in the country?' Or is the Parliament free in the country? Many however object that this is not the job of a judge to hold such opinion polls in the courtroom. Sharing the same bench with Justice Esa, Justice Maqbool Baqir agreed that 'judges should ideally avoid such comments but what can be done when the country itself is not in an ideal situation.'

by PML (N) President Shehbaz Sharif against the UK paper Daily Mail and its reporter David Rose -- before celebrating the legal victory. The UK court has accepted the case for hearing, finding the report libelous, if not corroborated with facts during the court proceedings.

Whatever the outcome of the case, Shehbaz Sharif deserves a pat on the back, simply for filing the defamation suit in a UK court against a UK paper, as there have been many a disparaging report in the UK papers against our politicians in the past but no one has ever moved the court. Has anyone? Ever? No!

The writer is a media veteran who has worked for various major print and electronic media outlets.

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No Reckoning for Robber Barons?

It is common knowledge they manipulated prices to pocket hundreds of billions of rupees. So where is the long arm of law?

By Abdul Moiz

There is plenty of evidence to show the high and mighty fleeced the masses by manipulating prices. There have been official enquiries establishing the wrongdoing, and official admissions. But the government is yet to taken action against those responsible for stealing PKR 400 billion from the pockets of general public.

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, the government was making efforts to stabilize the inflationary pressure that originated from requisite adjustment policies. Thus, the spike in inflation which appeared due to energy tariff adjustments and the adoption of market-based exchange rate flattened out to some extent.

However, as Covid-19 spread in Pakistan, price-hike took center stage and prices skyrocketed out of common man's reach. This situation fueled the anti-government protests, launched by 11 political parties under the umbrella of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) with Jamiat Ulama Islam (F) Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman as its first chief. The PDM has since held several public gatherings to expose the government's failures on all fronts.

The Government's ministers continued to criticize the previous governments by holding them responsible for the current state of affairs of the economy and inflation.

However, Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is under severe criticism for failing to take remedial measures to deal with one crisis after the other now looks relaxed after decline in inflation. Prime Minister acknowledged on a number of occasions that at least, wheat and sugar crises were the result of government's own failures but no action was taken against anybody as all the Ministers are still sitting in the Ministries.

Prime Minister Khan has also stated that it was the responsibility and mandate Dr. Abdul Hafeez Shaikh to control prices which is an indication that Prime Minister



is not happy with the performance of his Finance Advisor.

Dr. Shaikh, who heads the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, never made inflation as its agenda which is indicative of his seriousness to deal with the inflation, which is swallowing the public money. However, Price Monitoring Committee has held few meetings to discuss prices but the performance of the committee in taking measures to control prices of essential items has been questionable.

Mr. Shaikh, who is also a possible candidate of Senate from PTI, has now started appearing on electronic media and sharing his views on different policies of the government and indicating that the IMF program is about to resume. For this purpose some new measures are expected to be taken by the government as per agreement with the Fund.

The good omen is that over the last couple of months, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is on decline which is more visible in prices of seasonal vegetables and fruits despite the fact that fare of transportation has increased owing to continuous rise in petroleum

products. However, there is no let up in the prices of other essential commodities.

In January CPI rose to 5.7 per cent against 8 per cent in December last year, which the economist believe is remarkable achievement while core inflation, non-energy and non-food inflation remained at 5.4 per cent.

After Covid-19, on one hand millions of people lost their jobs and the other almost every private sector entrepreneur slashed salaries of the employees. The double blow of shrinking income and unchecked food inflation has made the common man dependent.

Increase in medicines prices under the garb of adjustment to ensure their availability is an additional burden on those who were already facing hardships to make the ends meet.

Prices of essential kitchen items especially pulses, chicken, ginger, onions, B-grade Ghee/ cooking oil have witnessed further hike in recent days due to supply and demand position.

At least two advisors to the Prime Minister, in-charge of economic Ministries have

challenged the authenticity of inflation data, collected by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) which is an attached organization of the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives headed by Asad Umar.

The government has now decided that Ministry of National Food Security & Research and other relevant stakeholders to finalize plans to improve the overall system, including statistical data reporting for better assessment of production and consumption of crops, import processes and coordination issues amongst the provinces for implementation of a uniform policy, with a view to plan for future to avoid the price hike and supply shock of essential commodities like wheat and sugar.

The focus of Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues during public and media interactions was entirely on supply side i.e. seasonal rise in price of perishables, Sindh government's reluctance in release of wheat prior to fixed schedule, profiteering by shops/ traders and artificial shortages created by cartels to raise price, and smug-

gling through long porous borders.

There are reports that Sindh is now releasing wheat stocks of five or six years old, which probably is not fit for consumption. The situation in Punjab is also critical as reports indicate that sand is being mixed in the wheat.

The government never accepted its fault that unchecked movement of wheat from Sindh and Punjab to KP and Balochistan are the main reasons of wheat crisis in the country. It is undeniable that most of the wheat reaching KP is smuggled to Afghanistan and Central Asia as wheat prices in those markets are higher compared to the official rate of wheat in Pakistan.

The Competition Commission of Pakistan (CCP) report on sugar had found cartelization and manipulation of prices by the Pakistan Sugar Manufacturers Association (PSMA). This was evident from the hike in sugar price immediately after the release of report of the Inquiry Commission on Sugar. It was also informed that the Lahore High Court had dismissed the long pending petitions filed by almost all the industries

challenging the constitutionality of CCP.

The sugar crushing season is now over but the prices of sugar in the domestic market are over Rs 90 per kg and there are apprehensions prices will touch Rs 115 kg in April when Razaman commences despite the fact the government has allowed import of raw sugar in addition to waiving duties and taxes on import of refined sugar.

There is no doubt that the decision makers have inflicted hundreds of billions of rupees loss to the national exchequer and general public as well due to its inaction.

Prices of gas and electricity will also increase, which implies that cost of production/ manufacturing will go up in the days to come. This will again push the inflation up.

The Federal Government has time and again directed the Provincial Governments to take measures to control inflation in their respective provinces and also assigned this task to the PTI's Tiger Force. However, neither the Provincial Governments nor the Tiger Force did anything in this regard.

Pakistan to Seek Debt Relief from China Belt and Road Loan

By Ayesha Javaid

Pakistan plans to ask China for relief on payments for power projects Beijing financed over the past eight years, the latest developing nation that's struggling to repay debt under President Xi Jinping's belt and Road Initiative.

In informal talks, Pakistan and China have discussed easing terms on the repayment of debt on about a dozen power plants, according to a person with knowledge of the matter, who said Islamabad hasn't made a formal request yet. The parties have canvassed Beijing's willingness to stagger debt payments, as opposed to lowering equity returns, the person said, requesting anonymity as the plan is private.

An enormous build-out of Chinese-financed power plants in Pakistan, which was originally intended to solve its electricity shortages, has resulted in a surplus that Islamabad isn't able to afford. Infrastructure projects funded by China's initiative in other developing nations, such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia, have suffered issues ranging from heavy debt loads to corruption.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance, as well as Pakistan's power division, didn't respond to requests seeking comment.

China has denied US criticism that the initiative leads to debt traps, while acknowledgment that countries have had difficulties repaying loans due to the pandemic-induced global recession. Last year, Beijing canceled interest-free loans to 15 African countries due to mature by the end of 2020, and it has delayed other payments.

The Belt and Road program had found new life in Pakistan last year with the signing of \$11 billion worth of projects, most of which went to revamping the nation's railway system.

While Chinese Financing has helped Pakistan diversify fuel supplies, it has also resulted in a surplus of electricity, which is problematic for the government in Islamabad because it is the sole buyer and pays producers even when they don't generate. To help tackle the issue, the government has negotiated with power plants, which produce roughly half of its electricity, to lower rates.

Pakistan will formally make the request to defer debt payments to China, as well as other plants that were part of the latest power policy, after it concludes deals with those local power producers to reduce electricity tariffs, said the person with knowledge of the matter. Debt relief from China will also help the government reduce power payments.

Living in Debt

By Dr. Ashfaqe Hasan Khan

Part 2 of 2

Debt Relief

COVID-19 has severely damaged the economies of both rich and poor countries, more so of the LICs, hampering their debt repayment capacity. Therefore, multi-lateral institutions like the World Bank, the IMF and the G-20 countries moved forward to assist the LICs by alleviating their immediate liquidity needs. At the request of the leadership of the two multilateral institutions, the G-20 countries announced in mid-April 2020 a debt payment freeze for 77 IDA eligible countries (mostly from Africa) including Pakistan. Under the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), debt service payments (both principal and interest) to the official bilateral creditors of the 77 eligible countries were suspended for the period May 1 to December 31, 2020. Private creditors were simply asked to participate in this initiative on a voluntary basis. If all the eligible (77) countries participated in the DSSI, it would have freed up about \$12 billion. According to the initiative, debt payment of eligible countries due during the period May 1 to December 31, 2020 was to be suspended and will be paid back in three years with a one year grace period.

The DSSI received a lukewarm response from the eligible countries, as only 46 out of 77 countries (60 percent) applied and succeeded in deferring \$5.7 billion in debt service payments. Why did the DSSI attract only 60 percent of the eligible countries? There are several reasons for the lukewarm response. Firstly, the structure of the debt of eligible African countries suggests that out of the \$405 billion total debt, only 20 percent (\$81 billion) is owed to official bilateral creditors whose debt service payments were supposed to be suspended. Out of the total debt, 32 percent or \$132 billion is owed to private creditors and bond markets and 35 percent or \$144 billion is owed to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, with the remaining 12 percent or \$48 billion owed to various other lending agencies. Thus, this initiative, according to the eligible countries, excluded multilaterals, bond holders, private creditors, and others accounting for 80 percent of the total debt or \$324 billion. Therefore, 40 percent of the eligible countries did not participate in the initiative.

The G-20 debt relief is a temporary respite and not “relief” or forgiveness

Secondly, the DSSI barred the eligible countries from raising resources from the international debt capital market. The rating agencies had clearly warned that if the eligible countries insisted on freezing debt payments to private creditors (bond holders), this would be treated as sovereign default and as such would attract immediate downgrading. The eligible countries did not want to sever their relations with the debt capital markets.

Thirdly, from the viewpoint of the eligible countries, the G-20 debt relief is a temporary respite and not “relief” or forgiveness. Whatever “relief” they receive from the G-20 today will be fully repaid with

additional interest to compensate for the delay in payment, because this initiative is neutral in effect or in Net Present Value (NPV) terms. The risk of disorderly default is rising. Some economists believe that these eligible countries were already in debt distress and with this debt relief, debt default has been merely postponed for a few years and disorderly default is inevitable.

Fourthly, there is a condition in this initiative that the countries seeking debt relief should either already be in an IMF programme or in negotiations for such a programme. Many LICs do not want to implement a four decades old stabilisation programme. Hence, those 40 percent eligible countries did not apply for debt relief to avoid being under the IMF programme. Since Pakistan is already implementing an IMF programme, it decided to apply for the debt relief.

Table 3

Structure of Pakistan's External Debt + Liabilities				
Items	2018-19		2020-21 (end Sept.)	
	Billion \$	Share (%)	Billion \$	Share (%)
A. Public External Debt	83.9	79.0	88.9	78.1
A.1: Govt. External Debt	67.8	63.8	72.3	63.5
A.12: Bilateral Debt	23.9	22.5	25.6	22.5
A.13: Multilateral Debt	28.6	26.9	32.9	28.9
A.14: Commercial Loan & Bonds	14.8	13.9	13.0	11.4
A.15: Others	-	-	0.5	0.4
A.2: IMF Debt	5.6	5.3	7.6	6.7
A.3: FE Liabilities	10.5	9.9	9.0	7.9
B. Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs)	4.0	3.8	4.8	4.2
C. Banking Sector Debt	4.7	4.4	4.4	3.9
D. Private Sector Debt	10.4	9.8	11.4	10.0
E. Inter-Company Debt	3.3	3.1	4.3	3.8
F. Total External Debt + Liabilities	106.3	100.0	113.8	100

Source: State Bank of Pakistan

Taking advantage of the DSSI, Pakistan also applied to join the debt standstill initiative and secured a relief of \$1.7 billion. In other words, debt payment which was due during the period May 1 to December 31, 2020 amounted to \$1.7 billion. Pakistan will not be paying this amount and hence it was a saving made possible through the DSSI. This relief was in fact a postponement of the debt payment and not the forgiveness of debt service. Pakistan will have to repay \$1.7 billion in the next few years with additional interest. Apart from the temporary debt relief, Pakistan also received \$1.4 billion under the IMF's Rapid Financing Initiative to alleviate its liquidity concerns. The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have fast-tracked their lending amounting to \$1.6 billion for the same purpose.

Like the debt structure of eligible African countries, where bilateral official creditors accounted for only 20 percent of their total debt, in Pakistan too, the structure of the debt is such that only 22.5 percent

or \$25.6 billion external debt is owed to bilaterals while \$63 billion or over 55 percent is owed to multilaterals, the IMF, commercial banks, bond holders and others (See Table 3). Accordingly, Pakistan also benefited very little from the DSSI.

Carmen Reinhart, Kenneth Rogoff, and their co-authors have recently published an article in the September 2020 issue of *Finance and Development* — a quarterly publication of the IMF — in which they have argued that multilateral institutions like the IMF and the World Bank have generously offered loans to developing countries in general and LICs in particular, and the G-20 offered debt payment postponement. All these loans were offered to meet pandemic-related expenditures. In the process, these institutions and the G-20 have further burdened the recipient poor countries with more debt and simply extended the list of countries in debt distress and, accordingly, sowed the seeds for a full-blown debt crisis.

Notwithstanding the above facts, the G-20 debt relief was an excellent first step in the right direction. It provided temporary relief to the LICs including Pakistan, enhanced their fiscal space which enabled them to spend on social protection, reviving economic activities and to meet Covid-related expenditures. The pandemic has caused unparalleled devastation to the global economy in general and to the economies of developing and LICs in particular. There is a consensus among the economists that it will take a minimum of two to three years for these economies to come back to the pre-Covid level. Realising this fact, the G-20 countries have extended the debt relief to June 2021 and the repayment period has been extended to six years. There are indications that this relief can further be extended to December 2021 with a decision to be taken during the IMF-World Bank meeting in April 2021.

How much additional benefits will accrue to the LICs, including Pakistan, due to the extension of the debt standstill for six months (June 2021)? Estimates suggest that all the 46 countries that have already signed the DSSI will initially receive further relief of \$6.4 billion. Estimates also suggest that Pakistan will receive additional benefits in the range of \$800-900 million. The total relief for Pakistan would be \$2.5-2.6 billion for the period May 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021.

Eurodad, a network of 50 European NGOs specialising in poverty reduction, has argued that the DSSI package does not go far enough and has warned that the low-income countries would face a debt repayment crisis from 2022 onwards. They have also stated the DSSI eligible countries will be paying over \$9.0 billion to multilateral banks, of which, more than \$2.0 billion has been paid to the World Bank alone during the May–December 2020 freeze period. The World Bank has so far received as much in debt service payments as it has given out in Covid-related grants. In other words, the debt relief provided by the official bilateral creditors has gone back to multilateral institutions like the World Bank. This is one of the reasons that the DSSI received a lukewarm response from the eligible countries. Even the extension of debt relief to June 2021 may not attract more eligible countries.

Comprehensive Debt Relief Initiative (CDRI)

According to Carmen Reinhart, Kenneth Rogoff and their co-authors, COVID-19 is a once-in-a-century shock that merits a gener-

ous response from all the stakeholders — official bilateral creditors, multilateral institutions, and private creditors. While rich economies will emerge out of the crisis soon, LICs, already in debt distress conditions, may take a much longer time to revive their economies because of their debt overhang. If the international community does not provide generous support at this juncture of economic history, there is a danger that the developing countries as a whole may see a protracted debt crisis. A full debt standstill is an absolute necessity to prevent a full-blown debt crisis. It does not make sense that the relief provided by the official bilateral creditors is siphoned off by multilaterals and private creditors.

Under the evolving deteriorating debt situation, everyone (bilaterals, multilaterals and private creditors) will have to share the burden. Firstly, the debt standstill period should be extended for another three years at least — up to December 2023. Let the bilaterals suspend their debt repayment for another three years. Secondly, the multilaterals — knowing that they are preferred creditors, and their debts are neither forgiven nor suspended — will have to come forward and share a proportionate burden. They are preferred creditors in normal times, but these are abnormal times that require out-of-the-box solutions. The multilateral debt is far larger than the bilateral one. Their participation in the debt standstill initiative will go a long way in addressing the serious debt situation. Let the debt repayment of multilateral institutions be suspended till December 31, 2023. This will give breathing space to eligible countries to fix their economies and bring debt situation under control.

Like the LICs, Pakistan also saw its EDL grow during the decade of 2008-18 at a speed not witnessed before

Thirdly, the most difficult and challenging part of the CDRI is to convince private creditors to suspend debt repayment. It is suggested that the private creditors may extend the life of the bond repayment. For example, if the eligible country has floated a sovereign bond in the international debt capital market for a 5-year tenure amounting to \$1.0 billion and the payment schedule is prepared in such a way that the principal and the interest are to be paid back to the bond holders in 5 years' time, it is proposed that this payment schedule be extended to 10 years. This would reduce the debt repayment burden of the eligible countries to half. In other words, the bond holders will continue to receive their payments according to the schedule, but the payments will be one half because the maturity of the bond has been extended to 10 years. In my opinion, this is a compromise solution to invite private creditors to join the CDRI.

Indeed, COVID-19 has caused unprecedented damage to the global economy. The debt of the LICs had already reached unsustainable levels even prior to COVID-19. It has now further been aggravated. If no concrete action or out-of-the-box solutions are found, the world may witness disorderly debt defaults in LICs. Like the LICs, Pakistan also saw its EDL grow during the decade of 2008-18 at a speed not witnessed before. Such a threatening pace has continued over the last two and a quarter years. The G-20 debt relief is a great step in the right direction, but it has only covered the official bilateral creditors. Given the scale of damage, it is proposed that the international community should consider comprehensive debt relief including all the stakeholders, that is, official bilateral creditors, multilaterals, and private creditors.

Digital Pakistan

By Mishaal Ashraf

Today's policymakers have to deal with a digitized environment. Pakistan's rural areas still do not have proper access to electricity, but the people do have a mobile phone in their hands. With the increased access to cellular phones, policymakers' meet with a new challenge to ensure that governments, businesses, and individuals are making the best possible use of networks and applications. Countries that have achieved superior degrees of digitization through mass adoption of connected digital technologies and applicants by consumers, enterprise, and governments have realized substantial gains in their economies, societies, and the performance of their public sectors.

With the advent of new technologies, opportunities for low- and middle-income countries to diversify their economies have emerged, alongside creation of new jobs, agricultural advancements, and improved levels of health and education. This is proof to the fact that rapid technological advancements affect the lives of citizens to a great extent. Social unrest can emerge if people are not put at the centre of economic and social change. The pace and intensity of change means it is all the more important that people are at the centre of the digital future, not the technology. In order to avail these opportunities, people need to be rightly equipped. Moreover, they also need to be protected against the harms of the digital age. The responsibility falls upon the governments to make sure that vocational education is truly useful for both workers and businesses in the digital age. Furthermore, the private sector can also not be left behind, and it also needs to be involved in keeping the programs up to date.

For the creation of digital products and services, essential components need to be in place, like physical infrastructure, digital identification, mobile money (foundational digital systems), and capital to be invested in innovation. Without these components, existing firms cannot adopt productive technologies, and hence digital entrepreneurs cannot get the space to build and innovate. Having reliable infrastructure means firms and service providers can focus



on their core business, without having to build on enabling environment from the beginning.

In developing countries like Pakistan, the biggest challenges to the present and future of the citizens are corruption and inefficiency of the government. Their outdated policies are what bounds the citizens and businesses to advance themselves. It is now high time that governments of developing countries lead by the example of developed nations and transform themselves according to the needs of a digitized world. With the population explosion in the country, Pakistan urgently needs to create massive employment opportunities. Digital economies around the world are disrupting traditional industries, making it difficult for developing countries to compete in a traditional industrial model. For example, automation is making millions of Chinese without jobs. Artificial intelligence has become a threat to national security. These are unprecedented developments that humans could not have predicted years ago.

The good news is that the current government of Pakistan has taken appropriate steps to institutionalize digitization in many sectors, and the initiative is headed by Tania Airdus, a former Google executive. PM Imran Khan, while expressing his contention with the project said that he has high hopes from the initiative and said that it would enable a lot of women to enter into the workforce. Furthermore, he laid emphasis on the significance of e-governance in today's day and age of technological advancements.

E-governance, infrastructure development, automation of electrical procedures, legislation, e-commerce, innovative digital payments, performance appraisal of employees, software projects, and local manufacturing, all are a part of the Digital Pakistan Initiative. The project aims to enable the digitization of a number of socio-economic sectors, ranging from agriculture to e-health, to e-energy, e-commerce, and cloud computing and Big Data.

Enrich confidence; not plutonium

As a first in history, Biden and Khamenei should strike a personal rapprochement. Reviving the 2015 nuclear accord is a win-win equation. Let's do it without 'ifs' and 'buts'

By Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri

There is a proverb in the military: we will see when we cross the bridge! So is the case with United States-Iran relations; estranged to the core but there is always an opportunity in disaster. It is a dichotomy of sorts that they hate to see together on the global stage; but vie for an interaction behind the curtains.

In a first televised foreign policy statement, delivered at the doors of the State Department, President Biden has taken an unrealistic approach. He wants Tehran to deescalate the nuclear temperature before withdrawing sanctions. The pinch, in fact, is being felt on both the sides.

In an unprecedented departure, nonetheless, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei personally took to the media and directly called upon the new White House leadership to take the leap forward by lifting sanctions. This speaks the mood of the hierarchy in Iran. Washington will be better advised to be soft and 'cultivate' Iran, rather than pushing it to the wall.

There are lessons for the Biden administration to be learnt from history, notwithstanding the jingoism posed by his predecessor, Donald Trump. Be it the Iran-Contra scandal; 444 days of besiege of the US embassy in Tehran; downing of Iranian civilian aircraft over the Gulf of Hormuz or rupture of the nuclear deal at the hands of President Donald Trump; both the countries have proved beyond doubt that diplomacy is the only viable option between them; and nothing had been sorted out to this day militarily.

That forms the rationale as US President Joe Biden reiterated his pledge to "revive" the nuclear deal stuck with Iran in 2015; and his Secretary of State Antony Blinken illustrating over plans to negotiate a "longer and stronger" accord.

Tehran too is forthcoming as it had hinted at closely working with the European Union, Russia and China to address American concerns and help 'synchronise' the deal in a fool-proof manner.

It is a win-win equation for doves all around the world, and a shot in the arm for confidence building measures in one of the most volatile regions of the world. The dye has been cast. Both Washington and Tehran are on the same page as far as the understanding is concerned to constrain the 'undesired' nuclear enrichment.

What's next? To further the envelope, both the parties should keep in mind that timing is of essential importance. The window of opportunity could be short-lived. Though the Americans can keep on harping over the deal prospects for a longer period of time, under the premise of reviewing its salient features under the new administration of President Biden, but for the Iranians it could turn out to be a 'forbidden' moment.

The Presidential elections in Iran are scheduled in June; and



the hawks are out to capitalise on anti-Americanism fervour as sanctions stand restored in 2018.

Washington has a moment to seize. Unlike its approach on Afghanistan where it has sought time to 'study' the Doha Accord stuck under the auspices of Islamabad, Tehran could turn out to be Waterloo.

Both the countries are already in a gridlock. Tehran has knocked at the doors of the International Court of Justice against unilateral slapping of sanctions by the Trump administration, terming it as a breach of 1955 friendship treaty between the two countries. The apex world court is seized with the matter.

Move in fast and help in compliance from both sides: US should lift sanctions and help ease the Iranian economy, and at the same time Iran should implement the 2015 paradigm in letter and spirit. That is the way to go.

All signatory parties should realise that it is a masterpiece of diplomacy negotiated after episodes of attrition, and that too only because President Barack Obama and President Hassan Rouhani were exceptionally willing to walk the few extra miles. The result was a unique consensus to restrict the Iranian nuclear program in return for lifting all kinds of sanctions from the United States and its allies.

Thus, any effort on behalf of any party to put 'preconditions' or 'tailor' the deal would be suicidal. It won't be easy for Washington and Tehran to cobble together a renewed consensus this time around. Geopolitically much water has flown down the rivers in the Middle East and Europe.

China has risen as a de facto superpower, and Russia had literally cornered the US on all counts during the Trump era. Tehran can resort to muscle-flexing and will be a hard nut to crack. The Europeans are already on the Iranian side.

Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei is busy galvanising a radical agenda, and that has its roots in silencing moderate voices at home. Biden's team should be tactful and extra-conscious, and desist from lingering on irrelevant issues.

Let's briefly revisit the scenario: Iran as a retaliation to sanctions slapped by the Trump administration in 2018 started enriching larger quantities of uranium to higher levels of purity. It was a tit-for-tat. But now Biden wants Iran to roll back its advancement before sanctions could be eased. This precondition is quite unrealistic; and tantamount to pushing Iran to the wall.

Washington, moreover, wants to stitch a broader pact to deal with Iran's ballistic missiles program, and ensure that Tehran's so-called proxies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere are put under stringent radar. This will fuel anti-American sentiments in Iran and that too at a crucial moment of the upcoming ballot.

Last but not the least is another precondition that is acting as a perfect monkey-wrench. French President Emmanuel Macron wants to bring in Saudi Arabia as a stakeholder in the 2015 Nuclear Deal. Paris intention is to oblige the Gulf Cooperation Council members, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in forging a new consensus on disarmament in the Middle East.

Tehran has already rejected this initiative. Its rejoinder is verifiable. Iran rightly says that the multilateral agreement is duly ratified by the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which is non-negotiable and parties to it are unchangeable. Digging heels on this stance is enough an excuse to stage a comeback of hardliners in the presidency and parliament in Iran.

The point is why the United States and its allies are bent upon putting a spanner in the works? This is quite un-American in essence, and hints at jingoism at work in few European capitals for reasons of exigency.

No point will be served if the JCPOA bites the dust. It will endanger peace and security in the Mideast, and provide Iran with excuses to foment anti-Arab and Anti-American sentiments.

President Biden, with more than four decades of diplomatic experience, has a responsibility to act as a statesman. He cannot afford to look-like Trump; nor could the Democrats stoop so low. The White House should keep in mind the lids had been taken off at the Fordow nuclear plant. Iran is busy enriching uranium to 20 percent. US intelligence officials estimate that Iran could produce enough nuclear material for a weapon in a couple of months. Thus, implementing the 2015 agreement is indispensable.

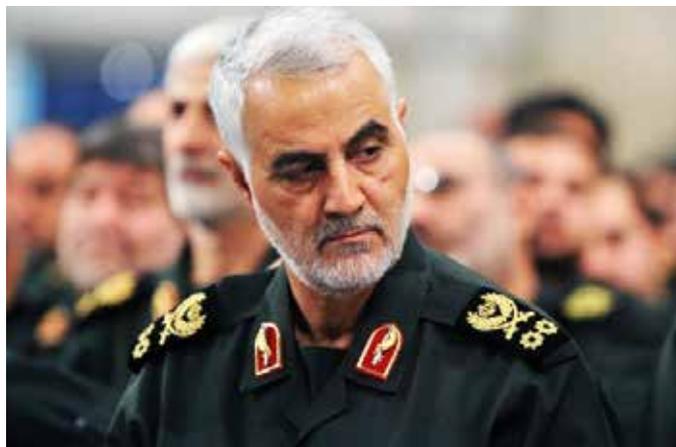
It is pertinent to mention that the internal situation in Iran is quite fluid. Hardliners are out to gun down the moderates. There are reports of an imminent change at the top, as supreme leader Ali Khamenei is not keeping good health. The radical constituency under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is quite proactive. Ahmadinejad was the man who insisted on Iran's sovereign right to nuclear technology, and defied sanctions to build a heavy water production plant at Arak. A déjà vu is in the making.

It's time for Tehran and Washington, as well as other signatories, to reflect upon the fact that the 2015 deal was a blessing in disguise. Iran had agreed not to produce enriched uranium or plutonium, and also ensured that Natanz, Fordow and Arak facilities would be open for international inspections.

The IAEA in 2016 testified that Iran had fulfilled all of its obligations

under the JCPOA. It shipped out over 12 tonnes of enriched uranium to Russia; scaled down its stockpile to less than 300kg; dismantled over 13,000 centrifuges and Arak reactor was downgraded. Iran was adhering to the accord. This was no small achievement.

The revulsion now is unacceptable and uncalled for. Tehran is literally going back on its commitments. This is in reaction as the Trump administration resorted to kicking Iran below the belt. The killing of top Iranian general, Qasim Suleimani – who allegedly was instrumental in manning the proxies – is a case in point.



Tehran now believes it's time to play to the gallery. The Iranian parliament has passed a law to go ahead with nuclear enrichment and shut the doors on International Atomic Energy Agency inspections.

So what is the way out now? Diplomacy can flourish in serenity. Arm-twisting measures and coercion will hardly work. It hasn't worked against Libya, Yemen and Sudan – what to say of resourceful and self-reliant Iran – the only military power in the Gulf.

Biden along with the multilateral consortium will be better advised to lift sanctions as a goodwill gesture, enabling Tehran to reciprocate in all sincerity. It goes without saying that Iranian economy is on the rocks. Sanctions and embargo have devastated it to the core. The best strategy to reform Iran would be to bring it back in the international mechanism.

Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei is a Machiavellian. Notwithstanding his anti-American rhetoric, he and his inner coterie are desperate for relief. President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javed Zarif are on record having assured their counterparts in Brussels, Moscow and Beijing that Tehran is serious in negotiating a durable and multi-pronged accord with the United States. The politics of hate is for public consumption, though.

President Biden, please walk the few extra miles to realise perpetual peace with your erstwhile ally, Iran. Tehran, too, is waiting in the wings to respond in Persian humility. The decision to pull back USS Nimitz warship from the US military's Central Command in the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific Command region is a welcome gesture. Likewise, revive and rebuild the 2015 nuclear deal. There is no going back. Washington and Tehran should keep talking -- even if they do not want to.

The writer is former Opinion Editor Khaleej Times, Dubai

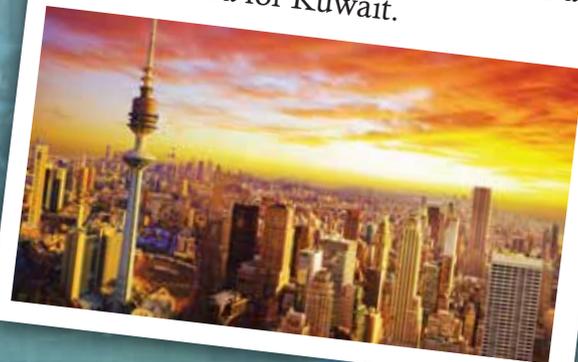
Kuwait

The State of Kuwait is a country in Western Asia with an area of 17,818 square km. Its capital and largest city in Kuwait City and Arabic is the official language of the country. It is bordered by Saudi Arabia and Iran and is amongst the high ranks of countries with regard to protection of civil liberties, press freedom and constitutionalism.

Interesting Facts about Kuwait



Kuwait is an Arabic word that means fort.



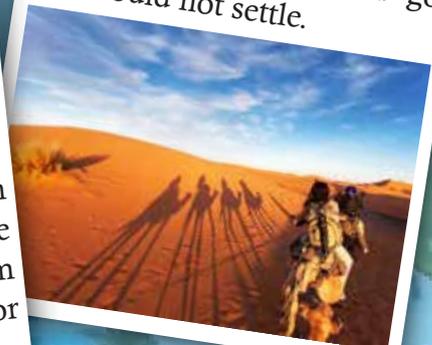
From 1946 to 1982, due to its prolonged prosperity, the period became known as the golden era for Kuwait.

In 1934, oil reserves were discovered in Kuwait, making it the world's sixth largest country.



If a man presents a woman with a gift, it cannot come from him but must come from his wife, mother, sister or another female relative.

Until the 18th Century, Kuwait was a region where people would come and go but would not settle.





Brunei

Brunei Darussalam is a country located on the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia with an area of 5,765 square kilometers. Its capital and largest city is Bandar Seri Begawan. According to various reports, Brunei is considered the fifth richest country in the world and was ranked higher than all Southeast Asian nations on the Human Development Index in 2018.

Interesting Facts about BRUNEI

1. Brunei is believed to be the most observant Islamic state in the entire Southeast Asia.
2. The literacy rate of Brunei is estimated at 97.2% of the total population.
3. Brunei has one of the highest rates of car ownership.
4. The Sultan of Brunei holds an honorary commission in the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force and Royal Navy.
5. The citizens of Brunei received free educational and medical facilities from the government.

Violence Spikes as Taliban Stiffen Stance Over Doha

After the Biden administration's announcement to review the Doha agreement, the Taliban say they would announce ceasefire only after President Ashraf Ghani has stepped down

By Tahir Khan



Key negotiations among Afghans to decide a future political roadmap face a stalemate amid rise in violence and the Biden administration's announcement to review the Doha agreement that calls for withdrawal of all foreign forces by May.

Najia Anwari, spokesperson for the Afghan Ministry for Peace, Nadery, a member of the government team have confirmed the Taliban representatives have not returned to the negotiations, blaming them for a stalemate in the process.

The Taliban have not officially commented on remarks by the government's members. However, a Taliban leader privy to negotiations in Qatar says the group has told Kabul the Ashraf Ghani's administration will have to go for the establishment of an inclusive Islamic government before the announcement of a ceasefire.

"The Islamic Emirate first wants an assurance from the Kabul administration's team to agree to this proposal as we have been fighting against the current system. But the Kabul team asks us to accept and join the present set-up and declare a ceasefire that we have rejected," the Taliban leader, who did not want to be identified by

name, told The Truth International this week.

"We will accept an inclusive set up with participation of all Afghans. An Islamic government has also been mentioned in the Doha agreement. We have an outline for the Islamic system and will put the plan on the table at an appropriate time," he said.

President Ghani refuses to step down and insists he would only hand over power to an elected government after elections.

In a latest development a group mandated by US Congress has recommended that the Biden administration seek an extension of the May troop withdrawal deadline stipulated in the February 2020 US-Taliban deal. The Afghanistan Study Group in a report released in early February said the Taliban had not fulfilled their commitments outlined in the agreement.

Shortly after the group released the report, the Taliban warned if the Doha agreement was breached, it would lead to a dangerous escalation for which the opposing side will be responsible.

"If the Doha agreement is abrogated, it will lead to a major war, the responsibility of

which shall fall squarely on the shoulders of America," said a Taliban commander.

In the wake of an uncertain fate of the Doha agreement, the Taliban political envoys have stepped up jockeying to garner support for their stance if the Biden administration delays troops' withdrawal. Senior Taliban negotiators travelled to Russia and Iran in the last week of January and held talks with senior officials of both countries including Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

Russia and Iran favour Taliban's call for withdrawal of all foreign forces. Head of the Taliban Qatar office, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who led the Taliban delegation to Iran also visited Turkmenistan in the first week of February. Taliban have planned more visits to several countries including Turkey, according to a Taliban official.

Besides the diplomatic blitz, the Taliban are also discussing military options for the upcoming fighting season that starts in April as the weather changes, according to a Taliban official. He says the Taliban military commission will finalize deployment of military commanders across the country this month.

The Taliban have kept pressure on the Afghan defence forces even in winter which traditionally is not a fighting season. Afghan officials said the Taliban killed 23 security personnel in Kandahar and Faryab provinces on 5 February. Nearly 50 security men and civilians are killed in the Taliban attacks in the country daily, according to officials.

The Biden administration created doubts about the fate of the Doha agreement after US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan announced that his country plans to revise the agreement with the Afghan Taliban movement.

Sullivan in a phone call with his Afghan counterpart Hamdullah Mohib said that the US would reassess whether the Taliban were living up to their commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said last week the Taliban are not meeting promises made in the Doha agreement.

“The Taliban have not met their commitments,” Kirby told reporters in Washington last week, adding that unless the insurgents renounce “terrorism” and stop “violent attacks” on Afghan security forces and the Afghan people, “it’s very hard to see a specific way forward for the negotiated settlement.”

Although the Biden administration has not yet formally announced any change in the Doha accord, statements from senior officials about the review and a possible delay in troops’ withdrawal have prompted the Taliban’s angry reaction. The Afghan government has, however, been upbeat at the expected review of the agreement.

Afghanistan’s first vice-president Amrullah Saleh welcomed the Afghanistan Study

Group’s report in a recent tweet. “We highly welcome the report which is more nuanced than the title given to it. It [calls for] wisdom and deliberation, not impulsive and rush decisions,” said Saleh, who has previously complained the US gave concessions to the Taliban in the Doha accord.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the Afghan war is that it pits Afghans against Afghans. No American and NATO soldier have been killed in a Taliban attack since the signing of the agreement on 29 February 2020.

A new report by the Special Inspector

General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) says that the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan reported 2,586 civilian casualties during the last quarter of the year 2020, which included 810 deaths and 1,776 injuries. This represents a 14 percent decrease over the previous quarter (July – September 2020). Additionally, civilian casualties in 2020 have decreased by approximately 5 percent compared to 2019 and 6 percent compared to 2018.

Despite these modest improvements, this quarter’s civilian casualties remain exceptionally high for the winter months when fighting normally subsides.



China’s approach to the US-Iranian divide: lessons in autonomous statecraft

By *Hannan R. Hussain*

2020 has been a testing year for US-Iran relations as President Donald Trump’s decision to strike down Qasem Soleimani – an Iranian military titan – empowered Shia proxies in the Middle East, left public discourse polarized on the JCPOA, rattled the global petroleum equilibrium, and sent market shares tumbling. SAMECA (South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia) has seen its fair share of diplomatic constraints too: finding it increasingly tricky to balance economic, military and strategic ties with Tehran at the cost of an uncompromising U.S. hardline in 2021.

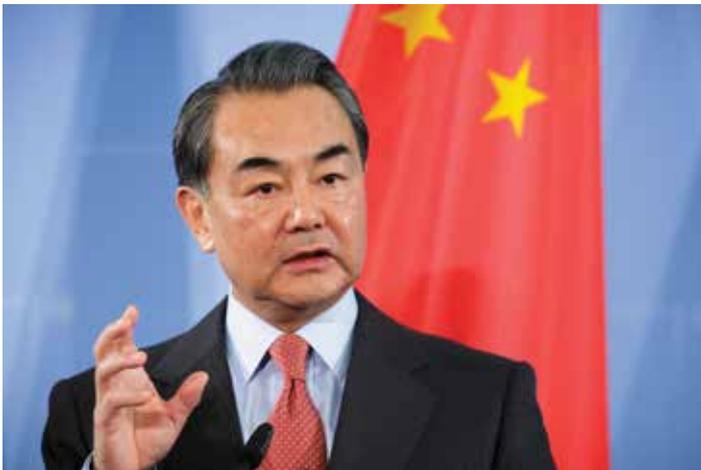
It is against this backdrop that China’s approach to bilateral linkages with Tehran is of particular value to SAMECA. Beijing has pursued the US-Iran escalation subject with great care – unwilling to appear soft on militancy, mistake more warfare for peace, or put its long-standing economic and cultural linkages with Tehran – and the broader Middle East – on the line. Thus, the luxury of exploring autonomous windows for neighborly diplomacy – regardless of great power politics – should constitute the core aim for SAMECA in the coming years.



Since 2017, China remains Iran's top export destination – with bilateral trade surpassing \$21.2 billion last year. Tehran is also the centerpiece of Beijing's New Silk Road Initiative, aimed at extending the Belt and Road Initiative's reach to Western and Central Asian countries. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif deemed it “the future” of Iran's regional and global interactions, and Beijing redoubled its support for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, cementing symbolism. Note that the challenge of US withdrawal from the JCPOA and reimposition of sanctions against Tehran, have not altered China's Silk Road commitments towards Tehran.

As pointed out by Dr. Mordechai Chaziza – an external contributor at the Middle East Institute – “uniquely situated at the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSRI), Iran is one of the major countries along the China-Central Asia-West Asia (CCAWA) Economic Corridor; a potential strategic hub linking the Middle East, Central, and South Asia and situated at the intersection of the SREB and the MSR.”

Therefore, Beijing's emphasis on Tehran's central geographic placement, its well-documented energy potential in 2021, and an emerging vacuum for peacebuilding in the post-Soleimani U.S. defense playbook – has collectively furthered China's state-to-state linkages with Iran.



SAMECA deserves similar autonomy. It can attempt to achieve this goal by broadly projecting key political and economic interventions that remain confined to countries' territorial boundaries. For instance, Kazakhstan's decision to renew flights to select East Asian countries is an ideal pitch to a SAMECA-led, post-COVID revival initiative. Nations across South Asia and the Middle East have spent months grappling with COVID-19 – and would be willing to chalk out tourism, flight, and transit options for the year-end. Especially, if it means lending some degree of growth impetus to cash-strapped economies.

More importantly, the joint inclusion of Iran, China and Russia – with or without the Biden administration's goodwill – should not deter SAMECA's prospective lead on regional integration. It should cement it.

Saudi Arabia too has shown signs of extracting investment gains on its extensively marketed Vision 2030 reforms. This pursuit naturally qualifies as an inlet for numerous other strategic proposals that

SAMECA countries may feel demand collective deliberation. The absence of any bilateral outreach from India, a volatile security situation in Afghanistan, and unprecedented US-China diplomatic escalations must lead SAMECA's inward probe as an alliance. A pursuit which, even on purely economic grounds, can eye what international financial organizations seldom have: allow investments to be customized to the debt-servicing potential of each country.

Shifting the focus back to China's post-Soleimani performance, there are specific challenges that Beijing has been able to navigate through autonomous statecraft. First, Washington's militarization of the Strait of Hormuz – an indispensable oil-supply passage in the Persian Gulf – was a key factor in aggravating select Tehran-aligned militias in the region. China's quick, high-level diplomatic rapprochement with Tehran allowed it to circumvent potential complications which could threaten the stability of the envisioned 2,300 kilometer New Silk Road.

As early as 2018, select experts at the TRT World Forum predicated China's Belt and Road success on Beijing's willingness to be “drawn into military and political struggles” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Speakers stressed that China's plans for a long-term presence in the Middle East will most likely push China to be more active on the political stage and adopt an independent policy orientation. Without being active in the central issues in the Middle East, there is very little chance of China influencing regional dynamics. The Chinese connectivity initiative and American protectionism will force developing countries, including those in the Middle East, to make difficult choices. However, the question remains how Beijing will play a role given Xi Jinping administration's unwillingness to be drawn into military and political struggles in the MENA.

As demonstrated by Beijing's purely bilateral outreach to Tehran (and its region-wide resonance with peace), China effectively turned that logic on its head. Involvement in the Middle East's military and political exigencies is not necessarily a precondition for tangible cooperation.

It is in this regard that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's high-level exchange with his Iranian counterpart, was of particular

significance in January. The former's emphasis on ending U.S. military adventurism in the Middle East, respecting Iran's territorial sovereignty (in the wider context of Gulf relations), and commitments to pursuing a constructive role for regional peace and stability – collectively sounded a peaceful tone for regional cooperation during a critical juncture.

The January 4 statement from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, detailing Yi's telephonic conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, reads:

“Wang Yi said that the military adventurist act by the US goes against basic norms governing international relations and will aggravate tensions and turbulence in the region. China opposes the use of force in international relations. Military means will lead nowhere. Maximum pressure won't work either. China urges the US to seek resolutions through dialogue instead of abusing force. China will continue to uphold an objective and just position and play a constructive role in safeguarding peace and security in the Gulf region of the Middle East.”

This prompt rapprochement accomplished two strategic objectives for Beijing. First, it decreased the possibility of Tehran turning a blind eye to the safety and security of Belt and Road investments, in the event that any future escalations with Washington came to the fore. This accomplishment is best seen as an extension of China's “strategic hedging” concept – a notion elaborated by emerging European experts Jeremy Garlick and Radka Havlova. They argue that China's Middle East engagement involves spreading “its bets as far as possible between the two major regional power-houses, Saudi Arabia and Iran, without antagonizing either of them or becoming caught up in their regional rivalry.”

Relevant to SAMECA's own strategic foresight is this: “Beijing recognizes that it would not be sensible to undermine the region's security provider – the United States – since this could result in increased Chinese entanglement in regional geopolitics and could also unnecessarily antagonize the US.”

The second strategic objective accomplished by China's prompt rapprochement is a long-term diplomatic gain. Beijing's peace and security assurances to Tehran helped transform an inherently “bilateral” US-Iran divide into a “broader regional security prerogative.” One that most Gulf powers didn't contest.

To buttress this reality, look no further than the changing diplomatic messaging of key Iranian adversaries. In a January 9th report published by The Guardian, diplomatic editor Patrick Wintour reported that “Saudi Arabia has sent a message to Washington and London that it wants to see a de-escalation of the United States' struggle with Iran, in a sign that Saudi is nervous about its vulnerability to Iranian missile strikes – and still uncertain about the reliability of Donald Trump's long-term commitment to his Gulf allies.”

Though Wintour's “missile strikes vulnerability” hypothesis is a largely speculative reading, Riyadh's recourse to de-escalation and Middle Eastern security is certainly inspired by a sudden change in atmospherics – an awareness drive partly spearheaded by Beijing.

Hence, it is this brand of effective diplomacy that is desirable for SAMECA as well.

Another challenge China successfully tackled after the Soleimani fallout was the currency and petroleum paradox. The U.S. dollar shortly entered into recovery mode as global markets became fearful of more US-Iran provocations. The dollar's resurgence became an opportunity for Beijing to suggest oil payments from Iran in Yuan, and bypass the US-controlled international payment system that brought the Iranian economy to its knees. It is important to note that in its efforts to placate Tehran, China never once compromised its affinity to Riyadh. A case in point is Beijing's petroleum diplomacy.



In January, China's total petroleum imports from Saudi Arabia began to peak. A recent Reuters analysis helps put those numbers into perspective: China's crude oil imports in the first two months of 2020 from top supplier Saudi Arabia rose 26% from a year earlier, while purchases from No. 2 supplier Russia gained 11%. China's total crude oil imports during January and February rose 5.2% from the previous year to 10.47 million barrels per day (bpd).

Rather tellingly, the same report adds: “Orders for imports in January and February were made ‘months before’ the coronavirus that first erupted in China's Hubei province started to drag on Chinese oil demand and spread around the world. China is the world's biggest oil importer.”

In theory, China's record petroleum imports from the kingdom should have contradicted its commitment to lifting the Iranian economy – Riyadh's top rival. Instead, by pursuing a strictly economic relationship with Riyadh, China made sure its vast petroleum imports were not reflective of an endorsement of the US-led maximum pressure campaign against Tehran, which the kingdom amply backed.

Thus, a thick distinction between China's revenue-based, transactional ties with Riyadh and a security-driven, geostrategic relationship with Tehran saved Beijing from picking one relationship over the other.

More importantly, since both Riyadh and Tehran represent two important yet contrasting geostrategic profiles within SAMECA's own regional framework, China's early navigation of the Saudi-Iranian friction is a vital lesson for applied diplomacy for other regional powers in 2021.

Is Kashmir on Biden's To Do List ... Yet?

How justified are the hopes the people of Jammu and Kashmir that the Biden-Harris administration will take action to shield them from the gross human rights violations by the Indian occupation?



By Dr. Moonis Ahmar

Hopes and expectations of Kashmiris from the new administration in the White House are somewhat justified because in October 2020, Kamala Harris during her election campaign clearly stated that, “We have to remind Kashmiris that they are not alone in the world. There is a need to intervene if the situation demands.”

An Indian-American member of House of Representative Pramila Jayapal, who moved a Congressional resolution on Kashmir, provided a symbolic hope to Kashmiris when she said, “There are people in Washington DC who can raise their voice against repression, oppression, and blatant violation of human rights”.

Her assertion against the Indian atrocities in J&K was so vocal that the visiting Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar refused to meet her which Pramila in her Washington Post article published in December 2019 termed as a “great opportunity missed and sign of weakness for any great democracy to refuse to allow those who have some criticisms to participate in a meeting.”

Amidst hopes and expectations from Biden-Harris administration to play an assertive role to alleviate the plight of the people of Indian occupied Jammu & Kashmir, one must be cognizant of hard realities at the international level, particularly in the United States. America is buried

under crises ranging from the pandemic to economic meltdown to racial discord to political polarization. The focus of President Biden is to pull the United States from a very difficult situation and the predicament faced by American society because of the assault on the Capitol Hill in January this year.

Domestic challenges and issues in the United States may not permit Biden-Harris administration to focus on foreign policy issues for a long period of time. And the Kashmir conflict, despite its dangerous and threatening nature is still low on the lists of its priorities. Afghanistan, Middle East, Russia, China and Taiwan are the matters which will shape the list of foreign policy priorities during Democratic Party's government.

Although recognized by the new administration in Washington DC as a major issue in South Asia, Jammu & Kashmir will not get the attention of Biden-Harris administration unless popular uprising along with surge of Indo-Pak tension threaten to destabilize regional peace and security. However, once the thorny issues faced by White House are sorted out, one can expect some focus and attention given to address the complicated and dangerous issue of Jammu & Kashmir.

President Biden's approach to dealing with difficult foreign policy issues is to seek biparti-

san support in the Congress. One can expect the same approach and strategy to be pursued as far as the Kashmir conflict is concerned.

The induction of 20 Indian origin Americans in the team of Biden-Harris administration has been seen with some concern particularly in Pakistan but while they have their roots in India, they are now Americans and pledge their loyalty to the United States. Speculations to the effect that the presence of Indian-Americans in the Biden team will be detrimental to Pakistan is therefore unwarranted.

Indian diaspora in the United States are incomparable with Pakistanis who are settled in that country. They are in powerful positions in the policy-making and research think tanks but it doesn't mean that the agenda of BJP-Shiv Sena which propagates Hindu nationalism and is anti-Pakistan is subscribed to by the Biden-Harris administration.

What matters is the connectivity and influence of Pakistani and Kashmiri diaspora in the United States and their ability to influence the policymaking process particularly the Congress, State Department, Pentagon and the military-industrial complex.

One can figure out three major opportunities which may arise in the new administration in the White House in order to mobilize public opinion particularly the print and

electronic media exposing Indian atrocities in the occupied Jammu & Kashmir.

First, the ostensible neutrality of Biden-Harris administration in Indo-Pak conflict and their possible effort to promote reconciliation and the resumption of comprehensive dialogue which is non-existent between Islamabad and New Delhi since the last several years. Once the US decides to exert its influence on the two neighbours to resume the process of dialogue, one can expect the thorny issue of Jammu & Kashmir to be discussed by the two sides.

Unlike in the past when Indo-Pak relations had not deteriorated to this level, it will be an uphill task for Washington to help jumpstart the peace process and prevail over the Modi regime to be flexible on Jammu & Kashmir.

Biden-Harris administration will certainly take advantage of the presence of Indian and Pakistani-origin Americans in its centres of power and can use their potential clout in their countries of origin in order to compel Islamabad and New Delhi follow a prudent approach to dialogue to overcome years of polarization.

How the thuggish Modi regime, which is responsible for worsening the security environment of South Asia by its dangerous overreach in Jammu & Kashmir and subverting the process of regional cooperation in South Asia under SAARC, is dealt by the new American administration is yet to be seen.

Second, in order to draw the attention of the international community including the new American administration, the Kashmiri diaspora need to augment their support for their national liberation movement. The more popular demonstrations are held by Kashmiris settled in the UK and the United States, the more they will get attention from international media.

Targeting influential print, broadcast, and online media outlets like The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, CNN and Fox News will certainly make a difference in seeking support from the US members of Congress and policy oriented think tanks located particularly in the US capital. A right kind of strategy is required to give an impetus to the US Kashmir policy under Biden-Harris administration.

A resolution passed by the New York Assembly on 3 February this year to declare 5 February as Kashmir-American Day means a lot to the beleaguered population of Indian occupied J&K. The resolution stated that the “State of New York endeavors to champion human rights including the freedom of religion, movement, and expression of all Kashmiri people, which are embedded within the United States Constitution, through the recognition of diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious identities.”

Sponsored by two Democratic Assemblymen, Nader Sayegy and Nick Perry, the resolution notes, “The Kashmiri community has overcome adversity, shown perseverance, and established themselves as one of the pillars of the New York immigrant community.”

India will definitely negatively react to that recognition but the realities in the Indian occupied J&K particularly since 5 August 2019 are sufficient for self-respecting Americans to side with the suppressed population of that territory.

The influence, clout, and power of a diaspora lobby depend on how good it is at networking and reaching out to the people and institutions that matter.

The pro-Israel lobby in the United States has been able to play a pivotal role in moulding official American policy vis-a-vis Israel despite its occupation of Arab territories, moving the capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and establishing scores of Jewish settlements despite the fact that it violates the UN Security Council resolutions.

Likewise, the pro-Modi Indian lobby in the United States is following in the footsteps of the pro-Israel lobby and is trying to justify the promulgation of Jammu & Kashmir Reorganization Act of 5 August 2019 and the anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as a right kind of policy and is justifying illegitimate domicile act and other repressive laws while portraying Kashmiri resistance groups as extremists and terrorists.

It is a major challenge for Pakistani and Kashmiri diaspora in the United States to counter the propaganda of the pro-Modi Indian lobby by showing it to be wrong and a major threat to democracy, secularism, and human rights.

Third, if the first 100 days of Biden-Harris

administration recognizes Jammu & Kashmir as major flashpoint and conflict threatening regional peace and security and the US Congress takes cognizance of blatant human rights violations by the Indian military, one can be hopeful that fairness and justice may be upheld. It will be a test case for Biden-Harris administration to deal with the case of ethnic cleansing and genocide taking place in Jammu & Kashmir by the Indian occupation.

As India shows its true colours as a fascist state and the level of tolerance is receding at an alarming pace, the task of Kashmiri nationalists will become easy as far as exposing New Delhi and drawing support for their emancipation is concerned.

“The US presidential election stirred as much excitement in Kashmir as in other parts of the world, partly because a lot of Trump’s political messaging and policy measures pitted him directly against Muslim societies”, says Shakir Mir in an op-ed piece published by the online paper The Wire on 10 November 2020.

“His controversial ‘Muslim ban’, his decision to establish embassy in Jerusalem and his shrill rhetoric against Muslim immigrants had already made him unpopular among Muslims. However, in the Kashmir Valley, the euphoria over Trump’s defeat was also sparked by the realization that senior US Democrats have publicly called out the Modi government over human rights violations in Jammu & Kashmir”.

The Wire quotes Mudasir Lone, a student from Pulwama, as saying, “A lot of Kashmiris view Biden’s victory positively. Given the past statements of Democrats in the US, there’s optimism that we might see some kind of changes, particularly in the domain of human rights and civil freedoms”.

As relative euphoria in the Indian occupied Jammu & Kashmir emanating from the electoral victory of Joseph Biden on 3 November 2020 American presidential elections will fizzle out in the days to come, one can expect political realism to surface. Whether the Biden-Harris administration, along with its European allies, be able to exert adequate pressure on the Modi regime to adopt a flexible approach on J&K and ease repressive measures undertaken since 5 August 2019 remains to be seen.

Contrary to Western narratives, Wang Wenbin's comments on Myanmar underline the need for stability, not endorsements

By Hamzah Rifaat Hussain

Ahead of a scheduled U.N. Security Council meeting on the military coup in Myanmar, China's foreign ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin said that all actions taken by the international community in the country should contribute towards political and social stability in the country. It is critical that China's narrative on the situation is viewed impartially instead of a yardstick to lambast Beijing on alleged passivity over the coup. The bilateral relationship of Myanmar and China is also defined by strong military ties and developmental cooperation yet recent events make a convenient case for many western governments and analysts to equate China's silence as tacit support or endorsement of military coups. The truth is that Beijing's relationship with Naypyitaw is beyond parochial interests which require further examination for a holistic understanding.

Nowhere did Mr. Wenbin mention China as an endorser of the military coup nor were his comments indicative of partisanship. Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that Beijing has sponsored or supported coups across the globe and those leveling allegations from across the Pacific have a checkered history themselves when it comes to promoting democracy or human rights at the expense of dictatorships. For example, Washington D.C. has supported numerous dynasties in oil rich countries in the Middle East as well as support the Shah of Iran with direct sponsorship. Systematic human rights violations were often tolerated as long as the governments supported American foreign policy objectives in the region including military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan or overt and covert support for proxy groups in conflict zones such as Syria and Yemen. On China, there is scant understanding from American academics of Beijing's official policy of non-interference as underlined by first Premier Zhou En Lai's five principles of coexistence.

In fact China's foreign policy has been defined by multifaceted cooperation focusing on development and investments regardless of which political dispensation has taken hold. Analysts at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies however, have said that Beijing is overjoyed with recalibrating its engagement with Myanmar after recognizing new realities on ground. Many experts also believe that China will attempt to fill a vacuum for the government of Ming Aung Hlaing if American sanctions come to bite Myanmar. Such bizarre assertions have been echoed by Japan's State Minister of Defense Yasuhide Nakayama who believes that Western democracies risk pushing Myanmar into Beijing's camp if the response to the coup thwarts avenues of cooperation with the military leadership. None of these assumptions however, underline the fundamental principles of China's relationship with countries such as Myanmar, where relationships go beyond internal politics and is based on trading partnerships which are divorced from Western attempts of defanging one party



at the expense of the other. This nuance on Myanmar has been highlighted by associate professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technology University in Singapore, Dr. Li Mingjiang who said that Beijing wanted stability in the country, not a coup.

On the other hand, American support for democracies and dictatorships has been duplicitous from the outset. Respective American administrations were to fund, sponsor and support dictatorships and coups subjectively and selectively where Washington's support for democracies in country's such as Syria stood in stark contrast to states in the Middle East with various administrations prioritizing economic ties over principles. When the same yardstick is applied by Beijing as a non-interventionist policy, castigation is directed at China's alleged passivity or endorsement of military dictatorships. There is no evidence to suggest that Beijing has sponsored military juntas, whereas voluminous evidence exists demonstrating that Washington D.C. has either tacitly or overtly turned a blind to democratic transitions, particularly from left wing political parties which disagree with American policies.

In retrospect, China has worked hard to foster strong ties with the now ousted Aung San Suu Kyi who had assured Beijing that she did not view China as a threat or an enemy. She also paid numerous visits to China and backed President Xi Jinping's One Belt One Road Initiative consisting of energy corridors and infrastructure projects. The BCIM portion of the OBOR which is also known as the Bangladesh China India and Myanmar corridor for example features Myanmar in its strategic calculus. All of these facts indicate that China has an all friendship and partnership with Myanmar based on nonpartisanship and non-intervention. Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Wang Wenbin's comments must be taken at face value.

Myanmar takes the lead

By M.A. NIAZI

Well, it's a relief to see that someone is patriotic, even though that someone is in Myanmar, not Pakistan. The overthrow of the Aung San Suu Kyii government would have raised some hopes, but it also showed that the Myanmar Army could do with some polish. For example, no one thought of declaring her a security risk.

Of course, Myanmar is disadvantaged, in not having a clearly defined enemy. Such an enemy is a great advantage, because it then becomes clear who one is working for, if one is a security risk. After all, there must be someone to whom one can reveal national secrets to. I mean, try to imagine being a security risk in somewhere like Ghana. Who would one reveal secrets to? Togo, Guinea or the Ivory Coast? If Ghana was to carry out a nuclear test, its neighbors would probably be the last to find out.

Another thing they forgot is corruption. Not a single kyat has been mentioned, even though that is one of the easiest things to say. As of this moment, no lieutenant-general has been put in charge of a NAB-like body. Nor has any famous sportsman been got ready. True, Myanmar hasn't got any achievement in the sport it's most into, which is soccer. There's also local kickboxing, but that does not ordinarily lead to having daughters out of wedlock. Aung San Suu Kyii can claim a foreign spouse, but she has the disadvantage that she stayed married to him till his death in 1999. He wouldn't have been known as Mr. Ten Percent, but Dr Ten Percent, because he was an academic, a historian. She has not married since, not even any of the Buddhist monks who have been willing.

However, the reason for the coup, was rigging in last November's election, the rigging was intense, carried out by the Burmese voter, who voted for Aung's National League for Democracy in droves, turning up their noses at parties the Myanmar Army supported, equally in droves. If nothing else, it showed how unpatriotic and shiftless are the people of Myanmar, for failing to vote for the people who had guided the country in its time of difficulty.



At the same time, some namby-pamby liberals might imagine that the soldiers didn't care about the covid-19 pandemic. But they do. Suu Kyii has been charged with violating the covid-19 laws, though it isn't clear if she didn't socially distance, or whether she didn't wear a mask. The election-related charges will be coming later.

The problem is, there isn't a replacement in sight. Myanmar might be a former British colony, but it wasn't one for cricket to take root, and the national sport is a form of kickboxing. None of those kickboxers have become world-famous, or ever won a World Cup. In fact, I'm not sure if there is a World Cup in kickboxing. No kickboxer has ever built a cancer hospital either, and none is known to eat only organic food. In short, the cupboard is bare, and the Army chief has got to take over himself.

Of course, some of the most important information has been kept quiet. What was the coup named? Operation 'Fairplay'? Or 'Golden Pagoda'? Or what? In this time of covid-19, a name is more important than otherwise.

I wonder if the PDM has given a name to their Long March, which they will begin on

March 25. Well, why not Pakistan Day? Kashmir Solidarity Day turned into an extended weekend for many this year, as it fell on a Friday, leaving all those with a five-day week with a three-day weekend.

The actor Christopher Plummer, who gained prominence as Captain von Trapp in *The Sound of Music* has passed because of covid-19, aged 95.

Well, Pakistan lost the actress Neelo, who had been the wife of film director Riaz Shahid and mother of actor Shan. One of the noticeable things about Neelo was that she didn't become the mother, as so many actresses did after they stopped casting her as a heroine. Frankly, some heroines are better remembered as mothers. Usually of Sultan Rahi, then increasingly of Shan, but now of nobody (because films are not being made).

Though it isn't clear how we lost Neelo, covid-19 has to be suspected. Even if she didn't have it, MQM supremo Altaf Hussain does, and has gone into self-isolation. How have the mighty fallen! Time was, this would have been the signal for strange scenes and ebullient events in Karachi and Hyderabad. But now, it seems, no one seems to care.

Pakistan and Djibouti Cementing Mutual Ties

Pakistan is eyeing to benefit from renewable energy especially in the fields of geothermal energy, wind, and solar power and boost economic as well as the commercial relationship with Djibouti, which is an important geostrategic location.

To cement the relationship and find a delegation of Pakistani parliamentarian visited Djibouti. Members of the delegation talking to The Truth International said Pakistan considers Djibouti's location, a strategically important route to both global trade and regional security. Further that the country is positioned next to Bab-el-Mandeb, the strait that links the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden.

Highlighting the importance of African country delegation members further stated that The port connects to the juncture of sea and land routes between the Far East, the Arab-Persian Gulf, Africa, Europe, and the East Coast of the United States, hence holding vital importance to the world economy. Average of 20 K ships or 20 percent of global exports, pass through the port on route to their final destinations, opined Pakistani parliamentarians.

One of the delegation member Senator Muhammad Saif Ali said "We want to utilize Djibouti's prime geostrategic location and its modern development infrastructure. We are all the more convinced that the partnerships that we are considering in Djibouti will lead to success, as our two nations share many heritages."

During the visit The President of the Djibouti Republic, Ismail Omer Guelleh welcomed the Pakistani delegation led by the Secretary-General of the International Congress of the parliament, Muhammad Ali Saif, at the palace of the Republic, in January 2021. From Djibouti, Mr. Mohamed Ismail Youssef, Member of the National Assembly, and the Secretary General of the Presidency Mohamed Abdillahi Wais took part in several meetings with delegation.

The representatives from Pakistan included Senator Mirza Muhammad Afridi, Chairman of the Standing Senate Committee on Trade and of the Policy Council, Fayaz Thaheem of the International Parliamentarians Congress, and some Pakistan businessmen, especially Imran Muhammad Ilyas, Djibouti based Pakistani businessman.

Djibouti's overall population is slightly less than one million people with a 94% Muslim population. Despite the small physical and economic size of Djibouti, it holds a great significance to global trade and military security. The country's political stability and strategic location have been attracting foreign military bases from developed nations like the US, Japan, and several other EU countries. In 2016, China announced its first permanent overseas deployment in Djibouti. It is also predicted that the country can easily be transformed into the Dubai of Africa.

Muhammad Ali Saif, while talking to the press in Djibouti mentioned Pakistan's ever-growing interest in the prospects



of investments in Djibouti. He said, "We want to utilize Djibouti's prime geostrategic location and its modern development infrastructure. We are all the more convinced that the partnerships that we are considering in Djibouti will lead to success, as our two nations share many heritages."

The distinguished delegation also had the honor of meeting with the Minister of Energy in Djibouti, Yonis Ali Guedi, on the premises of the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (MERN) located in the ministerial city. Djibouti is one of those countries that is ambitious to use 100% green energy by 2035 which is one of the biggest reasons along with the country's geostrategic position that attracts many international investors.

Pakistani delegation also had been observant on identifying the economic and commercial opportunities that Djibouti has to offer, particularly in the energy and mining fields.

The Minister of Energy and Natural Resources in the presence of several Djiboutian parliamentarians and Pakistani

Moreover, the Pakistani representatives met with the Budget Minister, Naval Chief, Coastguard Chief, and various Ministers including Member of Parliament.

This visit of Pakistani delegates stems from an invitation from the President of the Djibouti Assembly, Mohamed Ali Houmed, who visited Pakistan at the end of December 2020.

During the visit, Mohamed Ali Houmed was offered a position of the President of International Parliamentary Congress (IPC), which he accepted wholeheartedly. As a goodwill gesture, Pakistan presented rice bags for the people of Djibouti as a gift from Inter Services Public Relations Pakistan (ISPR).

Furthermore, Senator Mirza Afridi has been appointed the Honorary Council General of Djibouti in Pakistan by Djibouti's government. Overall, the Pakistani delegation considers this visit a great success and a significant step towards strengthening the diplomatic relations.

Finding the Mysterious Pakistani Owners of Luxe Dubai Properties

Pakistan wanted them busted but the UAE was not interested. Will the outcome be different this time around?

By Azeem Waqas

The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has once again said it intends to investigate some 1,913 Pakistanis who purchased properties worth of PKR 122 billion in Dubai in 2019.

According to the Dubai Land Development Authority (DLDA) data, Pakistan is among the top six investing countries whose nationals made investments in real estate sector in 2019. Among other big league investing nations are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and India.

“The Dubai Land Department Authority is sharing the details of these Pakistani investors”, said a senior FBR official told. “The FBR is going after them and would send notices to such peoples who have not declared their assets”.

The official who spoke to The Truth International on condition of anonymity did not know how many of the investors under the spyglass held UAE residence permits at the time they invested in Dubai 2019. Asked if the FBR hoped to receive tax details of those among the investors under scrutiny who held the iqamas, the official was evasive.

Pakistan has been struggling hard to get the details of those Pakistanis who are purchasing properties through Permanent Residence Certificate (PRC) – popularly known as iqama. The FBR had sent several letters to Dubai tax authorities requesting tax information and bank account details of Pakistani Iqama holders. On every occasion, Dubai tax authorities have declined the request, citing legal obligations.

“This fishing exercise would never yield any tangible results until and unless the FBR sends specific cases of individuals or companies who are purchasing luxury properties for the last so many years in Dubai”, the official said. “In fact, FBR has never asked Dubai authorities to share tax details of particular individual or company. They always send a general letter seeking bulk of information”.

According to FBR, Pakistanis who hold UAE Iqama are treated as UAE nationals and the UAE government has not provided information about them.

Former Chairman FBR Shabbar Zaidi says he tried to broach the iqama abuse issue as well as a revision of bilateral tax treaty with UAE but the initiative got nowhere. “UAE authorities declined to provide details of Iqama holders without giving any specific reason”, he told the The Truth International (TTI).

The official speaking off-the-record scoffed at Shabbar Zaidi’s logic, maintaining it was insane to change Pakistan’s laws and implement it on Dubai. “The world would ask what we



are smoking”, he said. “Also, when you borrow a billion dollars from Dubai, how can you ask Dubai to play by Pakistan’s rules?”

Under the avoidance of the double taxation treaty with the UAE, information can only be requested if a company is registered in someone’s name. It is not permissible to seek the general data of all Pakistani investors from Dubai.

During his tenure, Shabbar Zaidi argued Iqama was a residence certificate which did not allow huge investments, but Dubai authorities would not have any of it.

Supreme Court of Pakistan was told in 2018 that Pakistanis have stashed USD 150 billion abroad. Zaidi suggests a methodology to trace out the Pakistanis stashing big money abroad. “You want the names of Pakistani owners of USD 120 to 150 billion held abroad? Start with the names of all Pakistani foreign account holders. Identify debits from 1992 to 2018 exceeding USD 100,000 – the trail will lead you to straight to the big stashes.”

Pakistan has recently enacted Mutual Legal Assistance (Criminal Matters) Act 2020. However, changing domestic law is not sufficient. Willingness of the United Arab Emirates is key.

Immovable Properties purchased by Pakistanis’ in Dubai are categorized as offshore assets. The FBR can investigate Pakistanis who are offshore evader(s) or offshore enabler(s). However, before initiating investigation, it is important for FBR to get definitive information.

Definite information in hand, the FBR can initiate an investigation under income tax laws.

Data of Pakistanis having residence through investment in UAE was provided to Pakistan. Data is shared each year in September but according to FBR data shared by UAE is

insignificant as the individuals mentioned in the list had no significant balance in accounts. Many had already availed amnesty schemes introduced from time to time.

Residence through investment in real estate requires minimum investment of AED 1 million and the UAE has not provided information of these big investors which hold real significance.

According to FBR most of the Pakistanis have declared their Dubai properties in the tax amnesties of 2018 and 2019. In UAE 1,365 properties belonging to 537 individuals have been found while 316 people having assets in Dubai had availed amnesty scheme of 2018. Likewise, in 2019 about 346 billion PKR worth declarations were made only from Dubai.

In November 2017, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) had confirmed that it has traced out 100 Pakistanis who purchased properties in Dubai and an investigation was started but there was no follow-up of the report and no one knows the fate of the inquiry.

Similarly, the Supreme Court was informed by the FIA that 220 new individuals had been found holding 656 properties in the UAE, but again there was no follow-up.

In the past, the FBR has failed to take any action against investors who have been buying luxury properties even without the knowledge of State Bank of Pakistan and the Ministry of Finance.

In 2019, Pakistan officials held a meeting with authorities in Dubai. The parties agreed to exchange information of thousands of Pakistanis who had purchased lands worth billions of dollars. Director General (International Taxes), FBR, also approached his counterpart in the UAE to take up the issue with their tax authorities.

In addition, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Finance Abdul Hafeez Shaikh wrote a letter to the OECD to start crackdown against all the countries that are selling the 'artificial' residence under the cover of Iqama.

International Tax Expert and Supreme Court Lawyer Ilyas Zafar agrees the UAE has been reluctant in the past in sharing details of iqama holders, but says things are taking a turn for the better. "It appears that UAE has realized the gravity of the situation and appears to be finally opening up its cooperation internationally in light of global efforts to curb the menace of tax evasion and money laundering under the garb of iqama and other schemes", he told The Truth International while discussing Dubai properties of Pakistanis.

Zafar is of the view that UAE is not providing details of iqama holders because it regards them as its residents, who the UAE authorities believe are not covered by the Pak-UAE mutual tax treaties. "The UAE is not cooperating in the provision of actionable bank account information of Pakistani tax residents who are purportedly hiding behind the Iqama-based artificial residential status".

He said that Stance of Pakistan regarding iqama is that it is a 'work permit' but UAE regard it as residency – and maintains information on residents cannot be provided. Pakistan took up the matter with the OECD who agreed with the Pakistani interpretation and

assured Islamabad to take up the matter with the UAE. However, the UAE is still non-cooperative in these sensitive matters.

Under the Pakistani income tax law, a person who conceals an offshore asset (offshore evader) with revenue impact of PKR 10 million can be imprisoned for up to three years along with a fine of up to PKR 500,000.

Offshore enablers can be punished with up to seven years of imprisonment along with a fine of up to PKR 500,000. As well, the FBR can publish the names of offshore evaders and offshore enablers.

Ilyas Zafar says activities like hundi, hawala, over-invoicing, smuggling and schemes like Residence by Investment (RBI), Citizenship by Investment (CBI) and Iqama are often exploited to siphon illegal money or to evade taxes – among other offenses.

On the enforcement side, Zafar says the FBR can request the Secretary, Ministry of Interior to make a formal mutual legal assistance request to the authorities in the UAE. Upon receiving such request, the federal government can make a request to the UAE for assistance to collect of evidence and other related matters under Pakistan's new mutual legal assistance law.

"UAE fears that it will lead to shattering of investor's confidence who are an important source of foreign investment and thus play an important role in the development of the UAE," says Ilyas Zafar. "It's a common perception in the UAE that if the authorities divulge such details, investors' confidence will be shaken, which is detrimental to the interests of the Emirates.

"Pakistan should make all out efforts to make bilateral mutual legal assistance agreements with UAE for disclosing identity of tax evaders. It is important to address concerns of UAE, if any.



"Besides that, there is a dire need to raise hue and cry in all regional and international forums that exchange of information of tax evaders is a collective responsibility of all nations. Pakistan should ask United Nations to impose financial restrictions on countries who are non-cooperative in such matters".

Commenting on the situation, FBR Spokesman Nadeem Rizwi said, "FBR is aware of these properties in Dubai but it cannot change tax law. The Parliament has power to revise such agreements".

The writer is an investigative journalist.

Empty & Tied: The Hands That Work the Hardest

Despite decades of well-meaning efforts to stamp them out, why do the twin evils of bonded and juvenile labour refuse to die down?



By Asif Malik

Have you ever wondered why the hands that work the hardest are empty and tied? If a person is unemployed, their poverty is somewhat understandable. But it is beyond comprehension why those who generate wealth for their employers remain poor.

Brick kiln workers are a case in point: They work their hearts out with little protection against the elements, often as family units with pregnant women and small children contributing – and yet they are among the poorest of the poor in our country.

Allama Iqbal could be thinking of these people when he wrote, in his famous poem “Lenin in the Presence of God”:

“You are omnipotent and just, but in your world

Life is unbearably harsh for the toiling hand”

A recent report on the juvenile and bonded labourers shows how the labourers are bound to work at brick-kilns and in other nonregulated industries even along with the minors of their families, sometime round the clock and without any break.

The issue of juvenile bonded labourers was highlighted in a pro bono petition filed in the Islamabad High Court (IHC). IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah constituted a commission comprising senior lawyers, human rights activists and a senior journalist to ascertain the miseries of brick-kilns labourers.

However, in addition to the brick-kilns labourers who have been bounded with advance loan or peshgi the mine workers are also confined within compounds bounded by barbed wires at excavation sites.

How to establish a just relationship

between capital and labour is one of the most important and complex questions that every society has faced in every age. None of us have an easy answer - anyone who tries to come up with a simple and easy solution is bound to fail.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan in the case of Darshan Masih had declared bonded labour illegal and had waived the debts of all the workers. The advance system was declared a thing of the past by the law – but whether the court order is being implemented is a different story.

During the commission’s proceedings, an opinion emerged from government officials that the issue of bonded labourers was simple and straightforward. The solution is to close all the kilns in Islamabad at least for now - and then reopen them. Permission to reopen could then be granted on the condition that the advance system will not be

allowed to come again. Little do our exalted mandarin realise that the biggest loser from the closure of the kilns is the labour.

Besides, there are other industries where the labourers face similar situation. The advance system is practiced in agriculture, fisheries, mining and carpet making. So even if the exploitative system is successfully banished from the kilns, what about these other industries?

Another important point is that many of those who have analysed this issue before are of the opinion that there is no need for pre-existing and forced labour in some industries, such as football in Sialkot. There are industries where the advance system is prevalent but workers are not subjected to forced labour – and there are industries where workers are not given an advance, but they are still victims of a kind of slavery.

The solution may be establishment of Unions for industries. The root of the problem is that at present our environment as a whole is not conducive to union-building.

Another solution will be the written agreements. In Pakistan, the contracts between the capitalist and the labourer are seldom written. When the agreement is in writing it will be relatively easy for the worker to claim his right.

A new, comprehensive and common sense labour law could also help. Dozens of labour laws have been made in Pakistan. All are written in English, meaning they are not accessi-

ble to the illiterate workers. A labour-friendly law will have to be in a local language.

Then there is the matter of provision of resources to the Labour Department. At present, the Labour Department in Islamabad is virtually dormant due to lack of resources. The commission recommended waiver of advance loans commonly known as peshgi to enable labourers to work as per their free will.

Subsequently, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah directed the district administration to launch awareness campaign for the labourers telling them that they are not under any compulsion to work at the brick-kiln against their will and free to switch the job.

The commission found that the practice of extending advance loan or Vicious Debt is overwhelmingly prevalent in the entire sector of brick-kilns without exception which has resulted in sector-wide continuation and prevalence of bonded labour system in brick kilns despite its abolition by the Abolition Act, 1992.

“No brick kiln is registered either with the Labour Department, ICT, social security institutions, or with any other government authority relevant to the issue in hand”, the report said “Labourers working in brick-kilns are not registered either with the Labour Department, ICT or with any other social security institutions.”

Explaining the juvenile labourers the report

stated that “Most of the bonded labour lives at the premises of brick-kilns along with their families. Womenfolk and children are encouraged to informally work with the heads of the families. They are encouraged to work as a family unit, instead of as individual labourers. This practise violates many of the labour rights of womenfolk and children.

The commission recommended that the Labour Department, ICT ensure registration of all brick-kilns under the Factories Act, 1934, within three months of 1 February 2021.

The Labour Department, ICT, shall also ensure execution of employment contracts and the maintenance of prescribed registers, under the relevant labour laws, the report recommended adding that the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) should be directed to ensure issuance of CNICs to brick kiln workers, and registration of their families/children by sending special teams to brick-kilns within three months.

The report says no child below the age of 14 years shall be employed or permitted to work at any brick kiln, in line with Part II of the Schedule of the Employment of Children Act, 1991, kilns being part of the building and construction industry.

It advocates for every engagement or appointment of a worker at a brick-kiln to be subject to a written contract in the prescribed form, drafted preferably in Urdu or a regional language.



Why Pakistan Must Stop Smoking Now

One of the countries hardest hit by the global tobacco epidemic, Pakistan must act now to banish this preventable cause of disease and death



By Maheen Dhanani

Tobacco isn't something new. Indigenous to the Americas, the plant has an extensive history with the Mayan Empire where it was used for spiritual and medicinal purposes as early as 5000 BCE. The introduction of this plant to the rest of the world from the Americas dates back to the times of Christopher Columbus.

Fast forward to the present day and the global tobacco epidemic kills an estimated six million people every year and the World Health Organization says the number is set to soar to eight million by the year 2030. This is an alarming 33 percent increase which should not go ignored by governments. Some 70 percent of these deaths occur in developing low- and middle-income countries.

The task on the hand of the governments of these countries – including Pakistan – is to jump into action to stem this preventable cause of disease and death. The urgency of this task cannot be overemphasized – especially in Pakistan where we have a vast history of the officialdom waiting for a crisis to break out and then fixing it rather than taking preventive action in the first place.

We do not have the best healthcare delivery system to counter this if it escalates. On the bright side, we can tackle a significant percentage of this preventable cause of disease and death if we start now.

The tobacco industry just isn't limited to companies that facilitate the growth and sale of this plant. It also includes organizations that cater to tobacco shipment, commercialisation, lobbying, promotion, and distribution. This includes non-governmental organizations as well and stakeholders that conduct research wholly sponsored by these tobacco companies for their own purpose.

Although cigarettes look very simple and basic, they are the products of toxic and deadly engineering. Cigarette smoke contains over 7000 chemicals - Arsenic, one of the compounds present in cigarette smoke, is also present in rat poison and Nicotine is widely used in the making of insecticides.

Lung cancer and mouth cancer are most commonly found in Pakistani males. The eyes, nose, and throat are indefinitely affected by cigarette smoke, but even more than that it makes its way into the lungs, then the bloodstream and thereby the entire body of the smoker.

What is worse, tobacco smoke is equally hazardous for passive or second hand smokers. They are prone to cancer and other life threatening diseases as well.

According to a World Health Organization report from 2013 on the estimate of smoking prevalence in Pakistan, 31.8 percent of men, 5.8 percent of women, and 19.1 percent of

Pakistan’s adult population currently uses tobacco in one form or another. Among youth, 13.3 percent of boys, 6.6 percent of girls and 10.7 percent of all youth currently use tobacco or a tobacco product.

The engagement of youth in such activities is indeed unfortunate. Tobacco use among the youth is undeniably a paediatric disease and a paediatric epidemic.

Pakistan has been a party to the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) since 2005 but is still lagging in effective tobacco control and legislation.

Recent surveys show that cigarette prices in Pakistan are one of the cheapest in the world. Comparing it with a standardized dollar currency, the average cigarette pack is for \$2.83 in Sri Lanka, \$1.65 in India, \$0.84 in Nepal, \$0.51 in Afghanistan and \$0.33 in Pakistan.

High and cheap accessibility of the product only promotes it and creates a slippery slope for the users.

Many people are with the belief that cigarette smoking, ingesting, or even vaping tobacco is just a ‘bad habit’. They fail to realize the adverse consequences it poses to health and life.

In a country like Pakistan, in which everything ties to culture and even religion at some point or the other and in some way or the other, concerted efforts must be made towards educating the general public about the harmful health effects of tobacco consumption.

Like many topics that shouldn't be but are excluded from public school curriculum, the Ministry of Education must ensure students are taught about tobacco hazards at a young age. We have the alarming data to prove why this is an absolute necessity. It must be included in speeches in religious gatherings and the provincial governments must act in concert with the federal authorities if any progress is to be made.

Successful nationwide anti-tobacco campaigns have been carried out internationally and are highly encouraged by the WHO. In the United States of America, patients who suffer from tobacco related diseases can claim health care cost recovery from tobacco companies.

With no such policies in place for cancer prevention and tobacco control and the use of tobacco growing by the day with little to no education about the subject for the general public, the government must spring to action and work towards innovative solutions.

The writer is a specialist in healthcare services administration currently working in the telemedicine industry in Pakistan.

In 2011, 13th February was declared International Radio Day by member states of UNESCO and was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2012 as an International Day. Since then, February 13 has become World Radio Day (WRD).

Radio is a strong medium to celebrate humanity with its diverse cultures and mannerisms. It is a platform whereby democratic discourse is given space and worldwide, it is one of the most consumed mediums. It has the temerity to serve communities, nations and reach the smallest of units where other voices may not be heard.



CELEBRATIONS IN 2021

On the occasion of World Radio Day 2021 (WRD 2021), UNESCO calls on radio stations to celebrate this event’s 10th anniversary and the more than 110 years of radio.

This edition of WRD is divided into three main sub-themes:

- **EVOLUTION. The world changes, radio evolves.**

This sub-theme refers to the resilience of the radio, to its sustainability.

- **INNOVATION. The world changes, radio adapts and innovates.**

Radio has had to adapt to new technologies to remain the go-to medium of mobility, accessible everywhere and to everyone.

- **CONNECTION. The world changes, radio connects.**

This sub-theme highlights radio’s services to our society—natural disasters, socio-economic crises, epidemics, etc.

The Rise of the Ayatollah

Forty-two years ago this month, Ayatollah Khomeini rose to the leadership of a new Iran. How did this transformation come about?



By Azmat Mumtaz Saqib

Watching a revolution is like watching a hurricane. At the end, you get either a rainbow or a flood. For Ayatollah Khomeini and other Islamists, the seventies ended with a rainbow. For the United States, however, Iran is still flooded 42 years after the Revolution that rocked the world on 11 February 1979. Its trademark chants of “Death to Israel, Death to America” still reverberate in Iran.

The seventies started with the death of President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. From French West Sahara to Egypt to Syria, from India to Indochina, the majority of Third World countries were coming under socialist influence.

To get an idea of what the seventies must have felt like, consider this: The World was hit by the Yom Kippur Arab-Israeli war in 1973, followed by the Arab oil embargo, the 1975 American defeat in Vietnam, the 1977 takeover by Pakistan Army deposing PM Z A Bhutto, the Egypt-Israel peace accord in 1978, and the Russian takeover of Afghanistan in 1979.

At the outset of that eventful decade in 1971, one person, Iran’s Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, attracted the world leaders by celebrating his Western style monarchy as a legacy of 2,500 years of Persian Empire.

Through his decade-long White Revolution, started in early sixties, he westernized the Iranians by pushing back traditional and religious lifestyles, introducing female voting rights, marginalizing clergy, and rapid industrialization.

Enriched by oil money after 1973, Iran embarked upon arming its defense forces with the latest weaponry and advanced military training from the US and Israel. The Shah of Iran was eyeing to become a mini-superpower of Middle East and Asia, a deterrent against Soviet Russia and its Socialist Arab neighbors.

But Alas! On 16 January 1979, under pressure and on the run from the Ayatollahs, the Shah left Iran with tears in his eyes. How could this happen, especially when Tehran housed Asia’s CIA headquarters? Let’s glance through the early history of Shah’s ‘modern’ Iran for clues.

In the backdrop of Anglo-Russian direct control of north and south regions of Iran, Colonel Reza Khan, Head of the Persian Cossack Brigade overthrew the last Qajar King in 1921 and made Sayyid Zia Al-Din Tabataba’i the Prime Minister. Under pressure from clergy, Reza Khan abandoned the idea of Kemal Ataturk style republic and declared himself the king and founded the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79). British companies had already discovered oil in southwest Iran in 1908. They kept most of the revenue and secured extraordinary legal immunity for themselves.

After becoming the king, Reza Shah (previously Khan) introduced secular courts overseen by state bureaucracies and banned the custom of women wearing veils. He forced modernization and westernization and marginalized the clergy. He renegotiated British oil concessions and in the 1930s expanded trade with Germany to counter threat of

Anglo-Soviet military takeover. After an Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941, his refusal to sever ties with Germans resulted in his abdication in favour of his 21-year-old son Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

Young Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was viewed as a puppet of Western powers. In 1951 Nationalist parliamentarian Dr Muhammad Mosaddeq and parliament forced the Shah to nationalize Imperial Iranian Oil Company (British Petroleum PLC). The British company left Iran causing fall in oil revenues.

Under pressure from Britain and America, Shah tried to reverse the decision. A power struggle ensued and in 1953 the Shah escaped from Iran after being defeated by the Dr Mosaddeq, the massively popular prime minister. Backed by CIA and MI6, pro-royal elements brought back the Shah, tried the PM for treason and kept him under house arrest till his death in 1967.

The Shah maintained close relationship with the United States, both regimes sharing a fear of the southward expansion of the Soviet Union. Leftist and Islamist group attacked his government (often from outside Iran as they were suppressed within) for violating the Iranian constitution, political corruption and political oppression by the SAVAK (Secret Police).

Shia ulema have historically had significant influence in Iran. Among the Twelver Imamia Shia of Iran having a Marja-e-Taqlid (a supreme Legal Authority or the source of emulation) is obligatory for every practicing Shia. Besides religious guidance, functions of Marja-e-Taqlid is the collection of Zakat (1/40 of Income) and Khums (1/5 of Income). There are several marjas at any given time.

Thus, the Shia ulema of Iran were a source of financial support for the needy and had close links with the Bazaaris (Traders). Ulema also held large tracts of land through Waqf (Trust Property).

In 1891, a fatwa by Ayatollah Sherazi led to a Tobacco boycott and the ensuing public protest effectively destroyed an unpopular concession granted by the Shah giving a British company monopoly over buying and selling Tobacco in Iran. Then during the 1905-1911 the Qajar King had to introduce constitutional reforms, again pushed forward by ulema.

Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution first came to public prominence in 1963 when he led opposition to the Shah and his program of reforms known as the “White Revolution” which aimed to break up land holdings (even owned by ulema) for distribution among landless farmers, allow women to vote and religious minorities to hold office, and finally grant women legal equality in marital dealings.

Khomeini declared that the Shah had “embarked on the destruction of Islam in Iran” and publicly denounced the Shah as a “wretched miserable” man. Following Khomeini’s arrest on 5 June 1963, three days of major riots erupted throughout Iran, with Khomeini’s supporters claiming 15,000 killed by police.

After eight months of house arrest, Khomeini was released but he continued his agitation against the Shah condemning Iran’s relations with Israel and its “capitulations” to the US. In November 1964 he was re-arrested and sent into exile, where he remained for 14 years until the revolution in 1979.

Despite political repression the budding Islamic revival spearheaded by Khomeini began to undermine the idea of Westernization as progress that was the basis of the Shah’s secular regime. Jalal Al-e-Ahmad’s idea of Gharbzadegi – that Western culture was a plague or an intoxication to be eliminated took hold – as did Ali Shariati’s vision of Islam as the one true liberator of the Third World from oppressive colonialism, neo-colonialism and capitalism; and Ayatollah Motahhiri’s popularized retelling of the Shia faith all spread and gained listeners, readers and supporters.

Most importantly, Ayatollah Khomeini preached that revolt, and especially martyrdom against injustice and tyranny was part of Shia Islam, and that Muslims should reject the influence of both capitalism and communism which the slogan “Neither East, Nor West – Islamic Republic”.



To replace the Shah’s regime Ayatollah Khomeini introduced the ideology of Velayat-e-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) as Government, postulating that Muslims required “guardianship” in the form of rule by the leading Islamic Jurist or Jurists.

Such rule would protect Islam from deviation from Sharia Law, and in so doing eliminate poverty, injustice, and the plundering of Muslim lands by foreign unbelievers. And this duty could be performed while waiting for the Imam Ghaeb (imam in Occultation) thus removing the lacuna of Shia fiqh for legitimacy to rule in the absence of Imam Ghaeb.

Publicly, Ayatollah Khomeini focused more on socioeconomic problems of the Shah’s regime (corruption, unequal income, and development issues). Khomeini’s book on Velayat-e-Faqih was widely distributed among students, ulema and the business community. A powerful and efficient network of opposition began to develop inside Iran, employing mosques sermons and smuggling audiocassettes of recorded speeches by Khomeini, among other means.

Beside Khomeini’s followers, in the cities and educational institutions secular leftist and Islamic modernist students as well as guerrilla groups rendered great sacrifices. Young educated males and females were abducted from such institutions to unspecified locations and for indefinite periods. But they spearheaded the resistance in cities.

The leftist guerrilla groups (e.g. Fedayeen-e-Khalq) as well as Islamic socialists (Mujahedeen-e-Khalq) unsuccessfully tried to overthrow the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from 1971 to 1979. Yet during the final days of the revolution, they delivered the regime a coup de grace in street fighting. The militancy training

these groups had received from PLO camps in Lebanon came in handy at this juncture.

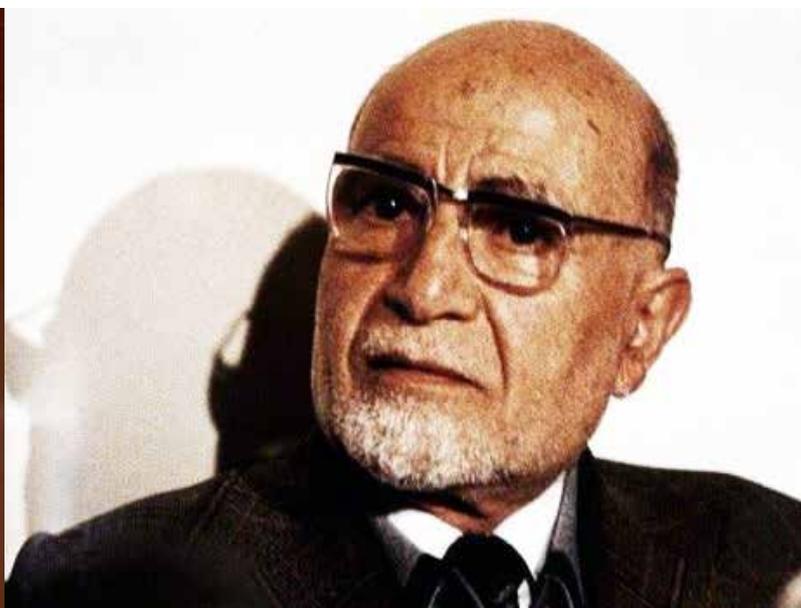
Constitutionalists wanted Iranian constitution of 1906 to be restored. Prominent in it was Mehdi Bazargan and his liberal, moderate Islamic group Freedom Movement and the more secular National Front. Very notable theologian Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmoud Taleghani leading these parties favoured rationality in Islam and also supported Dr Ali Shariati's teachings. Tudeh Party's communist followers along with leftist guerrillas of Fedayeen-e-Khalq were severely suppressed by Shah's security forces. The Islamist group that prevailed ultimately contained the core supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Democrat Jimmy Carter was sworn in as the 39th President of the US on 20 January 1977. He urged Shah to allow more democratic freedom in Iran. This infused the Anti-Shah movement with new vigour. In January 1978, former PM Amir Abbas Hoveyda wrote a

To appease the public, the Shah released 1,000 political prisoners on his birthday and arrested former ministers but nothing could stop the avalanche of revolutionaries, since they knew that no retaliation would happen if they participated in demonstrations.

In December 1978, the Ashura gathering of millions in Tehran became a pro-Khomeini demonstration. Now Shah was advised by his close confidants to appoint a new Prime Minister. He appointed Shahpour Bakhtiar, follower of Dr Musaddeq as PM, who took oath only on condition that Shah would leave the country.

In January 1979 leaders from the US, Britain, France and Germany in an already scheduled meeting came to the consensus that new government in Iran would be pro-west and not communist. Giscard d'Estiang, French President conveyed a message from Jimmy Carter to Khomeini (Staying in France after expulsion from Iraq) that if he supports PM Shahpour Bakhtiar's government, America would ensure Shah leaves Iran. Khomeini responded by



derogatory article against Khomeini in official newspaper labelling him a British agent.

The backlash was swift and spectacular. Riots erupted all over Iran and several lives were lost when security forces opened fire on demonstrators. Forty days later, chehlum (40th Day mourning) procession in honour of the martyrs resulted in more bloodshed.

Violence snowballed as this cycle of Chelum attracted more crowd and the authorities continued with their murderous ways throughout spring and summer of 1977. In September that year, strikes by industrial workers, especially, National Iranian Oil Company further paralyzed the nation.

On 8 September, the Shah declared Marshall Law. Unaware of the development, a huge crowd gathered for demonstration in Tehran's Jaleh Square. Security forces opened fire. The death toll was anywhere between 88 and 15,000 depending upon whose version of events you believe. In November, the Shah appointed General Azhari as PM.

saying Shahpour Bakhtiar's government was illegitimate and Iran should be left alone.

On 16 January 1979, Shah left Iran for holidays hoping to return soon, but he was not optimistic. The next day the whole Iran was jubilant but the country descended into lawlessness during the next few days.

To fill the political vacuum created by the Shah's departure, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran on 1 February 1979 after fifteen years in exile. He was greeted by millions of Iranians from the airport to his place of residence.

Khomeini appointed Mehdi Bazargan as his prime minister, declining to recognize the sitting prime minister Shahpour Bakhtiar.

On 11 February 1979, the Iranian Air Force declared its neutrality between the sitting government of the Shah-appointed prime minister Shahpour Bakhtiar and Mehdi Bazargan, the prime minister appointed by Khomeini. The revolutionaries took charge of the administration, police and all state institutions.

Thus arrived the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

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Shaheens Whitewash Proteas to Take Sweet Revenge

By Ali Abdullah

The Proteas visited Pakistan after a long gap of 14 years. The last time they toured Pakistan was in 2007 for One Day and Test series. The hosts faced defeat in both those series. Pakistan had never won a test series from South Africa in 17 years, and now it was time to take revenge.

South Africa played two Tests, one each at Karachi and Rawalpindi. In the first test Pakistani team was all over the Proteas. Fawad Alam, skipper Babar Azam, all-rounder Fahim Ashraf, wicketkeeper-batsman Muhammad Rizwan, leggie Yasir Shah, and debutant Nauman Ali – all showed advantages of playing in home conditions. The team gave an all-round performance and won the test match easily – so easily it was seen as a one-sided game.

The second test match was played in the Rawalpindi cricket stadium where Pakistan won the toss and elected to bat first. Wickets fell early on in the game, after which middle order batsmen Fawad Alam and Babar Azam indulged themselves in a partnership. They took the responsibility and took the team to a respectable total. Fahim joined the fun later on, adding more runs on the board.

The Proteas fell apart in the first innings. Hassan Ali who was making a comeback in this series took a fiver and bowled out the South Africans all by himself. The Shaheens had a lead of 71 runs. The openers and the middle order batsmen could not do much in this innings. M Rizwan played a mature knock alongside the rest of the team. He helped the team by scoring his maiden test century.



In the second innings, the Proteas had to chase a huge target of 370. Day 5 and the tourists were 127-1. They were looking good until Hassan Ali the generator came in action and took two wickets straightaway. Aiden Markam scored his fifth test ton and first against Pakistan, alongside Temba Bavuma who scored 61 runs.

At one point, the tourists seemed to have the upper hand of the game but then the second new ball arrived. Hassan Ali took 2 consecutive wickets of Aiden Markam and the out of form skipper De Kock. Hassan Ali took 10 wickets in the game and his bowling partner Shaheen took 4 in the second innings. Yasir Shah took his first wicket in the second innings which was of Wiaan Mulder.

Seventeen years of wait and Pakistan won the test series 2-0. As they say, revenge is a dish best served cold.



A New Cricketing Venue Fascinates the World

Cricket is a religion followed by millions all over the globe. Thanks to this obsession there are some really beautiful cricket stadiums around the world that make watching the game even more pleasurable.

Lord's Cricket Stadium, London

Lord's being the Home of Cricket has to be one of the most beautiful stadiums. Having completed its 200th anniversary in 2014, Lord's has hosted over 2000 Test Matches. The alluring view of the Worcester River can be seen from the stadium and will take your breath away. Cricket connoisseurs say Lord's is like fine wine – it keeps getting better with age!



Queenstown Event Centre, New Zealand

Queenstown Events Centre or John Davies Oval is a spectacular stadium situated at the foot of the Remarkable mountain range and the bank of Lake Wakatipu. With a unique style of seating in the stadium and aircraft landings around the stadium, you will be awestruck by how spectacular this venue is.



Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium, Dharamshala, India

Situated at 4780 feet above the sea level, the home stadium for Kings XI Punjab is one of the most beautiful stadiums in the world, and is located in picturesque Dharamshala. The snowclad Himalayan Mountains in the backdrop make watching matches all the more entertaining.



All these stadiums are renowned in the world because of their beautiful locations but recently a brand new stadium situated in Gwadar, Balochistan, Pakistan has caught the world's fancy.

Located amid the rocky mountains of Balochistan, the Gwadar Cricket Stadium has a stunning aerial view with a lush green cricket field situated between the rocky hills.

A number of cricketers highlighted the breathtaking views from the stadium.



Tabraiz Shamsi who plays for South Africa said it will be really nice if the third T20 is moved from Lahore to Gwadar. International Cricket Board also tweeted about the stadium and talked about its beauty. Hopefully this ground will host international matches soon.

Focus, Tenacity Make Dreams Come True, says S.W.A.T. Star

Lou Ferrigno Jr., on landing new roles, helping the marginalized, and nepotism in Hollywood



By Haider Rifaat

Emerging star Lou Ferrigno Jr., is following in his father's footsteps with roles that would challenge him and his craft as a performer. Now 36 years old, the actor is set to star in the forthcoming projects Dreamcatcher and Nightshade. He has also landed a supporting role in Blackout alongside Nick Nolte and Josh Dunhamel.

Lou currently stars in the action-drama series S.W.A.T. as Donovan Rocker. Get to know him in an exclusive one-on-one with Haider Rifaat of The Truth International Magazine.

TTI: Lou, what made you want to become an actor?

LFJ: Ever since I was a child, I couldn't decide what I wanted to do for my career. Acting was the world I knew. Traveling with my parents to film and TV sets across the globe allowed me to immerse myself in acting, its craft and its atmosphere.

When I was 10 years old, I realized that as an actor I could play many characters with many different professions – never needing to choose just one. My teenage dream was to play football in

the National Football League, which obviously never materialized. Yet as an actor, I have been hired to play characters ranging from former professional athletes, detectives, lawyers, superheroes and a S.W.A.T. officer. I am grateful that I am now paid to pretend I am successful in many different professions without actually having to dedicate my life to them.

TTI: As an emerging talent, what has been a core challenge for you in terms of acting and landing constructive roles?

LFJ: A major challenge has been not allowing myself to get caught up in the fantasies of portraying characters whom I have auditioned to play, but not yet booked. I constantly remind myself that my job as an actor is not to book roles but rather audition tirelessly until I book the right role.

The career of a professional actor is wrought with heartache and disappointment, which can be incredibly frustrating and discouraging at times. I am able to progress each day while keeping a proper attitude and focusing on improving as an actor.

TTI: Do you feel that you have an edge over other newbie actors given that your father, Lou Ferrigno Sr., is an actor himself?

LFJ: Having a famous name, or a famous father, could allow an actor to stand out on a list of thousands of other performers but the name itself hasn't helped me much to book big acting roles or be brought back for a recurring role on TV.

Nepotism in Hollywood happens more often if an actor's parent retains a powerful position as a producer or a director. Nepotism doesn't necessarily apply for on-camera talent, which for the actor necessitates audience approval. Merely bearing a famous name won't help any person become a skillfully effective actor or maintain a professional attitude while working long hours on-set.

I have been very lucky in booking many different roles, on different networks, which have been independent of my father's involvement. Life as an actor is very rewarding but difficult, and every poor audition or missed opportunity makes an actor a stronger performer and person.

TTI: Talk to us about your film *Guest House* and the upcoming feature *Dreamcatcher*.

LFJ: *Guest House* is what I would like to call a wacky comedy, which was a blast to film and even more fun to watch. I play Kip Werner, the ex-boyfriend to Sarah – played by Aimee Teegarden – who poses a threat to interlope her marriage to Blake (Mike Castle). The film turned out really funny, filled with hilarious actors and a rabid opossum that crashes Sarah and Blake's wedding party.



Dreamcatcher is a very different suspense thriller set in the exciting, mysterious world of Electronic Dance Music. In the vein of the classic 90's thrillers – *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* – this film is a wild ride, full of suspense and terror. It maintains a strong plotline and fascinating characters.

While attending a music festival, a group of friends are killed one by one with no clue of who is the culprit. I play Colton, a seedy talent manager with very ill intentions. I don't want to give anything away but *Dreamcatcher* will be really intense and you wouldn't want to miss it!

TTI: What is your character development process?

LFJ: Once I receive a character breakdown of a role, I take a lot of time filling in the details of the character's life as if he was a real person. I think of real people I know or have met who remind me of the character to gain a firmer grasp of a fictional person.

I spend time researching as much about this fictional character's life as I can. I write what this character does for work, for fun, his perspective, his thoughts on random

have been blessed with muscle building genetics, so being muscular helps me maintain a strong physical presence on-screen.

Also, I feel it is my personal duty as a Ferrigno to continue my father's prestigious fitness legacy and take it to the next level. Staying fit and healthy allows me to endure the rigors of action-oriented roles that I frequently portray, as well as keep my mind at peace when times get tough, which is often.

TTI: How do you hope to champion change for youngsters who would probably look up to you in the years to come?

LFJ: I hope that younger generations will view me as someone who achieved great success as an actor on his own merits while captivating audiences across the globe and keeping a great reputation as a person and a professional. It is very common that children of celebrities fall way short of their famous parents' achievements – never finding a place of their own in Hollywood, or even in life. I have dedicated my life serving as an inspiration to the less fortunate who believe that life aspirations cannot actually be achieved. I aim to prove that having a focused vision and a tenacious drive in any profession can make dreams become a reality no matter how ridiculous they may sound to the naysayers.

TTI: What social cause do you feel strongly about and why?

LFJ: The environment, animals and disenfranchised children hold a special place in my heart. For 8 years, I worked as an exercise therapist with at-risk youth at a teen rehabilitation centre in Malibu, California. I was given the opportunity to share my passion for fitness with children and young adults whose lives were marred with tragedy, addiction and self-harm.

In teaching troubled teenagers about the innumerable benefits of exercise, I learned so much from them about life, gratitude and the importance of helping others who are less fortunate. I am also a huge animal lover, fascinated by the vast range of diversity among species across the planet and the incredible connections that humans and animals share. I educate myself about the threats of environmental harm and extinction. I do my best to help the world be a cleaner, healthier, happier place for the future generations.

topics, his idiosyncrasies, the types of friends he would have, as well as his daily routine. I put myself in the character's state of mind early on before shooting, actively living and responding as this person right up until the film wraps. The entire character development process changes slightly every time but that is why I find it so fascinating!

TTI: How important is the role of physical fitness in a profession like yours?

LFJ: I was an athlete all my life through college, so physical fitness has always been a big part of my life. Having a strong, athletic physique plays a large part in enhancing my brand as an actor as well as keeping me safe. I

George Parker Goes Global

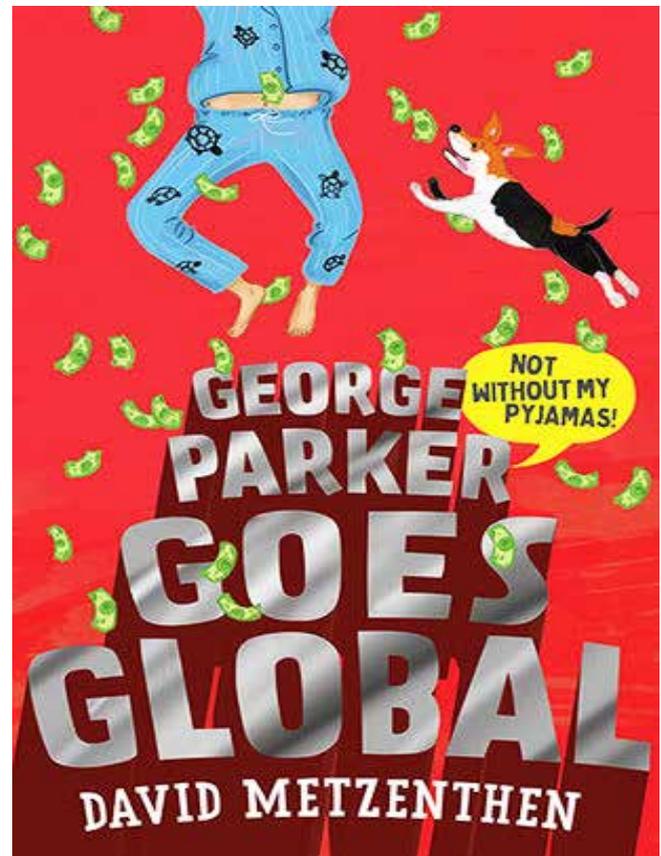
Reviewed by: Alizay Ashraf
 Author: David Metzenthen
 ISBN: 978-1-76052-346-6
 Pages: 278
 Publisher: - Allen & Unwin

This is a book by David Metzenthen about super-clever George Parker who unexpectedly teams up with super-rich Chase Landon-Bond on an international adventure to rescue Chase's sister. A flat-out funny, mad-cap, strange and joyful mission filled with hijinks and hilarity.

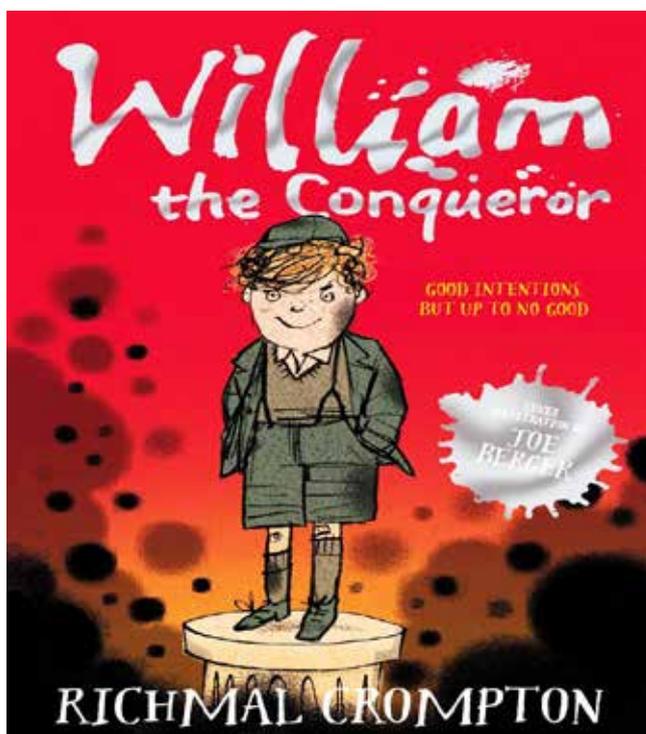
This book has it all; an unlikely friendship, a worldwide rescue mission, silly disguises and heroic escapes by treacherous villains using every form of transportation imaginable, including planes, trains, helicopters, French barge, luxury yachts and cruisers. The narrating of the story was very enjoyable.

The themes of the book are comedy, adventure, love, friendship, family. The writer has said that he wanted the story to teach readers that we can all learn something from people who are very different to us. The book was pretty charming, fun to read and very enjoyable. I really found this book joyful. The story was very adventurous as well.

If you're looking for a serious book this isn't it; but if you like a seriously silly story with plenty of laughs then this absurd adventure is sure to give you a seriously good time. I would definitely recommend friends and family to read this book if you want to take a break from your worries. Perfect for children aged 10+ who love their adventures action-packed, fast-paced, with over-the-top villainy and very, very silly.



William The Conqueror



Reviewed by: Alizay Ashraf
 Author: Richmal Crompton
 ISBN:
 Pages: 321
 Publisher: Pan MacMilan

This book is about a boy William, who is always in trouble, but sometimes it really isn't his fault. It was Ginger who showed him the book about Robin Hood, and it was Violet Elizabeth Bott's idea to steal from the rich and give to the poor. Unfortunately, the only rich person they know is Violet's father, so William's latest plan to right the world's wrongs is sure to lead to catastrophe.

This book is just amazing, it really shows how humor can stand the test of time. Although

this series of "William" was written 94 years ago, it is still remarkably funny today. The writing is exceptional, Richmal Crompton really captured William's character and portrayed him in the most shocking, outrageous way.

The book was really interesting to read and the narrator was excellent and the stories were innocent and reminds one of a more innocent time while being entertaining and lots of fun.

I really like this book and love the idea about having different sets of stories in one book. I would recommend it for children above the age of 9 because children under the age of 9 can find it boring.

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