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Double Abdication

An unmitigated disaster and a slow-motion train wreck

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Has the Kashmir issue been eroded?

Our Deep State's Broad Fortunes



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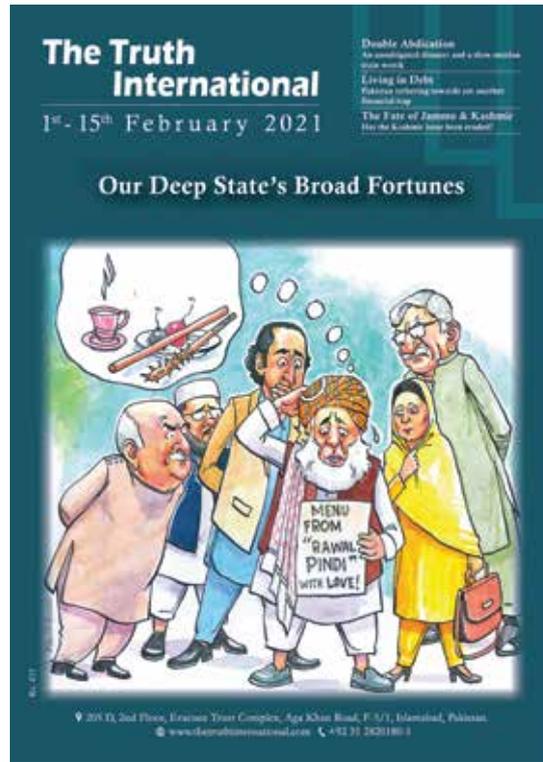
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Encircled!

By M. Ziauddin

A brand new world is in the making. Marked emphatically by a catastrophic pandemic, the Covid-19, the cut-off point between the one in the making and the one on the wane is denoted by an ascending China against the backdrop of a descending America while ringing in, at the same time, a riotous end to a tumultuous four years of Trump presidency.

Pakistan finds itself right in the midst of this whirling new world.

On the one side we are bound by our friendship with an ascending China; linked physically to the Northern neighbour via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an essential wedge of Beijing's all-encompassing but still under-construction global trading routes called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

On the other, we find America wanting ostensibly to walk away from our war-torn neighbor Afghanistan, bringing to an end, with our help, its so-called forever-war without, hopefully, losing face.

Lately, our eastern border has become too hot for our good as India, a strategic partner of the US, has been, under the BJP rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, spoiling to launch another false flag operation against Pakistan. Had it not been for the fact that relations between India and China have been worsening over the past few months, perhaps India would have carried out its threat by now. Perhaps to avoid a two-front situation Modi has held his hand, temporarily.

Meanwhile, the US is building up India via the Quad (Australia-India-Japan-United States), an 'Indo-Pacific' military alliance

to contain a rising China. The emerging equation has given rise to a war-like situation between a waning US and a China on the go. A truly Thucydides trap, a term which describes an apparent tendency towards war when an emerging power (China, currently) threatens to displace an existing great power (US, presently) as the international hegemon.

The cold war had remained cold all along until it ended with a whimper because the Soviet Union posed no economic threat to the US. It was purely a military threat and was taken care of as such. The economic challenges that US faced from Japan in the decades of 1980s-90s had not accompanied any military threats, therefore, the Japanese challenge was overcome with no difficulty at all. But Chinese threat is both economic and military. Therefore, it would be almost impossible for the US to resist the temptation of waging a hot war.

The US has already provoked China when President Trump in August last year sent, for the first time since 1979, high ranking US officials to Taiwan. The trip marked the highest-level visit to Taiwan by a Cabinet secretary since the year the US established formal diplomatic relations with Beijing and ceased to recognize the government in Taipei. And a thoroughly provoked China on Jan. 20, reciprocated by sanctioning for the first time ever 28 US officials including former president Trump's Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo. These individuals and their immediate family members are prohibited from entering the mainland, Hong Kong and Macao.

Either because of lack of scientific data or because 63% of our population being

between the ages of 15-33 years and over 65 only 4.2% and women making up 48% the incidence of Covid-19 has appeared to be not as widespread as it is in many other countries. Perhaps the right choice of the vaccine and the right choice of the population to be vaccinated earliest could relieve us of the devastation earlier than other countries, hopefully.

The choice having been made by the circumstances obtaining currently on which side of an emerging bipolar world we should be we could for a change consider lessening our dependency on others and stand on our own two feet by learning from China the skills needed to attain a modicum of true sovereignty. And also, we should without much loss of time probe the possibility of trading with China in Yuan because over the next decade or so, Yuan is likely to challenge and displace the dollar from its top perch.

Still, there is no reason why, while enjoying the best of relations with China, we cannot oblige the US with the needed assistance to make it possible for Washington to end its forever war in Afghanistan, though it is difficult to see at this point in history the US leaving a neighbourhood physically so close to the emerging rival (China), an about-to-become-a nuclear power (Iran) and a declared nuclear power (Pakistan) threatening from the safety of Chinese side its eastern neighbor being built up by the US to contain China.

And of course, ideologically Pakistan and China would certainly feel threatened to see Taliban, at the end of it all, having a free run in Afghanistan.

Our Deep State's Broad Fortunes

Double the Herculean labours in Afghanistan, half a Hobson's choice at home



By Umer Farooq

Asking in the spotlight for helping build peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan's security establishment seems to have no choice but to negotiate with the political forces agitating for its ouster from the political arena. What is more, fraught with all kinds of peril, building peace in Afghanistan promises to be twice as hard as the Herculean labours.

The three great world powers—United States, Russian Federation and China—have their eyes set on the political, military and security situation inside war-torn Afghanistan. All these great powers have stakes in maintaining peace in Afghanistan so that it would not again become a lawless land and would not again become a safe haven for international terrorists and Islamic fundamentalist groups.

For this purpose these powers have initiated two separate projects. The first of these is the peace process in Afghanistan, engaging Afghan Taliban on the one hand and Afghanistan's government on the other. The second, less publicized but no less significant, project is to eradicate the possibility of rise of Daesh (ISIS) in Afghanistan's northern, south-eastern and eastern regions. In both the projects Pakistan's military establishment is playing a leading role.

Pakistan's premier Intelligence Agency, ISI—a central element of the country's establishment—has played a crucial role in convincing its old friends in Taliban's ranks to come to the negotiating table with the Washington backed Afghan government. Earlier it was with the help of Pakistan security

apparatus that Washington reached an understanding with Afghan Taliban for withdrawing its forces from a war ravaged country.

The second international project that Pakistan's security establishment is leading has the backing of strong regional players including Russia, China and Iran. This project is based on multilateral cooperation among regional states to prevent the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan, which can pose a potential threat to regional countries including Iran, China and Central Asian states—countries which come under Russian Security umbrella.

Pakistan's ISI hosted a meeting of Intelligence Chiefs of Russia, China and Iran to discuss the rising threat of ISIS on Afghanistan's territory in July



2018. “The conference reached understanding of the importance of coordinated steps to prevent the trickling of IS terrorists from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan where they would pose risks for neighbouring countries,” an official said. The top security and intelligence officials stressed the need for a more active inclusion of regional powers in the efforts to settle the conflict in Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s security establishment is playing a leading role in both of these international projects, a factor which gives the country’s establishment much needed confidence and clout to consolidate its hold on power structures in the domestic political scene. It is not only relevant in the international security and political scene, it suddenly finds itself on the right side of great powers, which want it to do a project to consolidate peace in Afghanistan and to contribute in bringing political and security stability to that country.

In the above mentioned two projects, Pakistan has the backing of Washington, Beijing and Moscow, a situation which is in complete contrast with the past when Pakistan—in connection with its projects in Afghanistan—was strictly in American camp and was opposed staunchly by Moscow.

Pakistan’s security establishment’s standing in the domestic political scene is in complete contrast with its international standing: A former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif is spearheading a mass awareness campaign to show the leaders of the security establishment as usurpers and cheats. Nawaz Sharif’s political partners in this campaign come from rural and semi-urban Sindh, religious-political forces from rural and semi-urban Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and his own political stronghold in the middle-class constituencies of Central Punjab.

These political forces under the umbrella of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) have been engaged in mobilizing public opinion against country’s security establishment, thus undercutting and undermining their image and their influence in the urban centres of country in general and urban and semi-urban areas of Central Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular.

Pakistan’s security establishment is particularly sensitive about its image and its influence among middle classes in urban and semi-urban centres of Central Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—two regions from where the majority of Pakistan Army officer corps are drawn—which are considered the home of Pakistan’s security establishment.

Another reason for Pakistan’s security establishment to be sensitive about these regions is that the majority of the vocal and visible chattering classes of Pakistan society come from these two regions and urban areas of Sindh.

These two conflicting trends—enhanced regional security role for the security establishment and the rise of domestic countervailing political forces, which are opposed to establishment’s oversized role in domestic politics—will determine the status and role of the country’s security establishment in the foreseeable future.

The push and pulls of these two conflicting trends will keep the political pot boiling inside the country. On the one hand devising a new internal political system and security architecture for Afghanistan in which Taliban will play a legitimate role will not be an easy task, especially light of the fact that Pakistan’s security establishment will have only limited influence on the political situation in the neighbouring country. And any possible misstep by Afghan Taliban in the shape of more adventurous violence would have negative repercussions for Pakistan’s security establishment.

Similarly Pakistan’s security apparatus might have the power to convince Taliban to come to the negotiating table, but this would not guarantee Pakistan’s influence on other political forces of Afghanistan to accept Taliban as a legitimate play in that war ravaged country.

Similarly Pakistan’s own domestic political scene shows no signs of settling down in the near future. The architects of present political setup in Pakistan must realize that this setup has a very narrow social and political base with only one urban middle class party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, providing support to its edifice. The list of disgruntled forces is long and goes deep into the society.

Establishment’s attitude towards the political system and political forces varies from one Army Chief to another. In other words every three years there are discernible changes in political policies of the establishment. There are Army chiefs who are more aggressive in asserting the establishment’s political presence in the political system, like the incumbent one. There are others who are ready to concede more space to the political forces to operate within that space. One thing is however clear as daylight that establishment in the post-Musharraf period has been extremely assertive in making its presence felt within the political system.

In 2008, in the immediate wake of the exit of military strongman Gen Musharraf, the then COAS, General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kiyani clearly established the rules for equal partnership between non-elected





military and elected political leaders within the political system. After Kiyani's departure, there developed a civil-military turf war ensued over who is going to dominate the power structure.

In the original 1973 constitution, those who framed the document clearly wanted that the prime minister of the country should function in an atmosphere free of every type of duress. The pressure on a PM should simply come from the elected representatives in the parliament and no one else. The framers wanted that no administrative, military or judicial authority in the country should have the power to remove the prime minister from office. That is why they created only two provisions for the removal of a prime minister from office—one is through a PM's own decision to dissolve the national assembly and the other is

acting as diplomats-in-chief of the country in meetings of important heads of the states, etc. They even started to take interest in economic and financial management of the country.

So the weakening of the executive authority of the state was caused by the separate but parallel processes of the judiciary inventing a new mechanism for the removal of a Prime Minister from office and the office of Army Chief taking up powers once considered the preserve of the Prime Minister.

Pakistan's political class through their sheer ingenuity have invented yet another way to humiliate the office of Prime Minister. This has been done twice since August 2014 when various political players gathered a few thousand protesters in Islamabad and started talking about a mob arresting the prime minister, or forcing him to resign.

under the umbrella of PDM, with hardly any street power, can pose no major threat to the hegemony of Pakistan's security establishment on the country's political system. The major threat to establishment's dominance of the system comes from two sources: the fast weakening economy and the continued internal security challenges.

The weakening economy has greatly reduced the economic and financial pie, making it impossible to sustain a large defence budget. Internal security threats continue to dog Pakistan notwithstanding the claims by the security apparatus that it has broken the back of militancy in tribal areas and thus eradicated the potential of Pakistan Taliban to carry out terror attacks in the urban centres.



through a no-confidence move by the majority of the national assembly members.

In post-Musharraf period two Prime Ministers—Yusuf Raza Gilani and Nawaz Sharif—were removed from office through a court order that primarily unseated them as members of the national assembly. This ran counter to the original intentions of the framers of the 1973 constitution, which clearly laid down the two possible ways through which a prime minister could be removed.

This also happened to be a time when the office of Chief of the Army Staff was fast emerging as a parallel executive authority in the country. The military leadership was taking decisions about force application to curb militancy and the policy of initiating negotiations with the militant groups,

Another way to make a mockery of the political system is when (technically) subordinate executive authorities invite the leaders of the protesters to visit them in their office – even when they were hurling humiliations at the chief executive at the top of their lungs.

The Prime Minister's office now exists as an empty shell in Pakistan's political system especially after receiving continuous battering by subordinate executive authorities and machinations of unaccountable power centres. Its capacity to make things happen in society is much less than its subordinate institutions and executive authorities, which were on a persistent drive to power aggrandizement since the post-Zia period.

In such a situation, motley political parties

Serious security experts suspect Pakistan has the wherewithal to prevent terror groups from regrouping over a long period of time. Thus, while PDM may not be a serious threat to the continued grip of the security establishment on power structure, internal security threats and meagre financial resources will surely undermine their influence and clout in the country.

In the longer run Pakistani security establishment may well end up facing half the Hobson's Choice: Take it (i.e., negotiate and come to terms with the disgruntled political forces) – for leaving it is not really an option.

The writer is an analyst based in Islamabad.



Double Abdication

When the government is an unmitigated disaster and the opposition a slow-motion trainwreck



By Ahmad Waleed

In a democracy the government is elected by the people to be accountable to its citizens, uphold the rule of law, devise policies to provide relief to masses, make necessary legislations and protect individual rights while the opposition is supposed to play a constructive role on setting the government on the right track and question the wrong policies of the government. The question is if the government and the opposition in Pakistan are playing their effective roles to safeguard the interests of their voters.

Strengthening the democratic norms is a major function of the government. Unfortunately, the incumbent government has done little to promote democratic traditions. The media is less free than ever under the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) government. Citizens' rights have been usurped as there are reports of journalists and citizens being picked up by agencies and the government remains helpless or clueless in all such cases.

From day one, the government of Imran Khan seemingly has one main agenda – victimization of its political opponents in the name of accountability. Instead of providing relief to the masses who are under tremendous pressure of rising prices of daily use commodities, the government is on a witch hunt in the name of corruption as part of its agenda to cow all the 'corrupt' politicians belonging to the rival parties.

It is believed the shift in the government focus has led to the worst ever governance witnessed in the history of country. Blaming the previous governments for all ills the country is dogged by, the present government has absolved itself of all the economic blunders it has made.

It all started with the claim the government would not seek loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the government pledged to make every possible effort to bring back the 'looted money' from abroad. Instead, the government resorted to harass-

ing businessmen and let the rupee fall against dollar.

This indecisiveness and incapability of handling economic affairs caused uncertainty among the businessmen and investors. Hit by crisis after crisis the economy plunged into a much deeper mess.

The government mocked its own claims of busting what it called the 'mafias' when it launched inquiries against sugar and petroleum cartels.

Sugar was selling at PKR 56 per kilogram when the PTI took charge in 2018. It went beyond PKR 100 per kg after the government interference. On the other hand, the Prime Minister himself ordered the administration in Punjab to ensure the wheat procurement target is met at all costs. It resulted in a panic-like situation and the prices of wheat soared from PKR 1400 per 40 kg to PKR 2400 inviting the ire of the masses.



Sugar, wheat, medicines, petrol, gas and electricity prices have witnessed a sharp increase in the over two years' Khan has been in power. In order to contain trade deficit, his government followed the policy of discouraging or lowering imports which led to shortage of imported raw material and ultimately giving rise to the prices of almost every imported item hitting the ordinary man who had already been impacted by the historic imbalance of the rupee-dollar parity.

And as if to add insult to injury, Prime Minister Imran Khan says it took his government over two years to get to the bottom of the problems in the government functions.

On the foreign policy front, Pakistan continued to face multiple challenges because of the blunders by the PTI government. While China has serious reservations on how CPEC is progressing, Saudi Arabia and UAE have distanced themselves from Pakistan as we tried to join the Qatar-Turkey-Malaysia-Iran club.

Despite several offers to normalise relations the neighbouring India has shown lukewarm interest in restarting the dialogue process. Instead, it usurped the rights of Kashmiris by revoking special status accorded to the disputed territory under Article 370 inviting severe criticism from across the world. Pakistan's warnings fell

on deaf ears in the world community and India did not budge.

On the legislation front, the government did not even try to seek opposition support on key bills except for the bill for the extension of the Army Chief's service.

Equally bad if not worse has been the performance of the opposition, the other half of the democratic system. During the first two years of the Khan government the opposition kept its silence on key issues of price-hike, foreign policy, legislation, governance, etc., due probably to the aggressive witch-hunt of their leaders by the ruling PTI. There is little realisation it was a grave abdication of their duty.

They did not play an effective role in voicing concerns at the rising prices of food staples that have soared out of reach of the low-income segments of the society.

While several leaders of the opposition parties were jailed after hundreds of cases were launched by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the masses felt abandoned at the hands of the government. People were further driven to frustration as there was no one to raise a voice on their behalf in the high mansions of democracy. The media played its own part by sticking to 'positive reporting'.

Of late, the opposition parties have reached

an agreement to launch a movement under the umbrella of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) platform and give a tough time to the government. Public gatherings arranged by the opposition have managed to pull crowds and create a narrative that has perturbed the government and its backers.

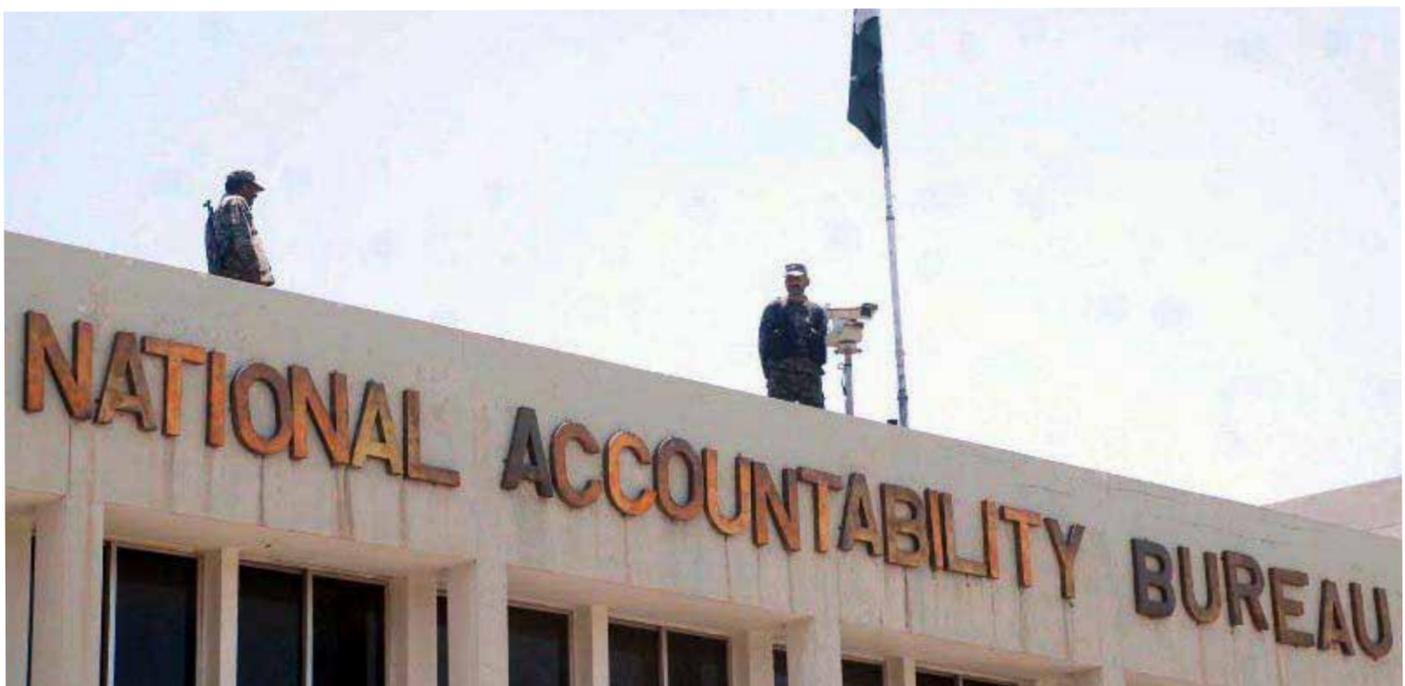
The stated objective of the PDM is to limit the role of the military in politics and run the democratic system as per the Constitution. However, they need to stay relevant to people. They must make sure that they are out to voice the concerns of the masses, not to pursue their personal interests.

These parties will have to satisfy the people that their rights will be protected, and the government will be forced to work for the betterment of the poor masses. If the opposition continues to play its due role of maintaining a check on the government's anti-people policies, no government can for long burden and oppress the people.

In the final reckoning, the success of our democracy depends upon the constructive role of the opposition parties.

Ahmad Waleed is a Lahore-based journalist who has worked for The Nation, The News, Geo News, and DawnNews and is currently associated with 24News.

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Topsy-Turvydom

Down the Rabbit Hole with Broadsheet and the Pious PM

By Hammad Ghaznavi

Popularly known as Madam Googoosh, Faegheh Atashin was perhaps the best known Iranian in Pakistan – excepting of course the dear departed Shah and a couple of the highest Ayatollahs; no more. A new star has risen that has, in a snap, become a household name in Pakistan: Kaveh Moussavi.

A gentleman of Iranian origins and the CEO of the UK-based assets recovery firm Broadsheet LLC, Moussavi has bilked Pakistan of around 30 million US dollars. And as it turns out, Pakistan's anticorruption mandarins have been dancing to his tunes for a while now – which reminds me of Googoosh again.

Broadsheet is a funny (read sad) tale. To find billions of dollars reportedly stashed away in foreign lands by some 200 corrupt politicians, Pervez Musharraf established the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) in 2000, which entered into a contract with Broadsheet LLC. The UK firm was founded the same year and had zero prior experience of assets recovery. Well, there is a first time for everything, Mushi must have thought.

In his infinite wisdom, the then head of NAB, General Muhammad Amjad accepted a contract which said that 20 percent of all bad money recovered from corrupt politicians would go to Broadsheet whether the firm contributed its recovery or not. What a contract! One can only salute to Moussavi's skills as a negotiator.

That's how the British court calculated the amount of \$29 million, 20 percent of the ill-gotten money unearthed (on paper only) by the Panama case JIT in the Pakistan Supreme Court. It's a roller coaster of follies by the anticorruption brigade. By the way, NAB has claimed to recover 45 million US dollars during its 20 years existence, while the Broadsheet case alone has cost the taxpayers around 60 million US dollars. Up to this point in time that is.

Who signed this contract? Who axed it in 2003? More interestingly, who delayed the payment to Broadsheet for about 18 months after the court's decision that led to \$9 million mark up? Nawaz Sharif?

To answer all these simple questions, the government has formed an inquiry committee to probe the muddy matter headed by none other than Saeed Azmat Sheikh, the former Supreme Court Judge.

The opposition – quick to point out that Mr Sheikh was a member of Shaukat Khanum Hospital Board of Governors, had been a judge on the Panama case bench, and even more interestingly, was NAB's Deputy Prosecutor General in 2000 when the agreement with Broadsheet was inked – has rejected the appointment.

Those who know the venerable judge ever so slightly say the man of honour will recuse himself from the position as a matter of principle.



Also rejected by all and sundry has been the 15 percent recent increase in the power tariff that will burden the consumer with an additional burden to the tune of PKR 200 billion. It's ruthless, many ferociously argue. The government not only disagrees but insists that it is the most citizen-friendly decision of the 2021 as the Prime Minister himself has intervened to save the masses from a 30 percent increase as was suggested by the OGRA (Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority).

The masses are told to celebrate the power tariff increase as it could have been worse. A patriotic Pakistani has actually suggested that every time there is a tariff increase the masses should jump with joy and thank their sole saviour who always firmly stands between the hapless millions and the ogre – err OGRA.

Another reason for the people to be jubilant is Prime Minister Imran Khan's challenge to have televised proceedings of the foreign funding case in ECP with all the political parties' heads in attendance. The opposition straightaway accepted the challenge but the ECP rejected the PM's offer.

Well, one cannot ask for a more transparent PM, who wants to answer all the allegations by his detractors to sully his immaculate reputation. For background: The foreign funding case has been languishing in the ECP for the last six years, courtesy some 14 petitions to halt its proceedings or have them in-camera – by the party of the aforementioned transparent PM.

If your head refuses to process it all, just leave this loony bin right now. Relax. Go and watch the latest dance video of Mufti Abdul Qawi.

*The writer is a media veteran who has worked for various major print and electronic media outlets.
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Of Racing Car Crashes and Diplomatic Bungles

CITY NOTES

By M.A. Niazi

Somebody Say it ain't so!

I don't have any objection to Naeem Bokari being stayed as PTV Chairman, but the reason given only added insult to injury: That the age relaxation given him was not valid.

Now Naeem Bokhari is a sort of Peter Pan figure who is beyond such mundane things as age, and it is fitting that he be in the PTI, with a leader who is the only sexagenarian known for attracting the youth vote.

Bokhari, one should remember, is the younger brother of Saleem Altaf, the fast bowler, who was a playing contemporary of Imran's. In fact, Imran was only picked for his 1971 debut because Saleem Altaf was injured. His recovery for the next Test led to Imran being dropped.



Well, at least neither Saleem Altaf nor his kid brother Naeem was up to the sort of shenanigans that Test cricketers Shoaib Malik and Wahab Riaz have lately won notoriety for.

The official version is that Shoaib rammed his sports car into a truck when he was leaving the PSL draw. So how did Wahab Riaz earn a mention in the story? Well, it seems that all attempts to excise him from the account cannot hide his having been racing Shoaib in his own sports car. Neither was injured, but Shoaib no longer has a sports car.

Speaking of cricket, while Pakistan was losing to New Zealand after suffering a Kane Williamson double hundred, Imran suffered another diplomatic failure when he could not stop India drawing with Australia on a tense final day, so that they went into the decider at the Gabba with the series level 1-1 – where they scored a historic win to clinch the series.

Our boys, on the other hand, don't seem to know whether they're playing cricket or car racing. I knew every truck driver thought he was actually a Formula One racer. It seems our cricketers are no different.

Is Imran paying attention? Or is he too busy with the revelations about Mian Nawaz Sharif reportedly trying to bribe Broadsheet PLC to stop digging up dirt on him? Well, Broadsheet found nothing against him, so the story is confirmed according to PTI evidentiary standards.

Reports say a member of Shehzad Akbar's team demanded a cut to get released the payment Broadsheet demanded. The payment has since been released but it seems Shehzad Akbar is going to face nothing. Of course, we all know that anyone suspecting Shehzad Akbar or any member of his team of wrongdoing is actually doubting that Imran built a cancer hospital, and that too with his own two hands – an extraordinary feat no doubt.

Well, courts are doing extraordinary things these days. Like a Sessions judge ordering a rape case registered against Babar Azam. The Lahore High Court suspended that order after Babar Azam argued he had reached a settlement with the lady back in 2018.

Does that make him a challenger for the prime-minister-ship? Not unless he has a daughter he denies. (And just as important, does Babar eat organic food? The cricketer to watch is always the one who knows a lot of Bollywood types.)

If that were to happen, Imran might not be able to do what US President Trump did after losing an election. Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol. Of course Imran's supporters stormed Parliament House during the dharna, but the youthias were desperate to get to a toilet. Trump supporters on the other hand wanted to overthrow the election results. Trump has been impeached. In Pakistan, we made Imran PM.

I suppose it's something of a coincidence that Mrs. Zarina Musharraf, mother of Pervez Musharraf, passed away so soon after the departure of Nawaz Sharif's mother. She was a little luckier, I suppose, for none of her kids was in jail, though one was in exile. She lived to a great age, reaching 100.

I know that none of our party leaders has a mother living, but I'm not sure that's a reason to make anyone PM. I'm reminded of the man who confessed to murdering his parents and then sought the mercy of the court as an orphan.

Imran would probably be happy that Shafqat Mahmud is not a competitor for the youth vote because schools have reopened, at least partially. The hopes of being on holiday forever seem to have been dashed. There is some forlorn hope from a ministerial meeting on Friday, but things will have to be really bad for there to be any action.

The writer is veteran journalist and working at Pakistan Today.



A Two-Way Contest Likely in By-Elections

An emerging electoral alliance of PDM parties could potentially reshape politics



By Qurban Baloch

Apparently unable to settle on a hard-line strategy to unseat the government, the component parties of the opposition PDM (Pakistan Democratic Movement) coalition now seem to be coming together as an electoral alliance for the by-elections. The trend that emerged following the announcement of election schedule for by-election by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) may have implications for the coming Senate elections as well as the wider politics of the country.

By assessing last few months after emerging PDM it seems that alliance is going to struggle against the present system of the country but after few days due to different opinion of allied parties or fear of some parties that they are not able to fight against establishment, alliance started back tracking from original narrative.

During the first phase of PDMs drive against the government, the chiefs of PML-N and JUI-F started criticising the army leadership. The strategy apparently caused some uneasiness in the PPP. On the

campaign trail for the Gilgit-Baltistan assembly elections at the time, party chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari voiced his reservations on the strategy of naming top military leaders. His message to coalitions partners was loud and clear: The PPP was not prepared to go to that extent against the establishment.

After getting messages by chairmen of major allies, Mian Nawaz Sharif raised some questions on that issue in the alliance meeting but actually he stopped naming the names although he continued shaming the characters who according to him were real culprits behind his ouster from power.

According to sources PPP chairman BBZ had reservations over the allies' decision of quitting the parliament from day one. Before completion of first phase movement, major allied party PPP in its Central Executive Committee (CEC) under the chairmanship of President Asif Ali Zardari (AAZ) and his son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (BBZ), differed with the resignation decision of the alliance and proposed to fight against Imran Khan in the parliament and contest by-elections.

On party's suggestion former Senator Mr Taj Hyder held on important meeting with authorities of Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and demanded early by-elections on vacant seats with in Sindh province to complete the electoral college for the Senate of Pakistan. Immediately after that meeting, the ECP announced a schedule for by-elections to the nine constituencies that had fallen vacant due to the demise of incumbent members.

Why did the PPP propose participating in by-elections and advocated in-house change instead of resigning from the parliament? Is in-house change possible without (active or silent) support from the establishment? Has someone in the power corridors given any assurances in this connection to the PPP leadership? Why has the PPP backtracked from the initial policy resolution of the alliance adopted on 20 September 2020 at Lahore? Answers of these question are still unclear.

By-poll on one Sindh Assembly seat PS 52 Umerkot-II was held on 18 January 2021, in which PPP candidate Syed Ameer Ali



Shah inflicted a humiliating defeat on Arbab Ghulam Raheem, the leader of Imran Khan allies Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA). He was the Chief Minister of Sindh under dictator Gen Pervez Musharraf from 2004 to 2007 even though he did not have a majority in the assembly. Observers say Arbab Ghulam Raheem's defeat is a setback for Imran Khan and the establishment because he is known man of the establishment.

During by-polls in Sindh on PS-52 Umerkot-II, a dangerous trend of violence emerged in which more than eight people were injured in different polling stations. Even more dangerous was Sindh culture minister Syed Sardar Shah hurling threats of violence against the opposition, "if the chairman allows", at a victory celebration attended by Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zaradari.

By-elections on eight more seats are in the pipeline. Polling for those seats is to be held in February 2021, so it is necessary that authorities take necessary steps to prevent violence.



According to ECP schedule by-elections on three National Assembly seats and five provincial seats are going to be held next month. Three National Assembly seats which become vacant due to demise of members are NA-221 Tharparkar-I, NA -45 Kurram-I and NA- 75 Sialkot-VI.

By-elections for vacant NA seats from Punjab and KP are scheduled for 19 February 2021, and for the NA seat from Sindh for 21 February 2021. NA-221 Tharparkar-I from Sindh become vacant due the demise of Pir Noor Muhammad Shah Jelani who belonged to PPP. NA-45 Kurram-I become vacant after the demise of Munir Khan Orkzai who belonged to Muthada Mijlas Amal Pakistan. NA-75 Sialkot has been vacated due to the death of Syed Iftkhar Hussain Shah belonged from PML-N.

By-elections on five provincial seats are also scheduled in the month of February 2021.

The two Sindh Assembly seats – PS-43 Sanghar-III and PS-88 Malir-II – became vacant due to the demise of PPP parliamentarians Jam Madad Ali and Ghulam Murtaza Baloch respectively. Elections on Sindh Assembly seats are scheduled on 16 February 2021. By-election on one seat of Balochistan, PB-20 Pishin-III is also scheduled on 16 February 2021 which became vacant due to death of Independent candidate Mumammad Fazal Agha.

By-polls on one Punjab Assembly seat PP-51 Gujranawala-I, which became vacant due to demise of Shoukat Manzoor Cheema of PML-N, and one seat of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly PK-63 Noshera, which became vacant due to death of PTI parliamentarian Jamshed-ud-Din are scheduled on 19 February 2021.

In the by-elections mostly competition is between the candidates PDM alliance of eleven opposition parties and PTI and its allies. Scrutiny of nomination papers for the by-polls of total eight seats is underway. Once scrutiny and other processes have been completed final names of candidates will be published by the ECP.

According to ECP the is initial and incomplete data of sixteen candidates who are contesting on one National Assembly seat in the Sindh (NA-221 Tharparkar-I) – although the real competition will be between PPP PTI/GDA candidate. According to sources PTI candidate Nizam Din Rahmoon, a local common man, is under immense pressure and has been offered money from ruling party for withdrawal from the contest.

On the National Assembly seat from Punjab NA-75 Sialkot-IV sixteen candidates are fighting but real fight will take place between candidates of PDM allies PML-N and PTI. Same situation is on by-poll of NA-45-Kurram-I, where the real fight is between government and PDM candidate.

On PP-51 Gujranawal-I, twenty-one candidates are competing but the real competition will take place between the ruling party PTI and opposition party PML-N. Competition on two Sindh Assembly seats PS-43-Sanghar-III and PS-88 Malir-II is between PPP and PTI/allies Candidates. Both parties nominated candidates on

above mentioned seats.

No different is the situation of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly seat KP-63 Nowshera-III and Baluchistan Assembly seat PB-20 Pishin-III.

The PDM is still in fight with PM Imran Khan's government and with establishment, but now it is taking shape of electoral alliance. After the alliance decision to take part in by-election recently during election board meeting chaired by vice president Maryam Nawaz, PML-N decided it will not contest elections in Sindh against allied party PPP. After that decision party is hoping that PPP will respond reciprocally. In light of that few days back PDMs two major parties PML-N and PPP entered election alliance in Sindh.

A PPP delegation led by Sindh president Nisar Khuhro met with PML-N Sindh President Shah Muhammad Shah and other party leaders, in which they decided that parties will not contest each other in the by-election. PML-N Sindh president Shah Muhammad Shah confirmed new development with TTI on contact.

Similar arrangements are emerging between PDM parties in the KPK where PML-N provincial president Ameer Muqam Khan and central information secretary of PPP's newly appointed central information secretary Faisal Kareem Kundi announced support for each other in by-election in a joint press conference.

Other reports say PDM allies have reached an arrangement to rally behind the alliance party that won that particular constituency in the 2018 general election. These developments clearly indicate PDM is morphing into an electoral alliance.

In short, all seems set for a two-way contest between PDM on the one hand and PTI and its allies on the other in the by-elections. If the PDM parties are indeed able to stick together, there is a good chance they can outperform PTI and shock the establishment. And how the by-elections turn out will have repercussions for the Senate election as well as the next general election.

The writer is Islamabad based journalist, contributing with digital and electronic media.



Impose the Consequences Now!

Militants are waging a war on Pakistan. They (and their foreign backers) must be taught their actions have consequences.

By Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri



Small words sometimes make for great revelations. That was the case with Prime Minister Imran Khan, as he consoled the bereaved Hazara family members in Quetta in the aftermath of the January's Machh massacre. He said: "Most of the top sectarian terrorists have been eliminated and that only '35 to 40' of them are alive and trying to stir up communal trouble in the country at the behest of their foreign paymasters".

Before we go on analyse as to why militancy has returned to Pakistan after a brief hiatus, let's recall one more candid admission – also by Khan. Addressing an audience at the Institute of Peace in Washington D.C in 2019, he had commented that about 30,000 to 40,000 terrorists – who are trained and have fought in various conflict zones – are in hiding in Pakistan. Period! He was not wrong. Of course, it was an offshoot of our myopic Afghan policy.

If statistics are any criterion, both the statements reflect the underlying deep security challenges; and the need to eliminate this gangrene at the earliest. Pakistan's security establishment has done a great job, and the smiles all around in Pakistan are ample testimony to it. But it

goes without saying that the security predicament fault-lines lie on both internal and external fronts.

Ironically, the bigger challenge is internal. It's the sectarianism coupled with ethno-lingual fissures. It refuses to die down. It also has all the catchments to attract international muscle and explode in an atrocious manner.

Pakistan is at the receiving end. Some call it fifth-generation hybrid warfare. It's too easy to win over minds and influence behaviour. And, that is exactly what is happening in Pakistan and the region.

There is no dearth of splinter terror groups in Pakistan subsisting as sleeper cells. They manage to get away under various petty parochial considerations.

They are all over Balochistan, the erstwhile FATA, urban Sindh and rural Punjab. Their modus operandi is hybrid: Propaganda, sabotage, subversion, terrorist activities!

They possess proactive militant wings disguised under sectarian and ethnic masks. To name a few: Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Tehrik-e-Taliban, Sipah-e-Sahaba, ISIS, Sipah-e-Muhammad; and the more refined ones include PTM and BLA.

Some even work as appetite forums for major political forces – namely two Sunni groups, Ahl-e-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat (ASWJ) and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), and the Shia Majlis-e-Wahdat-ul-Muslimeen (MWM).

The irony of Pakistan's foreign policy is that at least three of its neighbours, Iran, Afghanistan and India have an axe to grind with extremist unrest in Pakistan. The fourth major irritant is Saudi Arabia. It has the capacity to influence public opinion through its generous and unabated funding to like-minded religious outfits. Iran is doing same.

Islamabad to this day has never been able to sort out this mess and menace, obviously for reasons of geopolitical and economic exigencies. They all fight and operate through their proxies on the Pakistani turf against fellow Pakistanis. The State, at times, sits pretty confused wondering what went wrong and how!

The war trumpet was sounded in 2014, when the Taliban slaughtered 150 pupils in what came to be known as the Army Public School massacre in Peshawar. The event changed Pakistan's security paradigm for good. There is no going back now. The 20-point National Action Plan, though unimplemented in reality to this day, is the ultimate way to go.

The international pressure in terms of FATF has, however, helped push the buck. The State of Pakistan started disarming terror groups, and they did it well. It is a success story for the army and the intel agencies. Hats Off! The country was cleansed 90 percent of terror abuse.

But the mafia lives on. It breathes underneath the veins of political and lingual muscles. It blackmails the state, and the government, accordingly. Mobs of religious men on the streets of federal capital Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Karachi are a testimony of this civil-warfare. The author-



ities succumb for reasons best known to them. The Faizabad Deal is a case in point.

The simple question is if the government can conveniently check and block the source of Western funding for NGOs that operate in the intellectual domain, why can't it likewise monitor and audit the accounts of hundreds and thousands of seminaries?

If the so-called intellectuals disseminate 'anti-state' propaganda at the NGOs' behest, graduates of these seminaries too breed extremism in our society and body politics. Plus they act as street nuisance, too. Why this double standard? Are we so afraid of the cloak?

Let's take a cursory look at the recent terror log. An orchestrated anti-Shia campaign was initiated on social media in September, demanding that the Shia Muslims be declared as 'heretics'.

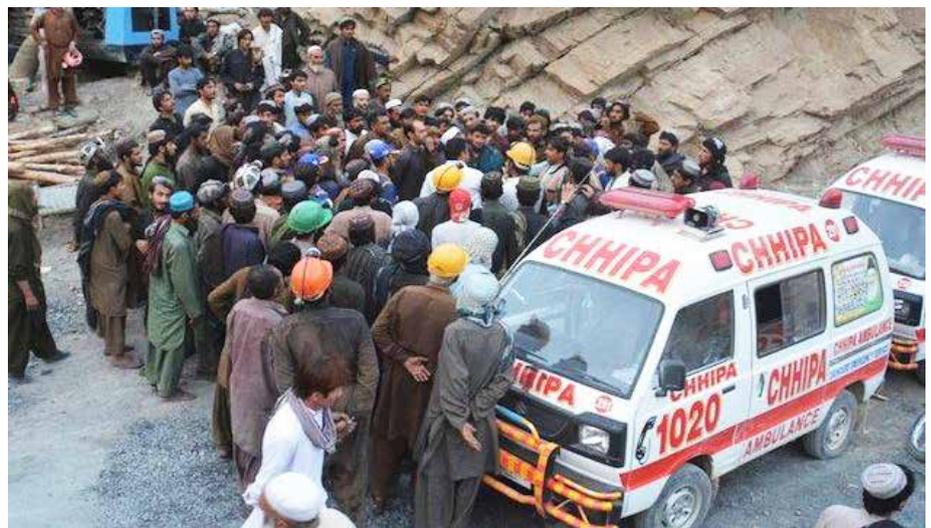
It was followed by rallies in Karachi and elsewhere against the Shia faith. The momentum, perhaps, was gathered on the heels of Tahaffuz-e-Bunyad-e-Islam (Protection of Foundation of Islam) Bill passed by the Punjab Assembly. The move was devoid of wisdom in a pluralistic society. The bill sought to enforce a narrow Sunni interpretation of Islam. It was, in fact, a biased piece of legislation and utterly uncalled for.

It was followed by a massive blast in October at a religious school in Peshawar, which killed at least eight people and left behind hundreds injured. The attack apparently had an Afghan connection, as it sought to target Sheikh Rahimuddin Haqqani, an Afghan cleric from Jalalabad. He was lecturing students at the moment of the blast at the Peshawar seminary. He survived, though.

Then the motorcycle blast in Quetta, which killed and injured dozens. It was followed by the assassination of Maulana Dr Adil Khan in Karachi. He was the scion of Maulana Saleemullah Khan, the founder of Deobandi Jamia Farooqia seminary. Dr Adil, an illustrious figure, was member of the executive council of Wifaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia Pakistan – the largest federation of religious seminaries in Pakistan with around 23,000 madaris in its fold. His murder remains a mystery.

The latest in the string of atrocities was the bloodbath at Mach in Balochistan. Eleven ethnic Hazaras coalminers were abducted and their gruesome slaughtering was filmed and posted online. All these tragic events are like connecting the dots as they were choreographed to provoke every community with an ulterior purpose.

These attacks also suggest that the militants are regrouping. Someone is working in cahoots with them. Their intention is to brew sectarian violence. The million dollar question is why now? The answer has a geo-political connection, too.



The new wave of terror arrived as Pakistan was making headway on CPEC projects – the country's USD 60 billion lifeline. Not surprisingly, the active theatre is Balochistan. Militant groups opposed to CPEC – or backed by external powers opposed to CPEC – are the prime suspects for carrying out attacks in Gwadar – the seat of CPEC in Pakistan – and elsewhere.

This is why Prime Minister Khan's estimate that 30 to 40 odd men are holding the state hostage needs deep introspection. They are not men in isolation. Each has carved out a place for himself in the woodwork of sectarian hatred and lingual prejudice. Illiteracy and poverty help them thrive and further the nefarious designs of their foreign masters.

Intelligence dossiers of Western sources say that there were more than 50,000 terrorists hiding inside Pakistan when the US bombed Tora Bora mountain ranges in Afghanistan. This is why Pakistan suffered more than 70,000 civilian and military

casualties as it fought the US-led war on terrorism.

The subsequent Pakistan Army assaults on the terror networks devastated them to the core. Pakistanis heaved a sigh of relief. The country is terror free but remnants are more dangerous than ever. They have taken refuge in the society's rank and file of disgust. They are now pampered and protected by the political and money-laundering elite. It is a serious nexus.

Prime Minister Imran Khan and the military top brass have an opportunity in disaster to attend to the problem. Use it as a

pivot for action. Nail down the abettors in one fell swoop. The terror contours will stand exposed.

Beyond that, nabbing 30 to 40 ringleaders should be a cakewalk for the Pakistani law enforcement. What we need to do is exhibit zero tolerance and nab them. Only then can we beat back the menace of militancy.

Finally, Islamabad needs to put in a discrete word or two in a few foreign capitals. The diplomatic corps should know how to make Pakistan heard by the right quarters without making a lot of noise.

There's absolutely no need for the message to be long winding or complex. Just tell them that we know who is doing what, and that we intend to impose consequences on anyone overstepping the line henceforth.

If we can get that right, the problem will solve itself in a matter of days.

The writer is former Opinion Editor Khaleej Times; and presently an Editorial Consultant

The Fate of Jammu & Kashmir

The steady marginalisation of the Kashmir Issue – and how it can be reversed



By Dr. Moonis Ahmar

Ever since the promulgation of “Jammu & Kashmir Reorganization Act” by the Indian Government on 5 August 2019 and consistent measures taken by New Delhi to strengthen its control over the Muslim dominated Valley, a steady erosion of the Kashmir issue has been in evidence.

While the Indian parliament approved and enacted the draconian law, the Supreme Court has yet to rule on a raft of petitions challenging the revocation of article 370 of the Indian Constitution and ending the special status of J&K.

The international community, on the other hand, has come across as indifferent to the Indian government’s steady measures to tighten the occupation and transform the demographics of the Valley of Kashmir.

How the Indian government is able to get away with the policy of ‘Indianising’ Jammu & Kashmir and why the saner elements of Indian civil society are unable to prevent severe violations of human rights particularly in the Valley of Kashmir needs to be analysed. Also worthy of analysis are the questions of how the erosion of the Kashmir issue is impacting Kashmiris’ struggle for self-determination and what can Pakistan do to help prevent the marginalization of Kashmiri freedom struggle.

The steady erosion of the Kashmir issue is a reality and is going on since the last several decades. If the UN

Security Council through its resolutions of 1948 and 1949 gave legitimacy to the holding of plebiscite, India which initially accepted such resolutions reneged on its commitments. Pakistan’s failure to oust Indian forces from the Valley of Kashmir during 1948 war unleashed the process of erosion of the Kashmir issue.

Back to back fiascos like the Operation Gibraltar and Operation Grand Slam before the outbreak of September 1965 Indo-Pakistan war; the Shimla Pact of July 1972 which effectively barred multilateral handling of the issue; occupation of a large chunk of Siachen Glacier by Indian forces in 1984; the Kargil fiasco during the summer of 1999 and; the revocation of article 370 which had given special status to J&K; and numerous other measures taken by New Delhi to integrate J&K in the fold of Indian union reflected the marginalization of the Kashmir issue.

Truly speaking, it will be highly unfortunate if the Kashmir conflict which needs to be resolved justly and according to the will of the people of J&K is marginalized and may face the same fate as the Palestinian issue. Both Kashmir and Palestinian issues emerged more or less at the same time i.e. 1947-1948. In both cases the UN Security Council passed resolutions and the two conflicts were a cause of wars in Middle East and South Asia.

But, if the occupation of West Bank and Gaza by Israel and the prolifera-

tion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank changed demographic makeup of that occupied territory, the same policy is now being implemented by the Indian state in the Muslim dominated Valley of Kashmir.

If the ultra-right-wing Likud party of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is trying to inundate the occupied West Bank with Jewish settlements, a similar policy is being applied in J&K by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In neither case has the UN or the International Court of Justice taken cognisance of the occupier’s actions displacing native population.

In case of Palestinians they have been let down by their Arab neighbours who have been indifferent to Israeli occupation of West Bank, Golan heights, East Jerusalem and siege of Gaza. Likewise Kashmiris, whose struggle is principled and justified according to international law, have been let down by Pakistan and Muslim countries.

One can figure out three main reasons why the fate of Kashmiris issue will be similar to what has happened to Palestinians. First, when India unilaterally annexed J&K under the cover of Jammu & Kashmir Reorganization Act of 5 August 2019, Pakistan instead of symbolic protests should have taken practical measures to compel its eastern neighbour reverse such a decision. Instead, the PTI government announced symbolic protest measures

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on every Friday condemning the Indian unilateral annexation of Jammu & Kashmir. Even this token protest fizzled out after a few weeks.

In terms of mobilizing international public opinion against India's suppressive measures in the Valley of Kashmir in the form of lockdown, curfew, siege and search operations, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests, Pakistan received lukewarm support from OIC and other influential world capitals. The UN Security Council failed to pass a resolution condemning the arbitrary revocation of article 370 of the Indian constitution and annexing J&K and reconstitution of Ladakh and Jammu as its union territories.

Pakistan also prevented the planned march of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in October 2019 towards the Line of Control fearing an Indian retaliation and requested them to postpone their march till the spring of 2020. This was tantamount to nipping an indigenous Kashmiri initiative to agitate the matter in the bud at the hands of Pakistan.

Second, India well calculated Pakistan's failure to actively support resistance groups in J&K against its 5 August acts and embarked on punitive measures to allow settlements composed of non-Kashmiris so as to turn the Kashmiris into a minority in their own land.

In April 2020, India introduced new domicile law under which a person who has resided in Jammu and Kashmir for 15 years will now be able to call the occupied territory his or her place of domicile. The J&K Civil Services (Decentralization and Recruitment) Act defines a domiciled person as the one who has resided for a period of 15 years in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir or has studied for a period of seven years and appeared in class 10 or 12 examinations in an educational institution located in the territory".

This means several thousand Indian nationals who before the revocation of article 370 were ineligible to cast their votes or acquire immovable property are now entitled to those rights at the expense of the native population.

Third, a national liberation movement has credibility when it is united and effective in emancipating its country from foreign

occupation. The history of Vietnam War provides a vivid example where the Viet Cong, a national liberation movement of South Vietnam backed by North Vietnam faced the mighty US power and succeeded in throwing America out from their country in April 1975.

But in the absence of any military support from Pakistan or elsewhere, the Kashmiri resistance groups like the All-Parties Hurriyat Conference and J&K Liberation Front (JKLF) are in limbo. The fact that these indigenous movements are receiving neither military nor material support from Pakistan has boosted the confidence of Modi regime.

At least, when there were indications that India will revoke article 370 in an attempt to absorb J&K, Pakistan should have mobilized international support. Furthermore, India wouldn't have dared to cross the red line had Pakistan threatened to use the nuclear option in case Jammu & Kashmir were annexed by India. Failure to provide nuclear umbrella to the beleaguered Muslim population of the Valley of Kashmir was a major strategic failure on the part of Pakistan. As a result, India proceeded with its unilateral actions and converted the Valley into a great big prison.

Is there still a way to reverse the erosion of Kashmir issue and can an age-old struggle of Kashmiris be taken to its logical conclusion? Historically speaking, the Kashmir conflict is at least as old as Pakistan. Even before partition of the Indian subcontinent the Muslims of Jammu & Kashmir resisted the Dogra rule and wanted self-determination.

After August 1947, J&K became a major source of conflict between India and Pakistan. If Pakistan termed J&K as its lifeline and missing 'K' of Pakistan, India termed J&K its integral part. From any

standpoint, 74 years of Kashmir conflict is now a humanitarian issue because of India's repressive occupation policies. Furthermore, thousands of divided families on both sides of the Line of Control have been prevented to reunite.

The only way the erosion of Kashmir issue can be reversed is by rendering practical support to the people of Jammu & Kashmir, particularly to the Valley who have been under the Indian subjugation for decades. Particularly since 5 August 2019, India has made concerted efforts to block any way which can help emancipate Kashmiris from New Delhi's subjugation.

A policy on the part of Pakistan based on courage, tact and strategy to put India in a defensive position on J&K is the need of the hour. Unless Pakistan puts its house in order in terms of political stability, vibrant economy, good governance and the rule of law, it will not be in a position to support the people of Jammu & Kashmir in a better manner.

It is yet to be seen how a hard hitting and passionate speech delivered by Sarah Owens, member House of Commons of British parliament on 14 January condemning India's blatant violation of human rights in its occupied parts of J&K has any impact on the Indian government because the Modi regime has proven to be more thick-skinned than any Indian government in terms of international suasion.

In a perfect world, pressure from democratic forces within India would compel the Modi regime to reverse unilateral revocation of article 370 and restore the autonomous status of J&K. Our world, however, is anything but perfect.

The writer is Meritorious Professor and former Dean Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Karachi.



Is Kashmir the New Palestine?

Alienation of the native majority is a matter of time as India deploys the ignoble toolbox perfected for the purpose by the Israelis in Palestine



By Mishaal Ashraf

Fresh evidence is emerging every day to suggest India's Modi regime is deliberately using the unholy playbook perfected by the ruthless Zionist regime over the last eight decades in Palestine to disappear the native majority in occupied Kashmir.

As part of what must be seen as the latest Indian initiative to turn Kashmiris into aliens in their own homeland, people who have lived in the forests in Jammu and Kashmir for generations have been slapped with eviction notices.

India purportedly completed the annexation of Jammu and Kashmir on 5 August 2019 when Modi's right-wing BJP revoked article 370 and 35A of the Indian constitu-

tion. The already draconian Indian occupation turned Kashmir into the world's greatest prison as India set about rolling out these nefarious measures.

Article 370 exempts the state of Jammu and Kashmir from the Indian constitution. Enacted in 1949, the statute allows Occupied Kashmir to make its own laws in all matters except finance, defence, foreign affairs and communications.

Article 35A was introduced through a presidential order in 1954 to continue the old provisions of the territory regulations under Article 370 of the Indian constitution.

Article 35A vested the authority to define permanent residents of the region in the

local legislature. It bars non-Kashmiris from permanently settling, buying land, holding local government jobs, or winning education scholarships meant for Kashmiris.

Revocation of these laws has paved the way for Indians freely acquiring land and settling in Kashmir. The development has also cut the share of Kashmiris in government jobs to a third of the total, leaving two-thirds of jobs for Indians to take.

Kashmiris say the object of this whole exercise is to reduce the Kashmiris into a minority in their own homeland by importing population from India. Mehbooba Mufti, the former Chief Minister of

Kashmir had tweeted that the Indian government's decision is received as "illegal" and "unconstitutional".

Among the forest dwellers served eviction these notices are the residents of the village Zilsidara inside a forest in the mountains of Pir Panjal. The story of 108-year-old Zooni Begum, a resident of this village, is Exhibit A on how people are being persecuted in their own homes even in the remotest parts of Kashmir.

Zooni Begum, a 108-year old Kashmiri resident was recently interviewed by an independent media outlet regarding the eviction warnings issued by the Kashmir Forest Department. The Department declared Begum's house as illegal, amongst many others in Jammu and Kashmir.

A list was published in December 2020 by the J&K Committee on Forest Encroachments, and claimed that more than 63,000 people are settled illegally, occupying 15,000 hectares of forest land. There are 32 forest divisions in Jammu and Kashmir. Those with the largest areas of "trespassed" land are Ramban with 2,017 hectares, Rajori with 1,974 ha, Poonch with 1,473 ha, Anantnag with 1,496 ha, Shopian with 1,027 ha, Pir Panjal with 655 ha, Kamraj with 578 ha and Jammu with 500 ha.

Indigenous people with special protection under India's Constitution – called Scheduled Tribes – form a large proportion of the forest dwellers. Scheduled Tribes account for about 1.5 million people in Jammu and Kashmir – 12 percent of the total population, according to the latest census in 2011. Most of these are nomadic pastoralists – Bakarwals and Gujjars. The livelihood and shelter of these citizens depends on the forest, as most of them are now land or private property owners.

In Begum's village where most of the inhabitants have been declared illegal occupants, basic facilities do exist, including roads, electricity, and piped water supply. Upon interviewing, the villagers told that these services have been provided by the government for a long time now, acknowledging the fact that their families have been settled in this village for generations.

Wresting control of land from the locals was the first step in Israel's policy of disappearing the Palestinian population from their own homeland. Decades of steady pressure towards that end has led to a situation where Palestinians have been reduced to living as an invisible minority called Israeli Arabs, bereft of their ancient identity. The diehard adherents to the Palestinian identity have gradually shrunk to the besieged areas of Gaza and West Bank.

The residents of Gaza have been under Israeli control since 2007, subjected to brutal military assaults since 2008. Civilians and civilian infrastructure, both have been a victim of Israeli bombardments. Under the context of undercutting the military power of Hamas, the Israeli movement continues. The Israeli blockade is enforced by their military on both land and air. The sounds of airplanes, drones, explosions etc., are a major cause of anxiety, fear, stress, and other mental illnesses faced by the residents of Gaza.



Since 2018-19, Gaza has seen severe economic and humanitarian conditions. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) for Palestinians, the amount of refugees' reliance on food aid increased from around 80,000 in 2000 to about one million in 2018. This means 80 percent of the population of Gaza has become dependent on international aid.

As much as 95 percent of Gaza's population have no access to clean drinking water, and has to suffer from severe, continuous power shortages, says the report. A 2018 decision by the United States to stop funding to UNWRA caused unprecedented financial difficulties for the committee, leading to cuts in the services it provides to Palestinians in Gaza and other areas.

Pakistanis feel strongly about the plight of their Kashmiri brethren. The country has provided consistent diplomatic and moral support to Kashmiris' struggle for self-determination. India's recent reign of terror continues to cause considerable disquiet in all parts of the country.

Pakistan therefore continues to agitate the matter at the United Nations and other international fora. Prime Minister Imran Khan has repeatedly drawn the world's attention to the Indian atrocities in occupied Kashmir.

He has sounded the warning that India's highhanded approach can potentially lead

to nuclear conflict in the region – reason enough why the world must not look away from this thorny issue.

The need of the hour is for all the world's upright nations to come together and make India and Israel realise Kashmiris and Palestinians are as entitled to human rights as Indians and Israelis are.

Would Biden's America be Any Better than Trumps?



By Dr Khalid Bajwa

President Joe Biden was sworn in as 46th president of the United States in an oath-taking ceremony the like of which has never been seen in living memory. It was preceded by chaotic scenes and bloody violence at the Capitol Hill on the day of ratification of the election results.

That day, the American democracy came under attack on the instigation of the sitting president who refused to accept the election results, blaming elections were fraudulent and the victory was stolen from him. The people who came to storm Capitol Hill thought they were participating in a revolution that would make 'America great again' by establishing white supremacy.

Trumpism is the epitome of white supremacy. It's not something new in the US. The sentiment has been present in the USA historically. It's only that Trump articulated it and tapped the hatred and division present in the American society. Hatred is the most dangerous of emotions, and Trump exploited it for his personal gains.

This hatred was on the rise in recent decades with the changing demographics of the USA. White supremacists are scared to death that white race will turn into minority not in a very distant future and that is simply not acceptable to them. The presidency of Barak Obama played a major role in bringing this dormant emotion of fear to the fore. It seems this hatred and division will

continue to play an important role in the politics of the USA in coming decades.

The brief description above was to emphasise that Joe Biden has a much bigger and more difficult agenda at hand within the USA. He has to start the healing process in a society that is simmering with fear, hate and division. It's not an easy job and will absorb most of the energy of the new administration, leaving it with little time and energy to fully engage with the rest of the world.

However, the rest of the world especially the allies of the US can heave a sigh of relief as Joe Biden is a veteran of the American establishment and he won't break the norms of the long-established order.

The new administration will reengage with its allies healing the wounds of the Trump era. Trump was not only pursuing the policies detrimental to the interest of its allies, but was also very rude towards powerful leaders of the European Union in his personal interactions with them.

It is hoped in the western capitals that the damage done by the Trump administration will be repaired and the process of healing the wounds will set in motion. The NATO will be strengthened to counter the perceived threat posed by Russia.

The relationship with the UK will remain warm but the UK shouldn't expect special treatment from the

Biden administration. The new president is likely to give much more weight to the EU, unlike Trump who actively encouraged the break-up of the EU. On the contrary, Biden is not a Brexiteer and is super-sensitive about peace in Northern Ireland.

Another factor that can play a role in defining the US-UK relationship is the close relationship and personal affinity between Trump and Prime Minister Boris Johnson for obvious reasons.

There is good news for the environmentalist camp: The USA has re-joined the Paris Agreement on climate change. This is an important development as climate change is at a tipping point with disastrous consequences for humanity and without active participation of the US there is no hope of pulling back from a catastrophic future. Similarly, the USA has re-established its relations with the World Health Organisation.

The European nations also hope and there are encouraging signs from Washington that Biden administration will re-join the 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action', commonly known as Iran Nuclear Deal.

In short, it can be said safely that under the Biden presidency, the US will be engaging with the rest of the world both bilaterally and on multilateral forums, which America helped to establish and build over time. Trump's reckless policies are now history.

The US relations with China are likely to improve but this improvement will be more in style than substance. This will be true for many other foreign policy spheres as well. The trade war between China and the US is likely to subside.

On the other hand, China will continue to be perceived as a potent competitor, a challenge, and a threat to the US supremacy. The US will continue to strengthen its influence and enhance its defence cooperation in the Pacific Rim. Taiwan and the human rights situation in the Muslim minority Xinjian will continue to be used to malign and put pressure on China.

The US perceives India as a strategic partner in its policy of containment of China. This strategic partnership will continue to grow even during Biden's presidency. These relations won't be affected by who governs India or the USA.

Washington's tight bipartisan embrace of New Delhi is a bad omen for Pakistan and the Kashmir cause. On the other hand, it's not in the interest of the US to abandon Pakistan. The upshot is that the Biden administration will continue to tread a fine line to balance its interests linked with both South Asian rivals.

However, any quantum leap in US-India relationship will bring more pressure on Pakistan, especially in the realm of defence and on various international forums.

The US under Biden will, hopefully, exert more pressure on India to improve human rights situation in Kashmir and therefore, there may be some relief for Kashmiris in the occupied Kashmir in this regard. Nevertheless, India is in a position to withstand this pressure as the US-India relationships are more important to Washington than to New Delhi.

This situation will prevail until something happens to change the prevailing worldview of the United States. The importance of astute diplomacy based on cold reason by Pakistan cannot be overemphasised to that end.

Apart from the importance of Islamabad's role in Afghan peace process and the ensuing peace and security situation, Pakistan is a gateway to Afghanistan and the resource-rich Central Asian States.

Contrary to India's pretensions of peace and investment in Afghanistan, India's interests lie in a destabilised Afghanistan, for a peaceful Afghanistan serves the interest of Pakistan giving it reach to the resource-rich Central Asian states.

Not only that, a peaceful Afghanistan will deprive India of any leverage to create disturbances on Pakistan's western borders. Peace in Afghanistan has huge dividends for Pakistan. Therefore, if the US holds its interest dear in the area and beyond, it must work with Pakistan for a peaceful Afghanistan to achieve one of the US foreign policy goal.

Pakistan could prove beneficial to the US in many other ways as well, as it has demonstrated in the past. Pakistan should use all these factors to persuade the US to put pressure on India to resolve the Kashmir Issue. In return, Pakistan can offer to become India's overland gateway to the landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia, a boon for India's energy-deficient market and resource-hungry manufacturing base.

Another area that poses challenges to Biden's administration is the Middle East. The US will continue to focus on Iran and would like Tehran to take steps paving the way for the US to re-join the Iran nuclear deal. Iran needs to provide enough incentive for the US to do so in the face of opposition from Israel and other Arab nations.



Resuming Iran nuclear deal won't be welcome in the Arab's capitals and Israel. It looks like that after some huddling the US will re-join the Iran nuclear deal and Iran will scale back its nuclear ambitions and ballistic missile programme.

To appease Israel, the Biden administration

will continue to follow most of Trump's policies departing only in spheres which are relatively insignificant like re-establishing relationship with Palestinian authority, resuming aid and rejecting unilateral construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied territory with no tangible changes on the ground.

Another area of consequence is a war in Yemen. Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken has expressed his intentions to review the Trump administration's decision to declare the Houthi rebels as terrorists. This will ire Saudi Arabia and its allies for the war in Yemen.

The new administration would certainly renew its emphasis on human rights in the Middle East that can sour the relationship between the USA and Arab world.

Then, too, there is the conundrum of a mercurial Turkey demanding a leading role in the Middle East and the Muslim world. The US policy, and for that matter rest of the Western world's policy, towards Turkey is at best confused. No big changes are expected on this count.

Biden's inauguration comes at about the right time for the US to not only work for a more cohesive society within its borders but also provide leadership for the resolution of long-standing conflicts in various parts of the world, including Kashmir and Palestine.



Humanity is understandably weary of these of these festering problems, resulting in great economic and human tragedy. Change is long overdue and the world is right to wonder, as Biden settles down in the White House, if anything will change for better.

A Gulf bridged?

By Ibrahim Moiz

The normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Qatar in early 2021 saw a blockade that had lasted three and a half years, with every manner of bluster and threat, end with something of a whimper. Reflecting the Gulf states' dependency on the United States as regional referee, the blockade ended in the dying days of the far-right American regime of Donald Trump, in whose basket its architects had placed their eggs. As it happened, regime change in the United States prompted a policy change in Riyadh. But the underlying tensions that led to the Gulf dispute, the particularly escalatory role of the United Arab Emirates, and the problematic power brokerage of the United States are by no means over: it would be premature to suggest that the bilateral easing of ties between Riyadh and Doha means that the gulf in the Gulf Cooperation Council has been bridged.

Background

It is worth revising the history of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the relations between its member states. At the end of the Second World War, only two of the council's six member states – Saudi Arabia and Oman – were independent states; the latter, moreover, was to all practical purposes a protectorate of Britain, the dominant empire of the day, who also had suzerainty over many other sheikhs in the Arabian Peninsula. British contraction during the Cold War, exacerbated by their humiliation at Suez in 1956 and their failed counterinsurgency in South Yemen during the 1960s, offered the Arab sheikhs a narrow window of opportunity to assert a new and more independent regional order. In particular the sagacious ruler of Abu Dhabi, Zayed bin Sultan of the Nahyan family, had by the late 1960s started a series of initiatives to prepare for the impending departure of Britain. He succeeded in attracting several sheikhdoms to what in 1971 became the United Arab Emirates; however, Qatar's Thani family and Bahrain's Khalifa family remained cordially separate from both the Nahyan initiative and the neighbouring Saudi family.



One by one, a series of threats – some imagined or exaggerated, but most real to at least some extent – confronted the newly independent sheikhdoms. These ranged from communism in Aden and Zafar to the Persian expansiveness of the Iranian monarchy to the particularly revolutionary form of Shia clerical republicanism that took power in Tehran. The latter proved the most worrying to the Gulf regimes, match as it did the Persian militarism of the Iranian monarchy with a particularly republican brand of Shiism. It is no coincidence that the Gulf Cooperation Council, a political-economic bloc, was founded in the early years of the war between Iraq and Iran, which entered the Gulf states' own backyard.

The 1980s Gulf war dramatically escalated the stakes for the Gulf powers, and when in 1982 Iran – having just expelled Iraqi invaders from its territory – refused a Saudi reconciliation offer and instead invaded Iraq, Riyadh and other Gulf powers were convinced that Iran intended to encroach on their territory. When in 1990 it was Iraq that instead briefly annexed Kuwait, it represented a prime opportunity for the United States, which has had close links to Riyadh in particular, to shoulder its way into the region as the direct protector of the various Gulf states in the second Gulf war. The

United States' invasion of Iraq a decade later – against the pleas of the Gulf states, who correctly expected Iran to capitalize, but who were powerless even to prevent American troops using bases in their countries – only increased their dependence on Washington as a bulwark against Iran.

As a result, Washington has benefited from disagreements within the Gulf council, whose members therefore try to compete for the support of the major player in the region. These disagreements, stemming from historical disputes between the sheikhs that often predated their independence, had hitherto usually contained within the Gulf Cooperation Council. The American military foothold in the region, however, saw a subtle jockeying amid the Emirates for greater influence with the United States; in the Qatari case, this usually involved mediation initiatives in a number of regional conflicts including Afghanistan and Yemen, where its policy often differed from that of the Saudis. But this was not always to the United States' liking; during their conquest and occupation of Iraq, for instance, the Americans became increasingly irate with the critical tenor of Qatari media, which they blamed for inciting anti-Americanism. By contrast, Saudi Arabia – worried that it needed American protection against an ascendant

Iran – had lapsed into sullen acceptance, while the United Arab Emirates became increasingly strident supporters of the Americans under the leadership of their crown prince Mohamed bin Zayed.

Islamists, uprisings, and other differences

Still, up to 2010, the scale of Qatar's differences with its neighbours differed little from other intra-Gulf disagreements during the 2000s. What alarmed the other Gulf states in the 2010s was the enthusiastic support that Qatari media offered to the regional revolts, particularly their Islamist segments; in Libya, Doha was a particularly early and influential cheerleader of the war against its former collaborator, Muammar Qaddafi. The Emirates also entered the fray, but largely in order to undercut the Qataris and in particular any semblance of political Islam, to which bin Zayed was extremely hostile.

We have mentioned the state-centred responses by the Gulf governments to their environment since independence, but their response with regards to non-state actors is similarly important and cuts to the heart of the Gulf dispute. Historically the Gulf states had supported some brand of political Islam or other during the Cold War; Saudi Arabia's Faisal bin Abdul-Aziz and Abu Dhabi's Zayed bin Sultan had been particularly enthusiastic supporters, and when such middle-class Islamist movements as the Ikhwanul-Muslimin (Muslim Brethren) were persecuted in such homelands as Egypt and Syria they found a more welcoming environment in the Gulf, enjoying considerable societal influence among the growing population, native and expatriate, that accompanied the oil boom.

The 1979 Iranian revolt saw the first difference between the Gulf rulers and such Islamists; where the sheikhs were alarmed, many Islamists welcomed the downfall of the shah and saw in Iran a Shia version of what could be accomplished, with necessary adjustments, in Sunni states. It is important to note that most Sunni Islamists remained sympathetic to such "Islamic states" as Saudi Arabia and reserved ire only for such openly secularist regimes as Tunisia or Syria. But a gulf began to emerge, if slowly, in the 1990s over the deployment of American troops in the

Arabian Peninsula – which provoked not only the particularly sharp revolt of Usama bin-Ladin but also criticism by loyalist Islamists. Increasingly hemmed in over the next decade by the various forces described above, Riyadh was in no mood to take chances with the Islamists come the 2010s revolts in North Africa and the Levant.

Whereas Qatar flung itself enthusiastically into the Islamist camp, with increasing support from Turkey, the Emirates took the opposite line. Bin Zayed, who virulently opposed any form of political Islam not under the court's strict control, drew the much larger and more potent Saudis into his camp by playing on their fear of Iranian encirclement. In its diplomatic initiatives, Qatar had often hobnobbed with Tehran, and this link was brandished by Abu Dhabi to prove that not only Qatar, but the Islamists they supported, favoured Iran. It was a ludicrous claim – the bitter Syrian war actually pitted Iran against such Islamists – but it was persuasive to a Riyadh whose insecurity was stoked further by American diplomacy with Iran to the extreme point of pathology.

Whereas state suppression of political Islam was easy enough in a compact little area like the United Arab Emirates, it carried far more risk in a Saudi Arabia whose self-legitimation rested on a consciously polished image as a bastion of Islam and custodian of its sacred sites. One necessary ingredient for such a crackdown was the ascent to power of bin Zayed's clumsy and inexperienced Saudi protégé, Mohammad bin Salman, whose concentration of power within the Saudi family enabled him to take such a risky step with some relish, crushing dissent with brute force. Another ingredient was at least superficial Emirati support to Saudi initiatives – notably the Bahrain crackdown of 2011 and the Yemen war four years later, although on the latter point Abu Dhabi increasingly pursued a divergent course. A third ingredient was heavy armament by massive purchases of military equipment, much of it tested in Yemen.

The fourth ingredient, which perhaps emboldened Abu Dhabi and Riyadh more than any other, was the election of Donald Trump to power in the United States. Whereas his predecessor Barack Obama had been seen by the Emirates and Saudi Arabia

as too amenable, respectively, to Qatar and Iran, the inexperienced Trump was far more responsive to the type of politics in which bins Salman and Zayed specialized – leavened with business jargon, vague platitudes about societal reform underpinned by autocratic repression, financial incentives, talk of radical Islam. It was no coincidence that only weeks after having gained Trump's personal confidence on his May 2017 trip to Saudi Arabia did Riyadh and Abu Dhabi mount their blockade on Qatar.

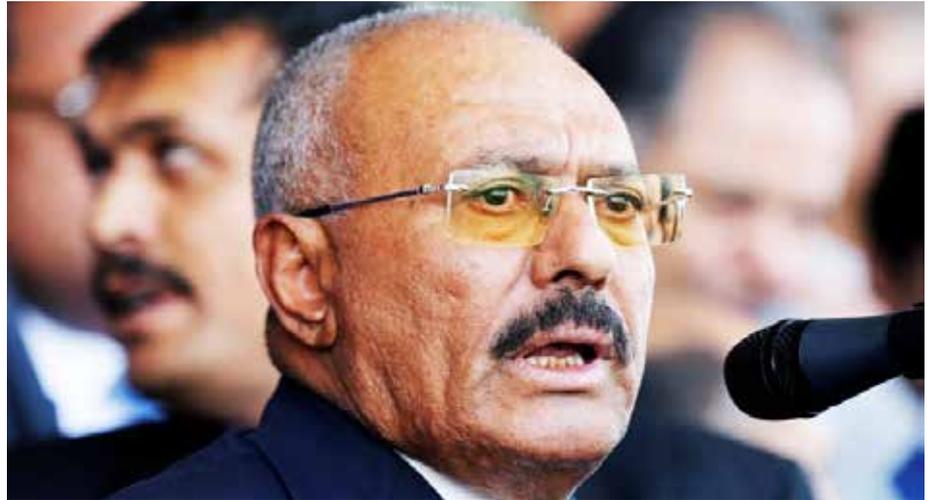
A blockade: starting with a bang, ending with a whimper

The blockade began with great vim and vigour – there was talk of an impending overthrow, flirtations with rival branches of Qatar's ruling Thani family, and even threats of turning Qatar into an isolated island. But like most of bin Salman's projects, the fallout was much greater. In the first place, its logic was garbled; as Ali Shehabi, one of its loudest cheerleaders, only recently admitted, it compensated for its ambitions with incoherent overreach in its claims, tying Qatar to any number of "terrorist" outfits to an extent that was both unprovable and came across as desperate. It caused considerable discomfort among peoples who had long coexisted beyond state lines, and when Riyadh attempted to make an example of dissidents – such as the sweeping arrests of such popular preachers as Salman Odah and murder of the respected establishmentarian figure Jamal Khashoggi – the problems only became compounded, with its soft power among Muslims and its reliability to the West becoming compromised.

Similarly, in spite of their initial encouragement the United States were ultimately in no mood to cut off Qatar, which housed their bases and had proven itself a valuable mediator in various conflicts. Lastly, the Gulf Cooperation Council suffered an unparalleled split over the issue; only Bahrain, practically a client state of Riyadh, lent support. Attempts by Bahrain and the Emirates to salvage support in the West by establishing ties to Israel has similarly caused similar societal discomfort and failed to yield the immediate returns it had expected; the United States and Israel have long been happy to promise great benefits for Arab suitors, such as Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, that never come. And bin Salman, in a

rare display of restraint, has not yet dared to follow suit in recognition of Israel.

Nor were Riyadh and Abu Dhabi otherwise in concert. Notwithstanding the personal bonhomie between their crown princes, the Emiratis' purpose – antipathy to political Islam – only partially overlapped with that of the Saudis, whose main aim was to bar off any conciliation with Iran. Bin Salman had not entered the process with any serious forethought. Saudi grievances with Qatar are not without basis – for instance, Qatari mediation with the Yemeni Houthis had given them a lifeline in 2007 – but can easily be applied elsewhere – Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Bahrain's lifeline to Yemeni dictator Ali Saleh in 2011 had enabled him to help the Houthis take over. Yemen, in fact, provided a key point where the nominal alliance between Saudi Arabia and the Emirates diverged, with Riyadh supporting Abdrabbuh Hadi's nominal government while Abu Dhabi backed a southern separatist cause that repeatedly attacked Hadi.



It has thus long been clear that the blockade had backfired. The Saudis had long been seeking a face-saving way out; with Trump on the way out and an openly critical Democratic regime on the way into power at the United States, the matter took on some insurgency, as Saudi foreign minister Faisal bin Farhan quickly began making outreaches to Doha. The decision of the

peninsular heavyweight to abandon the blockade forced the Emirates and Bahrain to grudgingly follow suit, but their own qualms with Qatar remain unresolved. The gulf in the Gulf remains to be fully bridged.

Ibrahim Moiz is a writer on politics and history. He graduated from the University of Toronto and studies modern history in the Muslim world, particularly in Afghanistan and Syria.

Afghans Want Nothing but Peace, says Khalili

A hasty US pull-out could leave Afghanistan in a mess, warns the head of Afghan High Peace Council

TTI Exclusive Interview by Zarghon Shah

A hasty US pull-out could plunge Afghanistan into a crisis, warns the incumbent head of Afghan High Peace Council Ustad Karim Khalili

A senior Afghan leader who heads his own Hizbe Wahdat Islami party, Khalili accentuated the need for an equitable, inclusive, Afghan-led, and Afghan-owned peace in a wide-ranging Q&A session with The Truth International during his recent visit to Islamabad.

The horrific killings of ethnic Hazara coalminers in Balochistan was not only a loss to the Pakistani nation but also to the Afghans, said Khalili, who draws his clout in Afghan politics from the fact that his Shia Hazara ethnic party controls the Bamiyan province as well as parts of its eight surrounding provinces in the mountainous Afghan heartland called the Hazarajat.

A veteran of Afghan jihad against Soviet Union, Khalili served as Minister of



Finance of Afghanistan in the Mujahideen government in the early 1990s. In 2002, he was appointed the vice president under President Hamid Karzai. He was Karzai's running mate in the 2004 Afghan presidential election, eventually serving as his vice president until 2014. Given below is an abridged transcript of the conversation.

TTI: How do you view the recent rounds of talks between the Afghan government

and the Taliban in Doha?

UKK: You are well aware of the fact that Afghanistan has suffered from four decades of bloodshed. The desire of the Afghan people as well as the world is now peace, and this is a golden opportunity for peace. We insist on lasting and fair peace — a peace inclusive of all ethnic groups and political parties. Indeed peace has to be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led.

TTI: One of the top Taliban demands for peace in Afghanistan is complete withdrawal of US forces from the Afghan soil. What is your take on the matter?

UKK: I have been meeting with US Special Representative for Afghanistan Mr. Zalmay Khalilzad and I am aware of the peace accord between the US and Taliban. Based on that agreement, the US has to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by May this year. So if there is a positive outcome of these negotiations, if peace is achievable and if people of Afghanistan deem that peace is within reach and war is about to end, then absolutely the US forces have to fully pull out of Afghanistan and that is very natural. But if that is not the situation, I fear the withdrawal of US forces would plunge Afghanistan into another crisis.

TTI: Pakistan claims Afghan peace is in its national interest and that Pakistan will keep playing its role in the Afghan peace process. Your comments?

UKK: Friendly allies in the region have to help and support us in our pursuit of durable and fair peace. I extend my appreciations to the neighbouring countries, specifically Pakistan, for their support and contribution in resolving challenges that crop up during the Afghan peace negotiations.

TTI: Pakistan alleges India is hostile to the current Afghan peace process – and that India wants to sabotage the Afghan peace efforts for which New Delhi is actually backing spoilers within and outside the Afghan government, your take?

UKK: In fact we believe every single country of the region could play a significant role towards Afghan peace. We wish every country in the neighbourhood to play a positive role but in a situation where Afghan peace talks are just beginning, it's premature to make judgements about different regional countries.

TTI: Being the leader of Hizbe Wahdat Islami Afghanistan which largely represents the Hazara community, how would you react to the recent killings of eleven Hazara miners in the Mach area of Balochistan that led to a weeklong protest turned sit-in at Quetta along with coffins of the dead?

UKK: I understand that Hazara community is suffering not only in Pakistan but also in Afghanistan. They have been targeted in their educational institutions and inside their

classrooms. They have been targeted during their weddings and they are passing through a very hard time. The Quetta incident was very horrific, it was not only a loss to the Pakistani nation but also to the Afghans, and this amply suggests we are sharing our blood besides other bonds. And I am really thankful to the Prime Minister Imran Khan and Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa for comforting the Hazara brothers and sisters.

TTI: During his recent visit to Pakistan, Hizbe Islami leader Gulbadin Hikmatyar flatly rejected negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban, and criticised President Ashraf Ghani, announced separate negotiations with the Taliban. How do you view this?

UKK: I would like to say there is freedom of speech. Everyone can have his or her own ideas and I respect that. We as a stakeholder are busy focusing on the peace negotiations right now.



TTI: How you think lasting Afghan peace can be achieved in the presence of spoilers and terror groups like TTP having safe harbour in Afghanistan – in addition to the anti-Pakistan mind-set?

UKK: I believe if we could reach an agreement with Taliban, the major part of the challenge you mentioned would hopefully be resolved. However extremism would still be a challenge. I also admit there are certain groups and individuals who don't want peace inside and outside Afghanistan but with the will of the Afghan nation, the countries of the region, and the world, the spoilers and terrorists can be defeated.

TTI: As chairman of the Afghan High Peace Council and former Vice President of Afghanistan, what are your findings about the people of Afghanistan?

UKK: The Afghan nation, whether under the control of the Afghan government or the Taliban, seeks peace. When I became

chairman of Afghan High Peace Council, I reached out to every single province of the country, ethnic groups, civil society and the women. And we held conferences and conducted surveys, finding out that every Afghan individual demands peace, peace and peace.

TTI: Does President Ashraf Ghani's negotiating team with Taliban have a Hazara representation?

UKK: Yes, the Afghan government's negotiating team with Taliban comprises four representatives from the Hazara ethnic group.

TTI: Do you think Russia and China could play a significant role in ensuring durable peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region?

UKK: No doubt China is a common and an important friend of Pakistan and Afghanistan. China's role in lasting Afghan peace has great significance. Similarly Russia is an important country in the neighbourhood. As I said every country of the region will finally be judged by its role and contribution towards a fair and inclusive Afghan peace and stability.

TTI: Pak-Afghan relations are often marred by distrust. Has this issue been discussed in your meetings with Pakistani government and military leadership?

UKK: I can tell you there is no discussion of any kind of distrust between our two countries, and I can tell you this has not been a subject of my meetings with Pakistani officials. In fact we stressed on joining hands for peace and prosperity instead of indulging into a blame game.

TTI: Terror outfit ISIS has gained a strong foothold in Afghanistan. The group claimed the recent killings of Hazara miners in Balochistan. Why isn't there any firm and resolute action against it in Afghanistan?

UKK: Let me tell you that ISIS is like a cancer for Islamic countries, for Iraq, Syria and also for Afghanistan. It's a sham and insult to the Muslims and this is a bloody phenomenon created and supported by some international elements. The ISIS has no space and support in Afghanistan, they didn't have it, they don't have it, and they won't have it. Once the agreement is reached with the Taliban, I am sure we will get rid of this curse.

Happy Independence Day



Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka, officially known as the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island country located in South Asia. The country's documented history dates back to 3000 years with further records of human settlements as far back as 125,000 years. With a rich cultural heritage, the first known Buddhist writings are said to have originated in Lanka around 29 BCE.

The country ranks among a minority of regions that have for at least two millennia not been conquered by any sort of invaders. With its two major ethnic groups, Sinhalese and Tamils and its two dominant religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, it has sought inspiration largely from the very dynamic Indian subcontinent right next door. However, despite its deep affiliation with India, it did not let its authenticity weaken even a bit.

Many cultural traditions that eventually vanished from India such as Buddhism and the Sinhalese language, became an indigenous category for Sri Lanka alone – forming part of its literary tradition. Its cultural development is also manifested in its position as a nexus point in the maritime trade routes between Europe, Middle East and Asia even before India was taken up as a formal route in the 15th century.



Unlike many countries, Sri Lanka is considered one of those states that are docile and friendly for all. Despite its location and affiliations, Sri Lanka has remained on cordial terms with archrivals India and Pakistan, maintaining a semblance of control by giving each state due respect and importance that is required to harness a lasting relationship.

Perhaps, this stems from its incredibly high literacy rate numbered at approximately 96.3% which has risen gradually since 1981 when it was marked as one of the global highest at 86%. As per analysts, it reflects clearly on how the society has evolved and the demeanor that they have embraced over time – of grace and compassion.



Alongside high literacy rate, Sri Lanka is also known for its tourism and was able to bag the top spot in the world's leading travel guide, the Lonely Planet in 2019. With a multitude of UNESCO heritage sites, beaches, wildlife parks, and hill country resorts all in the space of the Lankan island, there is small wonder that it became a destination revered and celebrated so widely.

Interesting Facts about Sri Lanka



Sri Lanka is also known as the 'Pearl of the Indian Ocean' and the 'Teardrop of India' for its geographical shape.



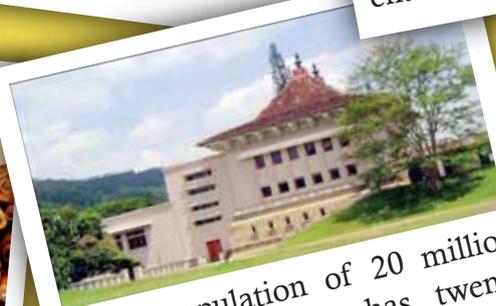
While cricket is a huge deal in Sri Lanka, its national sport is actually volleyball which was introduced in 1916.



Sri Lanka is the fourth largest exporter of tea across the world and it accounts for 12% of their entire exporting receipts.



Sri Lanka is considered the origin of cinnamon and approximately 80-90% of the world's cinnamon comes from it.



For a population of 20 million people, Sri Lanka has twenty universities which is an impressive number.

Johnson in Denial, UK in a Tailspin

As Covid-19 worsens and Brexit starts to bite, the UK faces the grim prospect of double-dip recession as Johnson's Tory government looks increasingly inept

By Syed Humza Imam

While the United Kingdom recorded 1,820 Covid-related deaths in a single day this week, the highest number since the pandemic began, its worries have been worsened by the reality of leaving the European Union.

For all the fanfare made when Prime Minister Boris Johnson struck a Brexit trade deal with Brussels on Christmas Eve, the inescapable reality of leaving the European Union's customs and regulatory territory has already started to bite. The fact that the deal was only agreed one week before it came into effect meant that dangerous disruption was inevitable for countless businesses that relied on seamless supply chains.

Despite Johnson's repeated claims that Brexit is a great opportunity for British exporters and would lead to a revival for free trade, the reality is very different: Freshly caught fish are reportedly being left to rot as exporters cannot get them to the European Union while logistics firms are sceptical that both importing and exporting is going to be viable for many businesses in the long term. Fallout from Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic is pushing the UK economy into a sharp contraction in the first quarter, according to data published by IHS Markit, meaning a double-dip recession is now on the cards.

While it should be a source of embarrassment for the PM that his deal has made life very difficult for many of the industries that he has championed post-Brexit, Johnson's public statements on the matter suggest he is oblivious to the reality that many are facing.



When asked to comment on the immediate consequences of the trade barriers implemented as a result of the deal, a UK government spokesperson said: "From the outset we were clear that we would be leaving the customs union and single market which meant that there would be new processes after the end of the Transition Period. These were widely communicated through our public information campaign."

The starkest example of what Brexit is doing to British business comes from Scotland's fishing industry. Despite the government's claims during Brexit negotiations that the fishing industry was very near the top of its priority list, there is a real fear that the entire industry could collapse in a matter of weeks.

"We had an entirely new system for exporters to get their heads around that hadn't been tested prior to use. The result, somewhat inevitably, was that it started going wrong straightaway," says James Withers, chief executive of Scotland Food and Drink.

"This isn't as simple as an IT glitch that needs fixing. In a matter of days, we went from being able to send fresh food to Madrid with a single cover sheet of paperwork. Now there are roughly 26 steps for each transaction," he added.

The real-world impact of this means that some exporters have had the European market cut off overnight. Almost every day, pictures circulate on social media of virtually empty fish markets and boats tied up. Withers has heard stories of Scottish boats sailing 48 hours to process catches in Denmark, just to get their stock into the single market. In an industry where profit margins are often thin, every hour spent working around red tape is critical to both the freshness of the product and the productivity of the business.

When pushed on the matter, Johnson has said that he thinks these are merely teething issues and not the fault of his deal or the barriers it's created. His spokesman explains that the government is providing £23 million for the industry to ease the process.

When asked specifically about the fishing industry earlier this week, Johnson once again denied that the problems facing exporters had anything to do with his deal, but instead were due to restaurants being shut because of the pandemic.

The current state of the pandemic in the UK is as bad as it has ever been. In addition to record daily deaths, the new Covid-19 strain discovered in the UK has been declared as deadlier than previous strains. "We've been informed that in addition to spreading more quickly... there is some evidence that the new variant... may be more associated with a higher degree of mortality," Johnson said at a news conference.

The UK's chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, added "With a man in their 60s, the average risk is that for 1,000 people who got infected, roughly 10 would be expected to unfortunately die with the virus. With the new variant, for 1,000 people infected, roughly 13 or 14 people might be expected to die".

On a more encouraging note, regarding the efficacy of vaccines against the new strain, Vallance said that there was "increasing evidence" that the existing Covid-19 vaccines would work against the UK strain. Johnson later added "both the vaccines we're currently using remain effective both against the old variant and this new variant."

By the time this article is published, however, the UK's Covid-19 death toll will have surpassed 100,000, far worse than the 'worst case scenario' figure of 50,000 the British government envisaged in April 2020. With the addition of Brexit, the immediate prospects for the country appear bleak.

Living in Debt

By Dr. Ashfaque Hasan Khan

The world economy was already witnessing a synchronised downturn even before the outbreak of COVID-19. The outbreak has simply dealt a major blow to the \$133 trillion world economy by totally devastating it with a speed which has not been experienced in nearly a century. The leading economies of the world have witnessed massive contraction, throwing many millions out of work and into poverty and hence, wiping out the gains of the last several decades that took millions out of poverty. Like the major economies, the pandemic has also severely damaged the economies of the developing countries, including the economies of low-income countries (LICs).

The pandemic has triggered unprecedented policy responses around the world. Governments in both developed and developing countries have taken extraordinary measures to prevent the spread of the virus. At the back of collapsing private sector demand, governments around the world used both fiscal and monetary stimulus to prop up aggregate demand and accordingly accumulated unprecedented debts. While developed economies have enormous capacity to afford high debt burdens, it is the developing countries and particularly the LICs that now face a rising debt burden. Most importantly, the LICs face the risk of catastrophic sovereign debt crisis with a possibility of disorderly debt default. Pakistan, being a low-income country, has also witnessed its economy contracting, revenue efforts faltering, expenditure on social protection — COVID-19-related and for the economic revival — elevating, budget deficit ballooning and both public and external debts reaching unsustainable levels.

It is important to note that the debt level of the LICs were already high and unsustainable even before the onset of COVID-19. According to an IMF study published in February 2020, half of the LICs, that is, 36 out of 76 countries, were at high risk of or already in debt distress. At the same time, sovereign debt downgrades by the major international credit rating agencies have soared in 2020 — to the highest level in 40 years. Argentina, Ecuador, Lebanon, Suriname and Zambia have already defaulted on their external debt payment and are at various stages of the debt restructuring process.

At the back of collapsing private sector demand, governments around the world accumulated unprecedented debts. Many LICs face the risk of catastrophic sovereign debt crisis with a possibility of disorderly debt default.

The total external debt stock of the LICs eligible for the debt relief provided by the G-20 countries stood at \$744 billion in 2019, equivalent to, on average, 33 percent of their Gross National Income (GNI). Total debt owed to private creditors amounted to \$102 billion and to official bilateral creditors, composed mainly of G-20 countries, at \$178 billion at the end of 2019. Such a high level of debt overhang is likely to slow investment and growth for years to come in the LICs.

COVID-19 has pushed the debt level of these countries to a new height because of pandemic-related expenditures; their revenues faltered because of the contraction of their economic activities, resulting in a rising budget deficit and accordingly a rise in debt. As a result, the pandemic has adversely affected both the solvency and liquidity indicators of these countries. The extent of debt distress of these countries will depend on the depth and duration of the pandemic's impact. Given the emerging post-pandemic debt situation in developing countries in general and the LICs in particular, it is highly likely that the world may witness a repeat of the disorderly defaults of the 1980s.

Pakistan's external debt and liabilities (EDL) were growing at an alarming pace even before the onslaught of Covid-19. Major factors that contributed to the surge in debt included fiscal profligacy, stagnant or declining exports, sharp depreciation of the exchange rate, keeping the discount/policy rate at an elevated level, borrowing in foreign currency to build foreign exchange reserves, and a decline in non-debt creating inflows.

Table 1

Year	Public Debt (Billion Rs.)	Public Debt % GDP	External Debt & Liabilities (Billion \$)
2006-07	4803	52.0	40.3
2012-13	14321	64.0	60.9
2013-14	16388	65.1	65.4
2014-15	17819	64.9	65.2
2015-16	20054	69.0	73.1
2016-17	21783	68.2	83.1
2017-18	25545	73.8	95.3
2018-19	34418	90.6	106.3
2019-20	38061	91.2	112.8
2020-21(P)	41867	90.0	118.0

COVID-19 has further aggravated the country's debt situation. Pakistan's external debt and liabilities stood at \$40.3 billion in end-June 2007, and increased to \$95.3 billion in 2017-18 — an increase of \$55 billion in one decade or \$458 million per month (See Table 1). It has further increased to \$113.8 billion by September 2020 — that is, an addition of \$18.5 billion in 27 months or \$685 million per month. It is important to note that Pakistan added \$72.4 billion during the two lost decades or 76 percent or over 3/4th of its EDL were accumulated in the two lost decades (See decade of the 1990s and the decade of 2008-18). The pace of debt accumulation over the last two and a quarter years is ominous (see Table 2). It is interesting to note that one thing was common in the two lost decades in which the country accumulated more than 3/4th of its EDL, that is, Pakistan remained in the IMF programme. Pakistan is again in the IMF programme and the debt is accumulating rapidly. Pakistan's EDL is projected to rise to \$118 billion and public debt to Rs. 41867 billion (or 90 percent of GDP).

Against this deteriorating debt situation that COVID-19 struck Pakistan, creating a perfect storm for public finances. On the one hand it hit tax collection and on the other

Table 2

Addition to External Debt and Liabilities (Billion \$)			
Period	No. of Years	Debt Added	Remarks
1990-2000	10	17.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pakistan added \$ 17.4 billion in the decade of the 1990s (Lost decade) - Pakistan added \$55 billion in the decade of 2008-18 (2nd lost decade) - Pakistan added \$72.4 billion during the two lost decades, or 76 percent of external debt was accumulated in the two lost decades - Pakistan added \$17.5 billion in the last two years.
2008-2013	5	20.6	
2013-18	5	34.4	
2008-18	10	55.0	
1990-2018	20	72.4	
2018-20	2	17.5	

resulted in a sharp increase in pandemic-related expenditure, putting tremendous strain on government. Notwithstanding the perfect storm, Pakistan like many other countries around the world, undertook expansionary fiscal and monetary policies to protect the vulnerable sections of society; to prevent job losses, bankruptcies and revive the economy. While Covid-related expenditure surged, the tax efforts of the government faltered equally, causing the budget deficit to remain at an elevated level, causing public debt to increase sharply. Like other LICs, Pakistan also faced serious difficulties in honouring its debt service obligations in an orderly manner because of declining exports and other non-debt creating inflows. With increased debt vulnerabilities, fiscal pressures, and a

global economic meltdown, Pakistan's capacity to absorb more debt has been weakened. Pakistan faced a serious dilemma in choosing between servicing debts to the lender and helping the vulnerable sections of society, including workers, small shopkeepers and so on. There is now a growing consensus at the global level regarding the likelihood of a protracted debt crisis in developing countries in general and LICs in particular.

Dr. Ashfaque Hasan Khan is currently the Principal and Dean, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST), Islamabad as well as a member of the Economic Advisory Council of the Government of Pakistan.

What Blackout's Fallout Doth Call Out

Food for thought for Pakistan's power system mandarins

By Khalique Ahmad

A massive power outage on the night of Saturday, 9 January 2020 disrupted economic activities both in industrial and commercial spheres and affected social life as the entire country plunged into darkness. The immediate public reaction from the government appeared to be political – as usual it blamed the previous government for not doing enough on transmission system.

While there should always be debate on political roles of the current and previous governments, the government should have steered clear of the customary blame-game given enormity of the event. The need of the hour is an independent, non-partisan and professional investigation from all technical and economic angles.

A similar breakdown in the North America in 2003 affecting large parts of the US and Canada took almost seven months and professionals of highest integrity to conclude a comprehensive report on the reasons, impacts and the way forward to avoid such situations in future.

A comprehensive investigation is all the more important given the repeated events of similar nature the country has witnessed over the past 10-15 years. There could be multiple and complex reasons and



impacts to the economy and other aspects of life but overall losses are unquantifiable given the lack of data and reporting mechanisms.

For example, we have no data as to how many man-hours or teaching hours were lost until the system was completely revived. That the entire country plunged into darkness, however, is a clear indication that industrial activity came to a standstill instantly. There is absolutely no data available to suggest which industry lost what, how much of raw material was completely wasted or how much of value addition went down the drain.

The government needs to collect such data from all industries which should then be handed over to experts of the relevant field to find out the overall losses to the economy. This aspect is mostly relevant to Industrial and commercial sectors, little to the service sector and none for the agricultural sector of the economy provided outage is very short term. While there may have been limited negative impacts in educational sector and agriculture sector given the fact the event happened on a weekend and was short-lived from these perspectives. But these are not to be ignored to plan for the future.

More importantly, the power system – from generation to transmission to distribution – must have suffered losses and may have required expenditure for replacement and repairs of plants, equipment and appliances within the power system and outside it used by other sectors like industrial, commercial and residential.

There is also a need for proper investigation to ascertain why such a big event took place despite the precautionary measures adopted, steps taken and investments made over the past few years following similar cascading blackout.

What is clear at this stage is the fact that the authorities have not learnt any lessons from past. It is also clear that the event was triggered by a human error at the Central Power Generation Company (CPGC)'s plan due to casual approach to safety protocols by relevant officials but the fact that it plunged the entire country into darkness meant that it was due to poor and inadequate maintenance and failure of the protection system in the national grid and the plant as well.

This has exposed the larger governance problem in the government that continues to operate the entire power sector on ad hoc basis and through remote control from Islamabad. The Chief Executive Officers of all the three key power companies including Discos, Gencos and transmission companies are working on makeshift arrangement.

The NTDC operates the country's national grid. Its protection system should have reacted to the Guddu Plant tripping and isolated the transmission network on the falling frequency. But this did not happen, resulting in cascading closure of all power plants across the country in a matter of seconds.

The NPCC monitors the flow of power generation from power plants and its quota allocation to and drawl of electricity to various distribution companies. It has to shun supply systems for load and frequency balancing. Even the Discos are working without regular chief executive officers for more than two and half years.

The NTDC is without a regular CEO since July 2017 while NPCC has not seen a full-time CEO for more than a decade. Likewise, the NPGC chief, working on temporary basis was hired last year from the private sector. As such, the power division had been running the entire power sector for many years even though Prime Minister Imran Khan is reported to have repeatedly expressed displeasure during cabinet meetings over non-filling of the posts of power companies.

The initial cause to be human error was indirectly confirmed by Engr. Hammad Amer Hashmi the day after the blackout when he suspended seven employees of Guddu power plant under Plant Manager-III, accusing them of negligence.

Officials said the initial fault appeared to have occurred at the Guddu plant's switchyard but the protection system at the transmission network did not respond to the fault. The transmission system should have rejected the load from Guddu plant through automatic protection mechanism but apparently it did not because of poor or insufficient maintenance and non-washing of transmission line.

The Guddu-Sibbi transmission line has been the traditional trouble spot because of extreme fog and environmental pollution that converts insulators into conductors and had been resulting in tripping in the past as well. The protection system had been separating southern and northern parts of the country in the past. These lines used to be washed every year, sometimes repeatedly, depending on the fog in winters.

In fact, the authorities have been claiming to have sufficiently introduced anti-fog wire coating materials over the last 5-6 years. The breakdown, third since 2015, meant the protection system was either not upgraded or the upgrade was insufficient. Another reason could be that the transmission lines were not cleaned with adequate rigour.



Moreover, there were various frequency relays like 50hz, 49.4hz and 48.5hz etc which meant the system should start shedding 10-15 percent. These relay system settings are upgraded every second or third year but had been missing for almost five years.

Power Regulator – NEPRA – has also ordered an investigation through a team comprising two former experts of NTDC and transmission protection system.

What also needs to be kept in mind is the fact that maintaining such a large integrated transmission line network of more than 17,000 kilometres including the nearly 6000-km of 500kv transmission system is not an easy job. It takes a lot in terms of both investment and effort and requires latest equipment to balance a large network that transfers bulk of power from north to mid-country in summer and shift generation from south to north in winter when most of the hydro-power system becomes unavailable due to annual canal closure.

It may be advisable to bifurcate the national grid into two or three regional grids with balanced supply and demand mechanism which could be maintained and balanced at a limited scale. There could always be facilities available to shift loads from one region to another in special circumstances.

At the same time, given the large surplus capacity the authorities may have to think in terms of a spinning reserve available which could replace a shut down in any large plant and keep the larger grid working instead of cascading blackouts across the country.

While there may be differences of opinion over the nuts and bolts of the reform to undertake, nobody can argue with the need for Pakistan to undertake serious power system reform. The country can ill-afford a blackout, much less repeated events like this. Apart from the huge economic cost they impose, they create a sense of insecurity and cause panic among the citizenry.

The writer has been watching national economy for two & half decades.

Boom Time for Housing Black Market

Political patronage allows shady builders to cash in on construction stimulus, prey on citizens

TTI Exclusive Report

ISLAMABAD: You can be forgiven for thinking it is open season on shady real estate developers if you pay heed to reports of official crackdown on illegal housing schemes. In reality, it is open season on unsuspecting citizens looking to build a home or invest their lifesavings – and joining the hunt are scores, maybe hundreds, of unscrupulous developers.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of the matter is that this housing black market is booming on the power of Prime Minister Imran Khan’s construction stimulus.

Almost all departments in federal capital appear to be working to regulate the mushroom growth of housing sector but most of the work amounts to little more than paperwork – without ever materializing as action on the ground.

The number of illegal housing schemes working in Islamabad may be as high as 250 or more. The authorities took action against illegal housing societies a few months back and sealed the offices of 10 housing societies found in violation of the regulatory requirements. But given the magnitude of the problem, this does not begin to scratch the surface of the problem of mafia-like patronage networks used by these businesses.

Most of the departments expected to regulate these housing societies seems hand in glove with owner of these societies. Some officers of Islamabad District government found involved in this dirty game were transferred a while back but illegal business is still on.

The source of this malignant growth is the usual suspect: Political patronage. All developers operating outside the regulatory regime are backed by influential politicians and/or bureaucrats. For example, one such housing society is being run by a Punjab government minister. This is how high the connections of these shady schemes go.

The upshot is that officials, owners and supporters of these societies remain untouchable even after a string of judgements passed from time to time by superior judiciary.

In a judgement on 13 January 2021, Islamabad High Court exposed the illegality of the system and state departments to accommodate some influential minister and ordered cancellation of the NOC of a housing society being run illegally since 2014.

Record showed that the NOC of this society was cancelled in 2014 and remained and never instated since. In 2017 in the continuum of the cancellation another requisite was added which was access to projects from 100 feet road. This was a mandatory condition for the NOC. However, in 2018 when ironically, then management of CDA maneuvered in a manner that has been ruled by IHC as misuse of Authority that resulted in loss to the exchequer.



The said society apparently lacked any access to a 100-foot road. However, in April 2018, the then CDA management came up with a hypothetical road, which was not on the ground, as access point for the project. They then used this imaginary road to consider the NOC condition for the said housing society fulfilled.

The purported approval to reinstate the NOC came at a CDA board meeting on 9 May 2018 following a summary moved on 24 April that year. At that time, even the land identified as government road had not been fully acquired by the CDA.

Thus a necessary condition of NOC was done away with and facts changed to accommodate the Project owned by a Punjab Minister. The summary was put forth by then Member Planning Mr. Asad Kyani who is allegedly a US national and a real brother of a former federal minister in the PTI government.

However, the story doesn’t end here. Documents presented before the High Court reveal that the state land connecting Main access point to said society was not fully owned even by the builder. This land was transferred towards end of 2018 under the auspices of the then Chairman of CDA, who is now a grade 22 officer.

Thus not only was the road not there but perhaps the land this imaginary road was connecting to was not owned directly by the company in May 2018 when the approval was granted. The Islamabad High court in its judgement passed the following observation regarding the conduct of the then bureaucracy:

“The summary and the approval given by the board were, prima facie, a classic case of misuse of authority to benefit and enrich a private entity at the cost of state land and loss to the exchequer.”

This looks like a damning indictment of a former Chairman CDA and a member planning as well as the entire Board of May 2018. Surprisingly no action has been taken against these officers, duly identified for the transgressions mentioned in the High Court Order.

The 2.5 Million Rupee Question Hanging Over NDMA's COVID-19 Spending

The parliament and judiciary seek transparency and accountability at the NDMA



By Azeem Waqas

The Supreme Court of Pakistan was the first to question the NDMA (National Disaster Management Authority) about its COVID-19 spending. A senate panel has now taken up the matter for probing, and as would be expected, Opposition members are not prepared to drop the ball over the issue.

The matter first garnered popular attention when the then NDMA supremo told the Supreme Court his organisation was spending PKR 2.5 million on every COVID-19 patient.

Senator Engr. Rukhsana Zuberi sees the need for rulemaking to adequately cover a contingency like the pandemic raging all around us, she is not prepared to allow rules being overruled.

The technocrat senator from the PPP-P (Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarian) told The Truth International (TTI) she advocates amendment of rules to allow a PC-1 submitted by the NDMA in an emergency situation to be breezed through to approval.

National Party Senator Meer Kabeer Shahi minces no words in voicing his opinion

talking to TTI: The NDMA claim of spending at the rate of PKR 2.5 million per patient is simply unbelievable.

“We suspect that the funds have been misappropriated”, says Shahi. “We insist on accounting for the foreign aid received to counter the menace of COVID-19 be provided in the Parliament”.

“We are sure that billions of rupees have been embezzled by the NDMA and the money has been pocked by a few individuals”.

He laments that corona patients in Balochistan were on their own during the peak of first wave of COVID-19. “The NDMA did not provide a single tablet or injection to them – even the parliamentarians were getting their tests in Islamabad because there were no testing kits available in the provincial hospitals”.

Opposition parties have raised serious questions on the transparency of COVID-19 funds being provided by the international donors, agencies and organizations, and, they have sought all details of the loans, grants and aid to be provided in the Parliament.

Although politics over matters of vital importance is a norm in Pakistan, but this time opposition parties seem furious and are sparked on the utilization of billions of rupees by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) without any approval and accountability by the Parliament.

Members of the opposition parties have shown their reservations and displeasure over the details given by the NDMA in one of the parliamentary committees scrutinizing the funds utilization and termed it a case fit for investigation by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

The NDMA is the lead agency for Pakistan's COVID-19 response. Prime Minister Imran Khan has allocated PKR 25.3 billion to the NDMA and it has incurred expenditures amounted to PKR 13.496 billion against budgetary support.

The NDMA has also received PKR 20 billion from different donors in terms of loans and grants while the NDRMF (National Disaster Risk Management Fund) has contributed PKR 20 billion for COVID-19 from endowment fund profits.

According to the Planning Commission of Pakistan, no foreign aid could be received without the PC-1 approval but NDMA has also received USD 140 million in foreign aid directly from international donors. According to Planning Commission, Pakistan had received PKR 128 billion during the last fiscal year, while a pledge of USD 3.4 billion had been made out of which USD 2.4 billion had been given.

According to Economic Affairs Division, the international community and donor agencies have committed to provide USD 3.8 billion to Pakistan to combat COVID-19. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had provided USD 1.38 billion to against budgetary support.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) provided USD 500 million and Asian Infrastructure Development provided USD 750 million. The US, EU, Japan, World Bank, ADB, China, UK, Canada, South Korea Islamic Development Bank and UNO have provided grants totaling to USD 78 million while they have committed to provide a total of USD 170 million in the coming months.

The Ministry of National Health Services and Regulations (NHSRC) prepared a plan called Pakistan Preparedness Response Plan (PPRP) which required USD 595 million and the international community has committed to provide USD 484 million to combat COVID-19. Out of USD 484 million, USD 238.6 million went to the federal government, 84.72 million to Punjab, USD 56.13 million to Sindh, USD 47.67 million to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, USD 21.74 million to Balochistan, USD 569 million to AJK, and USD 18.72 million to Islamabad Capital Territory.

The NHSRC has utilized USD 113.4 million out of USD 484 million. It has used a USD 38 million World Bank loan, of which USD 8.5 million were utilized for procurement of PPEs, kits and medicines for federal areas. Provinces utilized USD 29.50 million for purchase of PPEs and clinical management. USD 50 million provided by the ADB were 100 percent utilized by the NDMA for purchase of COVID-19 supplies. Another USD 2 million grant was utilized for in-kind support, lab consumable and for lab supplies. A further USD 2.7 million went to PPEs to all provinces.

According to the NDMA, China provided USD 4 million donations for the construction of an Isolation Hospital & Infections Treatment Centre (IHITC) at Islamabad.

The USAID provided USD 15.60 grants which is 100 percent utilized in providing training to healthcare workers, procurement of labs, emergency supplies, surveillance of COVID-19, strengthening of 154 districts diseases surveillance response units and six provincial diseases surveillance centres. Four mobile labs for each province were delivered in December while 200 ventilators were installed across the country.



The NDMA data shows that it has procured 30 portable ventilators and 99 were donated, out of which 84 have been issued and 15 remain unutilized. Likewise 811 ICU ventilators have been placed in the stores. The NDMA has procured 215 X-ray machines out of which 91 are still unutilized.

According to documents the NDMA has procured 2,931 ventilators which are delivered. Likewise, 377 ICU ventilators, 100 portable ventilators, 175 testing kits have been purchased and delivered. Similarly 9.9 million testing kits were purchased out of which 8.5 million have been delivered, and 20.9 million PPEs were purchased out of which 20.6 million have been delivered. The NDMA has also purchased and delivered more than one million goggles, 2.1 million suits, and 2.3 million gowns, 215 x-ray machines and 126,453 oxygen cylinders.

The NDMA has spent billions under the emergency clause of the Authority, which has perturbed the opposition.

Opposition Senator and a member of the Senate Standing Committee on Planning and Reforms Dr Asad Ashraf had voiced his reservations over the utilization of COVID-19 funds without any approval of authority. He opined it would be a case fit for a NAB investigation.

“The NDMA is an authority like other authorities in the country, every authority has some rules to make emergency expenses but they have utilized all funds directly. The NDMA should have followed some rules. They must have PC-1 of all the procurements according to the PEPRA rules”.

After checking NDMA details, Dr Asad Ashraf said the NDMA had made all procurement of medicines, machinery and equipment without any PC-1 in contravention of PEPRA rules by invoking the emergency clause. Nor have NHSRC, Finance Division or Planning Commission been informed by NDMA about these expenditures, he says.

Dr Asad Ashraf said that “Ventilators were procured at higher-than-market-prices. Even oxygen was not being provided to the patient. None of the respirators was used for the treatment – they were all put in store”.

He said that “Committee also enquired about the details of PKR 2.5 million expenditures per patient but the NDMA [ignored] all questions”.

The superior judiciary was the first to start asking question about NDMA’s conduct of COVID-19 relief operations. In a suo motu case the Supreme Court of Pakistan made serious observations and showed its dissatisfaction over the performance of the NDMA. The court observed that the report submitted

by the NDMA did not provide details of the import of machinery undertaken by m/s Al-Hafeez Crystoplast (Pvt.) Ltd. for the manufacture of N-95 masks in Pakistan.

The court order said, “Copy of LC and other import documents have not been filed. The Airway Bill shows that the value of the machinery has not been declared. It is not clear whether the machinery was imported by this Company and if it was so, whether it paid any taxes and duties on the machinery, and for whom these N95 Masks were supplied.

“If NDMA was the purchaser of N-95 Masks produced by this company than NDMA could not have been the facilitator of this Company for the import of machinery. The documents indicate that NDMA itself chartered an aircraft for airlifting the machinery, as noted from the letter dated 26.04.2020 of NDMA filed as Annexure-II.

“Flight clearance was sought from the Chinese Government through the Pakistan

Embassy, and whether the facilitation provided to this Company was also made available to other business entities in Pakistan by publication in newspapers, etc. No publication of this nature has been filed by NDMA.

“It appears that this Company has been favoured by NDMA for import of machinery for making of N95 Mask and then supplying the same to the NDMA. NDMA is directed to provide details of purchases of N-95 Masks from this company or any third party and money paid to this Company or its agents. Further, documents relating to payment of dues and taxes by this Company may also be filed.

“NDMA should also explain why this Company was given special favour by it for import of the machinery. The source from which the money was paid for the purchase of machinery should also be disclosed.”

The honourable judges also noted that NDMA has sought approval from the Drug

Regulatory Authority of Pakistan for import of unregistered drugs, i.e., 7000 vials of Remdesivir injection. The Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan through its letter dated 09.06.2020 gave its NOC (No-Objection Certificate) on the condition that NDMA would submit the details of patients including their CNIC & doctor’s prescriptions.

This approval issued under rule 13 of Drugs Import & Export Rules, 1976, was a prior approval that would not be applicable to any drugs already imported. The court noted that no material has been submitted before this Court to show that these conditions were met by NDMA”.

TTI repeatedly tried to reach the NDMA media advisor for the Authority’s side of the story with specific reference to its COVID-19 income and expenditure. However, there has been no response as we go to press.

The writer is an investigative journalist.

Expired Meds Supplied to NDMA, Matter Hushed Up

By Abdul Sattar Khan

In resource-strapped countries like Pakistan, charitable giving plays a key role in bridging the gap between demand and supply of essential medical supplies required to fight a medical emergency. What do you do, however, when critical medical supplies arriving in the nick of time as a welcome donation are found past the manufacturer’s printed date of expiration?

This is exactly what happened in Pakistan amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic: Vast quantities of medical supplies including pharmaceuticals donated by a group of domestic philanthropists were found to have already gone beyond their shelf life.

Pharmaceuticals undergo chemical changes over time. Drugs past their shelf life may have decomposed and either become ineffective or even harmful. Instances of expired or otherwise useless supplies – including medical supplies – arriving in donations are not uncommon in the global South – although this is the first such occurrence to come to light in Pakistan.



Outrageously, all the items included in the consignment – donated to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), a lead agency in Pakistan’s COVID-19 response – were either beyond their date of expiration or so close they would achieve expiration before delivery to a hospital.

The inventory included some 360 medical

products of 14 different categories. Some of the items included were Oxygen Mask, Ventilator Circuit, 3-way Stopper, Nasal Tube (Adult), Ball Spirometer, Legal Clip Extra, Urine Collector, ETT Tube, Radivac Drain Bottles, Cord Clamp, Double Lumew Infusion, Canvulla, Central Venus KTS, Feralife Syp, etc.

Donors are reasonably expected to conduct their own due diligence to ensure the suitability and fitness for use of items included in a donation package and checking the expiration date for each item would be integral to such an effort if the items in question are medical supplies. Why this particular group of donors from Karachi failed on that count is inexplicable.

Where did the donors source these items? Did their suppliers – whether manufacturers or wholesale dealers – wilfully include the expired items? Who is responsible for playing this evil trick on the people of Pakistan caught in the middle of a raging pandemic? These and other questions can only be answered once an impartial inquiry is conducted into the matter.



The authorities are said to have raised the matter with the Karachi philanthropists who consigned the expired supplies to the NDM as a donation. The matter, however, seems to have been brushed under the carpet for unfathomable reasons.

This hush-hush handling of a matter as scandalous as this is particularly incomprehensible coming on the watch of Prime Minister Imran Khan's government, whose Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party rose to power on an anticorruption platform – and who never passed up an opportunity to excoriate the governments over such issues in the past.

Two other questions left dangling from the episode are whether the items in question – unfit for use as they were – have been properly disposed of, and who bore the cost

of such disposal.

Expired pharmaceuticals pose threats to both health systems and environments. It is therefore important to suppress the accumulation of such pharmaceuticals and their slippage into the environment or counterfeit drug markets. As such, Pakistan urgently needs to strengthen the management of its pharmaceutical supply chains and the associated accountability and regulatory mechanisms.

Manufacturers generally assign pharmaceuticals shelf-lives of one to five years. Some pharmaceuticals are held in reserve for use in an emergency situation, such as an outbreak of an infectious disease, and many of these expire before any relevant

emergency occurs. This can result in large stockpiles of expired pharmaceuticals, inventory losses and financial losses associated with stock disposal and replacement.

To minimize the burden of the disposal and replacement of expired pharmaceuticals, the United States Food and Drug Administration has for more than three decades employed periodic testing and shelf-life review of pharmaceuticals that have good stability profiles. As a result of this initiative, which is known as the shelf-life extension programme, the shelf-lives of at least 88 percent of the tested products have been increased by at least one year.

Fixing responsibility for the incident and bringing those found responsible to book will also be key to preventing such incidents from happening in the future.

The WHO has in the past reported discovery of expired medical supplies among donation consignments in several low-income countries. On every occasion, the supplies in question were disposed of appropriately and the concerned government initiated legal action against those found responsible – although the action did not always reach its logical conclusion.

In Albania, 80 percent of the drugs donated a while ago were found unfit for use and were later on destroyed properly. In an incident in Bosnia, 17,000 tonnes of expired pharmaceuticals were found – and later on destroyed properly.

In Georgia, 20 tonnes Silver Sulfadiazine Ointment and 12 tonnes of un-needed donation including 9 tonnes of expired drugs were found – and later on destroyed properly. In Sudan and Honduras, large amounts of expired items were found among donations – and later on destroyed properly. In Chech, a drug consignment was found to have 30 percent of its contents expired – which were destroyed properly later on.

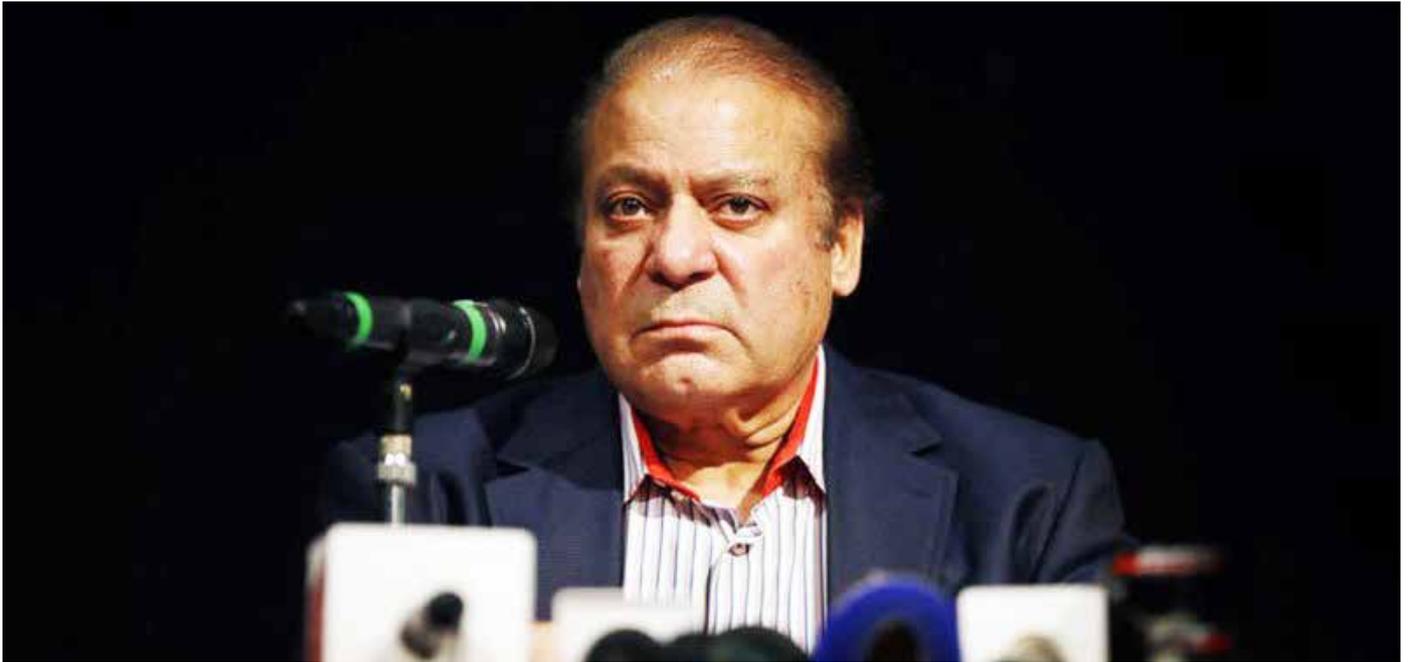
The WHO has specific guidelines to help recipient countries process donations of medical equipment, drugs and pharmaceuticals, covering locally acquired donations as well as those originating outside the country.

The guidelines put the onus to suppress the unregulated export of pharmaceuticals coming towards the end of their shelf-lives and other nonconforming medications on the recipient countries, who it says should strengthen the enforcement of national policies.

According to WHO, any low- or middle-income country considering the receipt of a proposed drug donation should ensure that only solicited donations are allowed entry; any donated drug is approved for use in the recipient country and congruent with the relevant national policies and regulations; donations are in accordance with a plan mutually agreed upon by both the recipient and the donor; the donation is on the essential medicines list of the recipient country; and the donation meets the quality standards of the donor and the recipient country.

Hedunnit!

Pending in Pakistani courts are a raft of corruption charges against Nawaz Sharif – who maintains it's all politically-motivated persecution



By Asif Malik

The most recent round of revelations in what has come to be known as BROADSHEETGATE among the Pakistani chattering classes have put the spotlight back on the laundry list of corruption allegations against former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

The UK's High Court also discussed in some detail the cases against Mr Sharif on the basis of the report of six-member Joint Investigation Team (JIT) that probed assets of the Sharif family following Panama Leaks. The foreign arbitrator mentioned the quantum of the amount which the JIT report of Sharif's alleged corruption as well as the verdict of the Accountability Court of Islamabad that besides sending Mr Sharif to jail also imposed heavy fine on him and ordered forfeiture of his London's properties.

The Broadsheet verdict mentioned three cases – Avenfield Apartments, Al-Azizia Steel Mills and Flagship Investment – while discussing the cases of Mr Sharif. However, Sharif, currently based in London, is facing at least eight different cases in Pakistan, including two pending references in the accountability courts of Islamabad and Lahore, three appeals in the Islamabad High Court (IHC) related to Panamagate, two investigations of NAB, an inquiry of the FIA in retired Air Marshal Asghar Khan's case, and another investigation of the ACE Punjab in connection with the allotment of a shrine's land.

So far, out of these eight cases, Mr Sharif has been declared proclaimed offender in pending reference related to the Toshakhana vehicle, two appeals in Avenfield Apartments, and Al-Azizia references of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

The Accountability Court as well as the Islamabad High Court sought details of the properties owned by Mr Sharif. The Accountability Court has also ordered attachment of his properties.

Former President Asif Ali Zardari and former Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani are also accused in the Toshakhana reference.

It accuses former president Zardari and former premier Nawaz Sharif acquiring cars from the Toshakhana after paying 15 percent of the price of the cars. The bureau further alleged that former premier Gilani facilitated Zardari and Nawaz in this regard.

Due to his absconson, the Accountability Court attached the properties of Mr Sharif including PKR 343,425 worth of shares in Hudaibiya Paper Mills, PKR 467,950 worth of shares in Muhammad Baksh Textile Mills, PKR 48,606 worth of shares in Ittefaq Textile Mills, and shares worth PKR 22,213 in Hudaibiya Engineering Company.

In addition, he has eight back accounts with multiple private banks, including three foreign currency accounts. He has 566 Euros, 698 American dollars, and 498 British pounds in foreign currency accounts, while PKR 612,000 in the rest of the accounts.

The former premier also owns three vehicles which have been attached, including one Land Cruiser and two Mercedes, according to the report.

The former premier and his dependents have properties in Lahore, Sheikhpura, Murree and Abbottabad. Those properties include a

bungalow in Murree and 15-kanal residence in Chhanga Gali in Galyat, and properties in Lahore's Upper Mall area. A total of 1,752 kanals of land is registered in the name of Mian Nawaz Sharif and his dependents.

Maryam Nawaz has challenged the attachment of properties of the Sharif family in Murree and Chhanga Gali with other properties frozen in connection with the Toshakhana reference because of absconding of her father Nawaz Sharif.

Accountability court judge Syed Asghar Ali issued a notice to the National Accountability Bureau and sought a report from the bureau by Dec 16.

Ms Sharif filed the objection petition in the Accountability Court against the attachment of a house at Murree, and another at Chhanga Gali, Abbottabad, in the Toshakhana case. She stated in the petition that both houses were owned by her late mother, Kalsoom Nawaz.

She said that the two houses had been purchased much before the period mentioned in the reference and after the death of the owner of the houses in question, the ownership devolved upon legal heirs as per judgment and decree dated May 14, 2019, and the houses are undivided properties in the joint ownership of all legal heirs.

Out of three pending appeals, two were filed by Mr Sharif against his conviction in Avenfield and Al-Azizia references. These references were filed before the Accountability Courts under the direction of the Supreme Court.

Supreme Court while deciding the petitions of chairman Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) Imran Khan and Sheikh Rashid Ahmed – currently Prime Minister and Interior Minister respectively – had constituted a six-member JIT to investigate the properties owned by the Sharif family.

Upon receipt of the JIT's report, the apex court disqualified Mr Sharif for life and directed NAB to file three references against the Sharif family in the accountability courts of Islamabad.

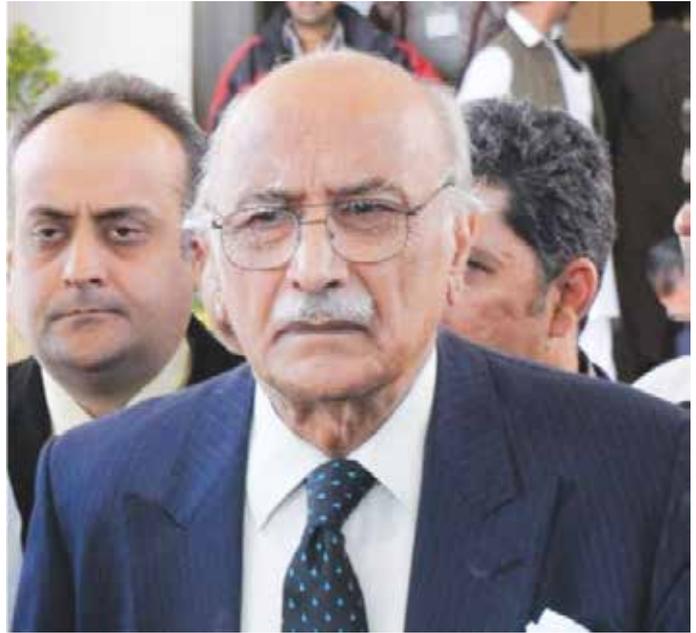
Accountability Judge Mohammad Bashir convicted Mr Sharif, Maryam Nawaz, and retired Captain Mohammad Safdar in the Avenfield Apartment reference on 6 July 2018. Accountability Judge Mohammad Arshad Malik convicted Mr Sharif in Al-Azizia reference but acquitted him in the Flagship Investment reference.

The third appeal related to Mr Sharif was filed by the NAB against his acquittal in Flagship Investment reference.

Sharif is also facing an investigation related to the plot allotted to media tycoon Mir Shakeel ur Rehman and is an accused in the Chaudhry Sugar Mills case. The Sharif family has been accused of using Chaudhry Sugar Mills for money-laundering and illegal transfer of its shares.

According to NAB, the family took a USD 15 million loan on the pretext to set up the mill despite the fact that it had already been established before the loan was acquired.

The NAB maintains that more than PKR 7 million worth of the Mills' shares were transferred to PML-N vice president Maryam Nawaz in 2008, which were later transferred to her cousin Yousaf Abbas Sharif in 2010.



The thrice elected Prime Minister is also facing a 'dormant' FIA inquiry in retired Air Marshal Asghar Khan case.

On 19 October 2012, the Supreme Court had ordered the federal government to initiate necessary action against former army chief Aslam Beg and former director general of the ISI retired Lt Gen Asad Durrani for their role in dishing out PKR 140 million to a particular group of politicians, including Nawaz Sharif, during the 1990 general elections, on a petition by Asghar Khan.

In 1996, Asghar Khan, who had joined politics, filed the petition before the Supreme Court, requesting it to look into the allegations that the ISI financed many politicians in the 1990 elections by dishing out PKR 140 million among them.

In addition, Sharif is also an accused in Pakpattan land allotment case. The case was registered by the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) against officials of the Auqaf and Revenue departments. A JIT in its report had recommended initiation of criminal proceedings against several individuals, including the then Punjab chief minister Nawaz Sharif, for withdrawing a 17 December 1969 notification and allotting 14,394 kanal land of Auqaf around Pakpattan to Dewan Ghulam Qutab in 1986, allegedly in violation of a Lahore High Court (LHC) order. Headed by Hussain Asghar, the JIT report was filed in the Supreme Court.

Apart from the above mentioned criminal proceedings, there are petitions of Mr Sharif in the IHC that seek inquiry against the deceased judge of the Accountability Court Arshad Malik for convicting him under duress. In the Lahore High Court (LHC) a petition is pending in which the LHC had initially allowed Mr Sharif to travel abroad for medical treatment.

Legally speaking, these cases will remain dormant until Mr Sharif's return and surrendering before the respective courts. The thrice-elected prime minister of Pakistan maintains all these investigations have been instituted to put political pressure on him.

The writer is a senior journalist.

Talking Trash

Pakistan's never-ending solid waste woes



By Palwasha Khattak

A family friend while giving me directions to her house mentioned a huge garbage pile near her street. Now this is a posh street lined by large, well-constructed houses. One imagines the highly educated, cultured residents of those fine houses to be bothered by littering all around them. But you are mistaken.

The problem of littering is so pervasive in our country that the residents of large cities have become attuned to littered surroundings. Seeing people use heaps of garbage as landmarks and poor little boys and girls root through garbage has stopped to shock many Pakistanis. These garbage scavengers manage to collect almost all the metal and glass, 95 percent of paper, and almost 60 percent of plastic waste while their suffering goes undocumented and unrecognized.

In 2016, the world generated 242 million tons of plastic waste. In the next 30 years, it is further expected to grow by 70 percent. However, at the same time, the same plastic is used as a commodity in the global industry generating USD 200 billion every year. The World Bank report states that by 2050, in the absence of required actions, on

current levels the global waste will increase by 70 percent.

Per year, Pakistan produces nearly 50 million tons of solid waste which makes almost 135,000 tons per day, a tenth of it coming from Karachi. The alarming part is that it is growing by some 2.4 percent each year.

Syed Ayub Qutub, Executive Director Pakistan Institute for Environment – Development Action Research (PIEDAR) says Pakistan produces a mere 0.8 kilos of waste per person compared to the global average of 1.42 kg. “Municipal authorities in Pakistan only manage to collect half of this waste”, says Qutub, adding the waste thus collected ends up in landfill sites, the hazards of which for the environment are undeniable.

Dumping the garbage also requires land and dedicating large areas of land for this purpose, which is becoming more costly by the day with prices of urban properties on the upsurge. The landfill sites are being overfilled and there is no space for extra waste. Lahore’s only landfill site and Karachi’s two landfill sites are nearly filled up.

Surprisingly, Islamabad does not even have a permanent landfill site yet. The federal capital proudly dumps its garbage in open spaces in the outskirts of the city.

What is more, a lot of urban trash falls through the yawning cracks of the system. For instance, only 60 percent of Karachi’s solid waste ever arrives at the landfill site, the remainder ending up in storm drains and city streets.

In the clear absence of formal recycling facilities in Pakistan, an informal recycling industry, which is recycling roughly 27 percent, is making its way through garbage pickers and sanitary workers who buy recyclables from households or pick out metal and cardboard items from waste and sell them to scrap dealers who buy plastic, paper, glass, and metal per kg from the scavengers and sell what they collect to factories either directly or through middlemen.

The small informal industries reduce these materials into composite forms which are further used for producing new products. But high-quality plastic manufacturers in

Pakistan import raisin and pellets due to contaminated local product from not being disposed of carefully.

Pakistan has rarely any waste segregation practice. In Lahore, Green Earth Cycling is amongst a few which specialize in waste material recycling and reproducing while depending on local contractors relying on scavengers for plastic and paper collection. They manufacture products like outdoor furniture, roofing sheets, manhole covers, and pellets.

Pakistan's biggest city, Karachi is blessed with an alluring sea, or once it was – as sailors now call it a sea of trash. The sport of sailing no longer has a playing field by virtue of the plastic bags and bottles messing with not only the sea but is a menace to the marine life too. Putting a ban on plastic items sounds like a solution but that is not it.

Qasim Abbas, a sailor from the Pakistan navy mentioned that since 2008, a consequential hike is noticed within Pakistan's maritime boundaries. Karachi's sea receives approximately 4,000 tons of garbage and around five million gallons of sewage water along with waste and oil from vessels. When it rains, the garbage littering streets and storm drains ends up in the sea.

Recently, the Pakistani government is seen getting into action (which is a rare sight) about garbage collection. Unfortunately, the action does not involve solving the problem but just transferring it as the waste is being picked and dumped far away out of sight. This practice is pushing cities like Karachi and Lahore to the top in the list of areas with the worst air quality.

A study by the World Wildlife Fund found out that an average person is possibly ingesting about five grams of plastic every week. This clearly depicts the deteriorating quality of life since no matter where the garbage is dumped, it seems to find its way into our food chain.

High-income countries seem to have found the best solution to the problem of waste disposal; they export it. Although they together account for some 16 percent of the world's population, they generate more than 34 percent of the world's waste. Rather than finding a place at home to dispose of the waste, these countries sell

waste to firms that further send it to countries where recycling is cheaper.

However, the countries receiving this waste are not properly equipped to dispose it off. In 1988, Italian waste management firms stored high-risk waste in a Nigerian Fishing village in drums. In 2013, a Canadian firm dumped repatriating waste, including nappies in the Philippines.

A little known treaty called the Basil Convention empowers poorer countries to reject the flood of exported waste starting from 2020. China, in 2018, also banned the import of cheap and contaminated plastics which pushed developed countries to find another destination for their waste.

European countries are the first ones to introduce policy promoting separation of waste and are leading the way in the recycling field. Focusing on environmental protection, Sweden has focused on transforming its combustion into energy that provides electricity to the 250,000 homes in the country. The country further imports trash from Germany and the UK. With a high metal recycling rate, Japan is on its path to zero waste depending on its general public majorly.

In 2020, the town of Kamikatsu recycled 90 percent of its waste. Netherlands center of attention is reutilization and sustainability as the country constructed two of its bike paths entirely out of recycled plastic. Wales has jumped from recycling 5 percent of household waste to 64 percent in just 20 years. The country aims to not have any waste in incinerators by 2050. Germany's recycling rate was 66.1 percent in 2015 and in 2016, Wales recycled 63.8 percent of its waste. Countries like Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy have more than 50 percent of the recycling rate in the years 2015 and 2016.

A huge factor that does not let civil society improve conditions are garbage mafias regulating the informal recycling industry and have forcefully kept the waste industry 20 years behind the rest of the world. In their presence, the collaborations and partnerships of young companies prove unfruitful even with modern approaches. The garbage mafia hides several pressing issues under its umbrella, like child labor,

child pedophilia, using drug addicts as garbage collectors in exchange for drugs, and so on. These mafias can only be dealt with if the government and civil society work closely.

The social enterprises are giving their best but they are just able to cater to the tip of an iceberg. 'Saaf Suthra Sheher' an Islamabad-based social enterprise established in 2016 has recycled 111 tons of waste in total for Islamabad's population producing nearly 1,000 tons of waste on daily basis. The enterprise believes that 60-80 percent of that waste is recyclable.

Similarly, 'TrashIt' is a Karachi based social enterprise set up in 2017 that collects organic waste and turns it into organic fertilizer. It is only able to process half a ton out of some 13,500 tons of organic waste generated every day by more than 20 million residents of this megacity.

Last year, the Sindh Solid Waste Management Board purchased over 200 Qingqi rickshaws to collect garbage from 'door-to-door'. In one week, the three-wheelers collected and disposed of 145,000 tons of garbage. This looks like a good initiative but whether it can be scaled to meet the needs of Pakistan's most populous city.

Every now and then, we see environmental activists launch campaigns to clean up places like Clifton beach. But that is absolutely not enough. Public messaging and awareness campaigns can only do so much which hints at the option of launching incentive-based schemes.

In Nigeria, social enterprises like WeCyclers and Greenhill Recycling have been incentivizing residents of low-income neighborhoods with electronics, groceries, and cash in exchange for their sort out recyclable waste. In the Philippines, the Manila City government began a similar program through a public-private partnership with Unilever Philippines.

There are a number of industries dependent on recycled waste like the glassware industry, packaging industry, and the industry manufacturing plastic crockery, pipes, furniture, buckets, mugs, etc. Similar incentives and public-private partnerships if encouraged by the Pakistani government formally can create a huge impact.

Will Pakistan have Nationwide COVID-19 Vaccination?

There is still no clarity over if and how Pakistan plans to reach COVID-19 vaccination to every last citizen

By Maheen Dhanani

We begin this new year with hope for a new sense of purpose and possibly a fresh start, but many consequential, unprecedented challenges still remain. COVID-19 still poses a threat to mankind and health workers remain at the frontlines treating patients globally. The World Health Organization has designated 2021 as the year of health and care workers to recognise their commitment to providing care to patients worldwide especially during the COVID-19 crisis. They have truly been the heroes of the year.

The world continues to fight the pandemic, sometimes with unity and sometimes without. The global hot topic that has made its way from 2020 into 2021 is the COVID-19 vaccine. Some said it can never be made, some said it would take decades but now here it is. So what will be the fate of the COVID-19 vaccine in Pakistan?

There are three main ways a vaccine is developed: Using the whole virus or bacteria, using only parts that trigger the immune system or just utilizing the genetic material. Vaccines save millions of lives each year. They work towards strengthening the immune system of the body and gear up the body's natural defence system to prevent the target illness.

Sadly, healthcare is still a side issue for policymakers in Pakistan. The WHO recommends a minimum allocation of 5 percent GDP on healthcare, while Pakistan spends less than 1 percent of its GDP on health, the lowest number even in South Asia. Even after the COVID-19 crisis, which choked the healthcare system around the globe, we barely increased our spending on health.

Pakistan shares a large burden of disease and swift action must be taken to ensure adequate healthcare delivery of a national vaccine program.

In June 2020, the WHO established the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility. The main purpose of this was to work with countries, and upon approval, ensure safe access to vaccines. "Equal access to a COVID-19 vaccine is the key to beating the virus and paving the way for recovery from the pandemic," said Stefan Löfven, Prime Minister of Sweden.

Pakistan is one of the lower-middle income countries that is a part of this facility which is indeed a great resource for Pakistan.

WHO's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization has determined priority groups as: Frontline workers in health and social care settings, people over the age of 65, and people under the age of 65 who have underlying health conditions.

There has been alarming news that Pakistan has only allocated USD 150 million to procure COVID-19 vaccines for its 220 million population. Federal Minister for Planning and

Development Asad Umar recently said 1.1 million COVID-19 vaccines would be available in the country in March 2021. Only 1.1 million for a population of 200 million!

With that, there is news that China is giving us free COVID-19 vaccines as well. There are talks of Pakistan receiving 500,000 doses of the coronavirus vaccine as aid from China by the end of January 2021. Developed in the Beijing Institute of Biological Products this vaccine only shows an effective rate of 79.3 per cent.

With scarce resources COVID-19 immunization programs must strategically categorize priority groups before broadening distribution to the entire population. There is still no clarity as to how Pakistan's COVID-19 vaccination program will unfold.

Our neighbours have been doing extremely well in procuring COVID-19 vaccines. India has invested in the research and development of the coronavirus vaccine to produce 100 million doses per month till March and then 300 million doses every month beside around, with 50 million doses already produced.



Bangladesh has reached deals to get 30 million doses of Indian-made AstraZeneca. Malaysia has procured 12.8 million Pfizer and 6.4 million AstraZeneca doses to cover 40 per cent of its population and is close to finalising a deal with China to cover its entire population. Indonesia purchased three million doses and procured raw material to develop some 45 million doses at home.

The pandemic has affected everyone regardless of age, gender and race. Addressing basic health needs is as imperative as ensuring people have food, a roof over their heads and other basic rights. This pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to come together and begin redressing the historic neglect of healthcare. Carefully structuring initiatives like the COVID-19 vaccine procurement and rollout will expand access and reduce structural barriers to help cover individuals from all walks of life.

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

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Constantinople: From Conquest to Capitulation

Part 2

By Azmat Mumtaz Saqib



The supremacy the Ottomans achieved over the Christian Europe through the 1453 conquest of Constantinople was avenged by the victorious Entente powers after WWI after their forces entered Istanbul in 1918. What Renaissance achieved in Europe over several centuries was enforced in the first quarter of twentieth century during the Ottomans collapse.

It took the Ottomans two centuries after 1453 to establish their military and administrative dominance over Europe. In contrast, the Ottoman domains of the three continents had been occupied by the Western powers only one decade after 1918.

But the sick man of Europe was laid on his deathbed after a century long viral infusion of Western Ideals, ethno-religious and territorial independence ferments, TURKO-RUSSIAN WARS and finally the WWI. Last but not the least, power struggles between the caliphs, Young Turks and Ulema had weakened the immune system of the Empire.

Sultan Abdul Hamid II tried his best to arrest the decline, but the forward looking restless Young Turks finally deposed the Khalifa in 1909. This top down revolution brought the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) into power and the new Khalifa became a figurehead.

Three Societal currents culminated into this revolt, viz., Young Turks heralding Western concept of statehood and reformation under the caliphate; reformist Ulema like Mustafa Sabri favoring authority to be shared between Khalifa, Parliament and the Ulema; and French-style secular liberals promoting exclusion of religion in state.

The CUP dominated the politics with Talat Pasha as Grand Vizier, along with Enver Pasha and Jamal Pasha, who became increasingly autocratic. In the 1913 Balkan wars, territories were lost by the Ottomans. Despite opposition from deposed Abdul Hamid II and secular Colonel Mustafa Kamal Pasha the CUP-led Ottomans joined the German/Austro-Hungarian Alliance in WWI.

During WWI, Russian Origin ethnic Armenians sided with enemy forces of Russia. Ottoman Army was defeated by Russians on eastern front and Ottomans forces massacred hundreds of thousands of Armenian military and civilian personnel labeling them as traitors.

After the defeat of German led Alliance in 1918, the Ottoman Khalifa Sultan Muhammad V became subservient to the British General Sir George Milne. In 1919, the Greek forces occupied Smyrna (present Izmir). Britain officially dismantled the Ottoman Parliament in Istanbul on 11 April 1920 and forced the Ottoman government to sign the Treaty of Sevres (France) in August 1920. Under this treaty partitioning of Ottoman Empire among Greece, Italy, France, Britain, Russia and Independent Armenia. Ottomans were granted only half of the North Central Anatolia.

The Rise of Mustafa Kemal Pasha (1881-1938)

Born in Salonika, Mustafa Kemal Pasha was sent by his father to a modern secular school at an early age. In 1902, he graduated as lieutenant from Ottoman War College, Istanbul. During his military training, Mustafa Kemal came under the influence of Young Turks Movement and after discovery of his political activities was sent by his high command to the Fifth Army in Damascus.

Angered by the corrupt officials treating the locals, he became involved again in anti-government activities. He was posted back to Salonika in 1906, joined French Freemasonic order and in 1907, he secretly joined CUP.

Mustafa Kemal was of the opinion that Turkey should abandon areas outside Anatolia, primarily Balkans and the Middle East. When WWI began, he favored the Ottomans to join the Britain led alliance. His heroism as field Commander in the battle of Gallipoli earned him a celebrity status in Turkey.

Later on, he was posted to the Mesopotamia region under German General Otto von Sanders. At odds with the Germans, it is reported that he did not fight the advancing British armies in Mesopotamia declaring that it is futile to fight the British, and vacated most of the area. He even suggested to the German General to vacate Syria up to Aleppo in order to defend Anatolia.

In 1919, he resigned from the Army due to the humiliating state of Istanbul Government and organized the Turkish War of Independence. He also founded the Grand National Assembly at Ankara in 1920. He mobilized the Anatolian population for the war of independence in defiance to the Khalifa who was hostage to the whims of the Western occupation.

Mustafa Kemal's forces pushed back Russian forces from Eastern Anatolia, signed truce with Russia renouncing claims of the Empire in Caucasus. He did the same with France and Italians, renouncing claims of territories under their influence outside Anatolia.

He fought back the Greek forces to a stalemate and under British pressure the Greeks withdrew from Anatolia and were formally defeated in 1921. In 1922, a truce was signed followed by evacuation of Greek, French and Italian forces. Anatolia was liberated from foreign occupying forces – apart from the British garrison.

General Harington was still in Istanbul overseeing the weak Sultan and his CUP government. Mustafa Kemal's influence and popularity as a savior shot up throughout Anatolia. A besieged Istanbul had no say whatsoever for full authority has gone into the hands of Mustafa Kemal at Ankara, whether pertaining to controlling the armed forces or pertaining to matters such as relation with other states.

It seemed as if the European powers were quietly encouraging Ankara, led by secular nationalist Mustafa Kemal, to form a parallel government, weakening the Ottoman Khilafat at Istanbul.

Mustafa Kemal's Grand National Assembly at Ankara deposed the reigning Sultan Muhammad VI, who escaped to Malta on board a British warship fearing for his life. The Assembly stripped away the powers of the Khalifa, making him a spiritual and constitutional symbol only.

On 19 October 1922, British pre-conditions for recognition of Independent Turkey were laid down as under:

1. Complete abolition of Khilafat
2. Expulsion of Khalifa beyond the Turkish borders
3. Confiscation of Khalifa's assets
4. Declaration of secularization of state

Between November 1922 and February 1923, several rounds of talks with the Turkish side represented by Ankara ended without success. The Grand National Assembly was not prepared to accede to the abolition of Khilafat despite the re-election of new deputies. Mustafa Kemal and his close associates schemed, resulting in an impasse among deputies, and extraordinary power of decision was handed over to him.



On 29 October 1923, Mustafa Kemal Pasha by decree declared Turkey as a Republic, Addressing the Assembly he said:

“Was it not because of the Khalifa, Islam and the clerics that the Turkish peasants have fought and lost their lives for five centuries? It is high time Turkey attended to her own interests, ignoring the Indians and the Arabs, and saved herself from the burden of leading the Islamic lands.”

On 3 March 1924, Khilafat was abolished and Turkey was declared a secular State. That same night, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, as the President supervised expulsion of Khalifa Abdul Majid to Switzerland by car with a suitcase and some money. Two days later all the princes and princesses were deported by train from Turkey on one way exit documents. All the assets of the Caliphate were confiscated.

All religious functions were cancelled throughout the Republic. Auqaf became state property, religious schools were turned into civil (modern) schools under the Education Ministry.

All the preconditions laid down by Britain in October 1922 were met. On 8 March 1924, Foreign Minister Ismat Pasha sent a letter to the Conference requesting resumption of negotiations. The Conference was convened on 23 April and the Treaty of Lausanne was signed 24 April 1924.

European States recognized Turkey's independence. Britain evacuated Istanbul and the Straits of Turkey. On this unilateral evacuation and recognition of Turkey one British MP protested. The influential Lord Curzon replied;

“The point at issue is that Turkey has been destroyed and shall never rise again, because we have destroyed her spiritual power: the Khalifa and Islam.”

Indeed the Khilafat System in place for thirteen centuries governing individual and collective Muslims' lives was no more. A hundred years on, that system is a myth and a strange impracticality for the world.

Sea and land routes to Asia, Africa and Indo-China were now controlled by the European powers, and former Ottoman provinces were newly emerged nation states pampered by European nations.

To be continued.

No Andy Flower or Gary Kirsten Available for PCB Head Coach's job

By Ali Abdullah

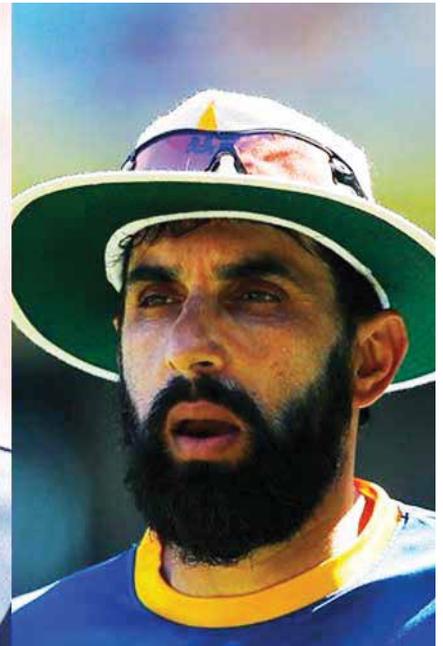
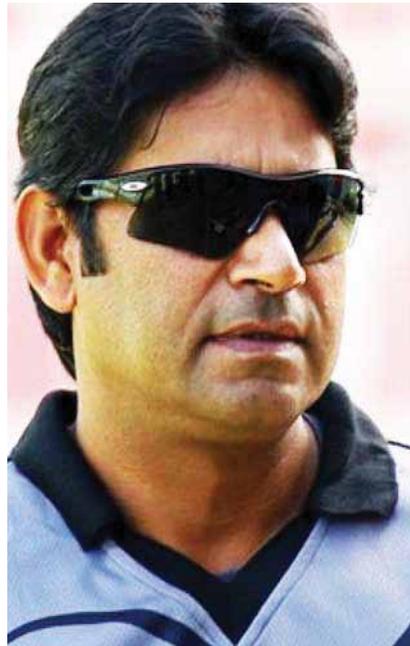
Former Pakistan bowler Aaqib Javed has attacked the coaching skills of Misbah-ul-haq as the Pakistan national team suffered in their ongoing tour of New Zealand. The Pakistan national team is staring at defeat in their second Test against the Kiwis after New Zealand scored a whopping 659 runs and declared in the first innings. The visitors had only put up 297 runs in their first innings and are trailing by 354 runs.

This comes after a close first Test match where New Zealand managed to win the game in the last hour of the fifth day. But the Pakistan batting lineup did not show much promise, except for some effort put in by Fawad Alam and captain Mohammad Rizwan.

Poor display of form and grit has led to immense criticism of the head coach Misbah-ul-haq. Former pacer Aaqib Javed who now serves as the coach of Pakistan Super League (PSL) side Lahore Qalandars has said that Misbah had no prior experience of coaching and yet he was given the responsibility of managing the national side.

Speaking to Cricket Pakistan, the pacer said both Misbah and bowling coach Waqar Younis should take responsibility for the poor display by the team as both took up the coaching positions without any experience in the field. The former pacer even went on to say that Misbah will not be fit for a coaching job at any school, let alone the national side of a country. "Looking at Misbah's coaching, I don't think even a school will give him this job," Javed added.

He said that professional coaches must be appointed to improve the performance of the Pakistan squad. Javed, who was a part of the World Cup winning side of 1992, said that the officials who appointed Misbah for the coach's post must actively decide how to better the decision.



He also urged the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) to take into the account the ground realities, warning that otherwise cricket might serve a similar fate as that of hockey in the country.

Rumors were spread that Misbah Ul Haq will be sacked after the South Africa home series.

The CEO of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB), Wasim Khan, has denied all the rumors developed to sack the head coach Misbah ul Haq from the post and choosing either Gary Kirsten or Andy Flower as the replacement.

Denying the reports and terming them as false, Wasim said that the ex-Zimbabwe cricketer is committed to his national duties, hence, cannot take over Misbah. He also cleared that the bowling coach and Misbah are signed on a three-year contract by PCB but can be dismissed earlier if they fail to perform during the South Africa series.

No Andy Flower or Gary Kristen available for the PCB head coach's job?

Notably, the favourite candidates cannot be available for two more years as per the reports rounding nowadays.

Hence, if there will be any official report regarding sacking Misbah, these two contestants would not be taking over the vacancy.

"Flower will not be available for two years due to his commitments," he said. "There is no truth to the report of him replacing Misbah. We have not signed a deal with anyone at this moment."

"A three-year deal has been signed with him and [bowling coach] Waqar Younis, but they can be let go before their given term,"

Wasim's comments got viral in reply to Shoaib Akhtar, who had earlier made a bold claim saying that Gary and Flower already have been signed by PCB but will not be available before PSL 6.

"PCB has already offered Andy Flower the head coach job. He is not accepting it due to his coaching commitment with Multan Sultans. But once PSL is over, he'll take over. The decision to sack Misbah is already taken. They are not giving him any chance."

Asif Ali Ahead of Afridi in Ball Per Six Ratio

The cricketing fraternity has witnessed a large number of explosive and stylish sixes hit in the Pakistan Super League (PSL) – although no one has surpassed Australian star all-rounder Shane Watson who holds the record of hitting the most sixes in PSL history.

Amazingly, however, Asif Ali from Islamabad United, with a ball per six ratio of 8.02, has the next best stats after Watson for hitting sixes.

The explosive Watson has smashed 81 sixes after facing 982 balls at an astonishing ball per six ratio of 12.12. The Australian all-rounder retired from PSL last year after his team Quetta Gladiators failed to qualify for the playoffs.

Asif has faced 401 balls to hit 50 sixes, whereas Boom Boom Afridi is now at number 3 with 36 sixes on 297 balls averaging 8.25.

Notably, the PSL 2021 is near and no one seems to equal the record of Watson as it will take two or more seasons for something comparable to his brilliant stats to emerge.



9 Rookies to Fledge against the Proteas in Home Series

Pakistan has named nine uncapped players for the two-match home test series against South Africa that starts later this month. New chief selector Mohammad Wasim says he wants to reward rookie players like batsman Kamran Ghulam and fast bowler Tabish Khan for their consistent performances in domestic cricket.

Ghulam topped the scoring chart in this season's Quaid-e-Azam Trophy by scoring 1,249 runs in the country's premier first class tournament. Khan is expected to replace fast bowler Mohammad Abbas, who has been dropped after a sharp decline in his wicket taking ability that saw him picking only 25 wickets in his last 13 test matches.

The 36-year-old Khan made his first-class debut in the 2002-03 season and has taken 598 wickets including 30 this season. Wasim says he is more effective and useful in Pakistani conditions. He is seen as a workhorse who can bowl long spells with controlled line and length. He is a like-for-like replacement for Mohammad Abbas in the given conditions.

The selectors have also dropped opening batsman Shan Masood and middle-order batsman Haris Sohail after Pakistan was routed 2-0 by New Zealand in the test series with regular skipper Babar Azam missing the entire series due to a fractured thumb. Azam has recovered and will lead the side against South Africa.

Young fast bowler Naseem Shah, opening batsman Imam-ul-Haq and all-rounder Shadab Khan were not considered for the series because of injuries. Haris Sohail, Mohammad Abbas and Shan Masood have been dropped due to inconsistent performances, Wasim said.



Shan's bad form has opened doors for Abid Ali's new partner, be it Abdullah Shafique or Imran Butt, who was last domestic season's top scorer. Together with Abdullah, he was in New Zealand with the Shaheens side.

Fast bowler Hasan Ali has regained fitness from his back problem and returns two years after playing a test match against South Africa in 2019. He impressed selectors with his stellar performance this season in domestic cricket where he took 43 wickets and scored 273 runs.

The Pakistan Cricket Board said that all 20 players now move into a bio-secure bubble in Karachi, which hosts the first test from 26 January. Rawalpindi will host the second test starting 4 February, followed by a three-match Twenty20 series in Lahore.

The squad for the Twenty20 series will be named later. Wasim said the squad will be trimmed to 16 players.

O Brave New World!

Yes, novel coronavirus has wrought comprehensive devastation, but the world goes on



By Oroba Tasnim Siddiqui

Year 2020 was one of introspection for many who were on the fast track to growth and development. While for some, it became a cause of utmost relief and long overdue rest, others found themselves plunging into a depressive state as global trends of mental illnesses surged. But in the advent of the coronavirus, societies struck forth with greater thrust than ever before – an evolution that in the past few decades was dictated less and less by social actions or behaviors and more and more by technology.

Within the sphere of what had become a world under the global village, reality became a distance that seeped through into daily lives as the notion of separateness and isolation became a casual twist of the tongue. In came the shift in trends, the changes that were merely an advocacy at first but soon had to be incorporated in actuality.

First, the societal structure had to be reformed, one that had taken hundreds of years to develop – stemming from congregational values and collective cohesion. Suddenly, there arose a need for emptiness, queues of individuals a danger to one another. The shaking of the hands and the mere hug meant to instantly alter moods became almost a sin, as if one's life hinged on it – and honestly, it did.

A mere virus, a minor particle that defies human vision taking the entire world by storm as if suggestively insinuating that all that reigned normalcy previously was no longer a norm of the times – an eventuality that some are still trying to grapple with. But within that period of reflection, a wayward sense of procession overtook humankind as if all hell had broken loose.

As the known norm slowly dissipated and the new world order took over, it was neither armed missiles nor deadly weapons that destroyed the prior structure, but a mere fragment of a disease which was not even visible to the eye, a virus that brought the entire world to a standstill, be it travel, economy or politics, as the world stood in unison worriedly gaping for an iota of solace.

And in that moment, what stretched on for several months, there was no amount of wealth or tract of fame that could procure the ability to deflect the virus, just mere luck and extreme precautions. For one slight instance, the world finally stood at one point, on equal footings, on level ground. Perhaps, the equity in pursuance of which goals and targets were set, but basic numerical objectives, neither compassionate deterrence nor the behavioral shift in sight.

Year 2020 was one of firsts, a new norm, a new dawn but nevertheless the same perseverance of strife, struggle and stumbling. Into the second chapter of 2021, now that we have gradually taken in the New Year, let us persist with the same strife but in an embrace of newfound compassion – of trying to stimulate the equity that was lost, the distributive ignorance that caved in and the belated strike of casualties.

Our world is a congregation of tragedies each socially distanced into an isolated form of collateral casualty. Let us no longer heave sighs of relief but remember that all is still not lost. Let us proclaim from the rooftops that there is light at the end of the tunnel – and that like all catastrophes prior, this too shall pass.

CHEF AIDA KHAN'S FIRST FLAME

The Spark We All Need in Our Lives

Chef Aida Khan, who is the Founder of the restaurant SHOLA – Karachi Kitchen in London and Islamabad, brings a colourful, desi cuisine to your doors. Recognized for its homemade taste and fine quality, Shola offers a wide range of traditional recipes that run in Aida's family. Let's dig in to find out what Shola – Karachi Kitchen is all about!

By Haider Rifaat



TTI: Aida, tell us about yourself and what pulled you towards the culinary world.

AK: Food has always been a big part of my world from a young age. My father was an avid foodie and my mother loved to cook, so it is literally a part of my DNA. My father left Pakistan in his 20s. We grew up in the UAE and he really wanted to make sure his children had the same food experiences and memories that he did.

All our trips to Pakistan over the summer holidays involved exploring different parts of Karachi for an authentic food experience. I spent most of my life outside Pakistan – first Abu Dhabi, then the United States for college, and finally London for my Master's and now work. The expat life really makes you appreciate Pakistani food much more.

I completed my Master's in London when my older son was two years old. I ended up cooking a lot more at home while entertaining friends. I really wanted my children to have the same

food experiences as I did growing up, so I started researching for my family recipes. I eventually studied at Leith's School of Food and Wine because I wanted to take my home cooking to the next level and take the leap into commercial cooking.

TTI: You are the owner of Shola – Karachi Kitchen, which offers a wide variety of desi, homemade food. What inspired the name plan?

AK: Shola or spark in English, is the first flame when we light up our BBQ grill. I felt it was a great way to get across the feel of igniting a spark for our food culture to a wider audience while also keeping the authentic food flavors of Karachi alive in Islamabad. Shola was always going to happen. As someone who is incredibly passionate about our food heritage, I felt there was a gap in celebrating it in its true form in the cities I lived in – London and Islamabad.

The menu at Shola is based on traditional family recipes that have been passed down in my family over generations. The true inspiration for all the dishes simply comes from wanting to pay an homage to the traditional cooking techniques found in the kitchen of our grandparents. We really focus on going back to the roots of the food. All our masala is roasted and ground in our kitchens. We don't use any additives or colouring. It is simple, slow cooking the way it has been done for generations.

TTI: Does your restaurant chain incorporate food flavors of Karachi only or combines culinary finesse of other regional cuisines across Pakistan too?

AK: Karachi's cuisine is an amazing melting pot. It is possible to find food from all over the country in one city. Our restaurant represents the diversity

of Karachi and our menu has many influences from all over Pakistan.

TTI: London is home to a large Muslim community. How well have Londoners responded to your business, and do Muslims, mainly of Pakistani heritage, make most of your customers?

AK: The response has been phenomenal in both London and Islamabad. It is especially an honour to share our incredible cuisine with the people over in London. Our restaurant is located at a site with many offices, so our lunch time clientele is very diverse with 80 percent of our customers not being South Asian. We have stayed true to our ethos of serving traditional food so we do not adjust the spice levels. Our chicken tikka is fiery hot and a firm favourite. Even I struggle with high spices but people love it!

For dinner, we see more people traveling to the restaurant from different locations, looking for Pakistani food that they can enjoy in a fun and welcoming environment with friends and family. My sons are often there after school and we have plenty of options to please even the pickiest of eaters. We cater to a diverse clientele from all backgrounds and it is heart-warming that our food is appreciated by them as well.

TTI: How do you ensure a fine dining experience for your clientele?

AK: We ensure that each guest has an individual experience. Each guest is treated like a VIP. We remember names, faces and how guests like certain dishes. Our service style is fast but that does not mean we are brusque.

There is attention to detail in everything we do; how we welcome our

guests, how we explain our cuisine to them and how we take their orders. It is a conversation, not just us taking your order and handing over food. When you dine at Shola, you are getting the full Pakistani hospitality experience.

TTI: What are the checks and balances of food hygiene at your restaurant?

AK: The way I keep checks and balances at Shola is by being very involved and hands-on in the kitchen. Everything is made every day with fresh ingredients. Even our spices are ground in-house. Everything is tried before we serve to our guests, and if something does not meet the standard I have set, we are perfectly fine starting from scratch.

My team knows that I would rather get a dish right than try to get something below standard out of the kitchen. We all make mistakes and I am the first to admit when I have made one, or cooked something that just didn't turn out right. I would make sure it is redone.

TTI: What is more important in your view: speed of service or quality of food?

AK: We categorize ourselves as a fine-casual dining experience, so as important as the speed of service is, we don't let that get in the way of the quality of food we serve our guests. Nothing leaves the kitchen if it is not up to our high standards.

TTI: What is key to making a stellar desi dish?

AK: For me, picking fresh produce is key. It really makes a big difference in a dish.



TTI: What mistake do you think restaurateurs often make in the food industry?

AK: Getting too attached to the menu. There will always be things that might not work out despite how much you love them. Don't take it personally. Learn from it and allow your menu to evolve.

TTI: Many restaurants purposely keep customers from reviewing their subpar dining experiences on social media. What is your game plan to foster constructive reviews of your business?

AK: We don't avoid bad reviews. For us, as a start-up, bad reviews are learning opportunities and we pay attention to them. If the customer is open to it, we invite them in for another experience. I strongly believe that some of your most loyal customers are unhappy customers that have been converted. All feedback is incredibly valuable to us.

TTI: Moving on, what pearls of wisdom have you taken with you from Leith's School of Food and Wine?

AK: Many! The most important for a restaurant is definitely the balance between

getting food out on time under pressure and maintaining quality. It takes quite a skillset to manage that and I really feel Leith's has prepared me well.

The worst thing you can do during busy service is panic before you serve the food. I really believe in the notion that your energy is transferred into the food you cook. So, if I am stressed out, I am sure my guests will be able to taste that in my food.

TTI: What are you most proud of as a businesswoman?

AK: Flying the flag for Pakistani cuisine in London is definitely something I feel incredibly proud of. Also, it has been wonderful sharing the recipes of past generations and preserving the essence of our traditional cuisine in Islamabad and in London.

TTI: What is your success mantra?

AK: Be true to yourself and to your work. Be humble. Never, ever stop learning. There is so much more to do, always.



Vasia Fatima Loves 'Short and Sweet' Web Series

Among several upcoming projects, the Karachi-based starlet says she's busy cooking up a television show centred on food



By Palwasha Khattak

The quick-witted Vasia Fatima is an emerging star of the Pakistani media. You would probably recognize her as 'Neelam' from the hit drama serial 'Do Bol'.

A versatile actor who can assume and bring to life a cosmopolitan boss lady or an emotionally lost village girl with equal ease, the Karachi based starlet has won the hearts all around in a short time.

Given below is an abridged transcript of a conversation the Truth International (TTI) had with the amiable young talent.

TTI: Vasia, how did you start your journey as an actress?

VF: To be honest, I had no intentions or plans to join this field but destiny got me here. Although, I had this 'acting ka keera' in me but I never considered doing it professionally. I never missed a chance to participate in stage drama at school. After finishing school, I got a chance to do voiceovers and then started getting projects one after the other. In the same way, I got an offer for acting and gave it a shot.

TTI: What difference do you feel from your first role till now?

VF: I am not camera shy so I didn't face any difficulty in facing the camera but if you ask me about my first role, I had no clue about anything. I didn't know basic things like a close

shot, master shot, etc. I felt like an alien but with time I improved. Now I am way more comfortable and confident in what I am doing.

TTI: What was the most challenging role you came across?

VF: That's yet to come. I am still waiting. So fingers crossed.

TTI: Is acting your passion or just a hobby?

VF: Acting is not something that I do to kill time. I love doing it a lot.

TTI: Can you briefly tell us what current projects you are working on?

VF: I am currently doing two web series, which should be out soon. I am also working on my show which is related to food. For TV, I am still going through scripts and waiting for the one that clicks.

TTI: Has there ever been a role you rejected for any reason?

VF: I have rejected more than a few and the reasons are always different. Sometimes I feel I am not fit for the role, sometimes it's the budget, and sometimes it's the story that I can't relate to. And the same way I have faced rejection too.

TTI: Do you feel one can make good friendships in media?

VF: I have a few very good friends in the industry and we

share a great bond. I can confidently say that I am blessed to have good friends in the industry and outside.

TTI: What are your thoughts on helping hands for the newbies in the industry? Are there any?

VF: When I came into this field, few people really helped me out early on. People do help each other but that also depends on your hard work and loyalty towards your work. If you are hardworking you'll make your own way to the destination.

TTI: What are your thoughts on the new wave of production of digital web series in Pakistan?

VF: Actually, now I have started enjoying doing web series and the reason is they are short and sweet. We do not have any limitations and boundaries, unlike TV. Web audience is mostly our youth or

TTI: Who did you enjoy the most doing any project with and why?

VF: I am blessed to work with the most chilled out people so it will be difficult to take one name but currently, I am doing a web series with Mojiz Hasan, Shehzeen Rahat, and Nida Khan and I can only say that we are just crazy, and people like them make acting fun.

TTI: Name three actors whose acting you admire the most in showbiz?

VF: Mahira Khan, Rubina Ashraf, and Imran Ashraf

TTI: Who do you want to work with next and why?

VF: I would like to work with Imran Ashraf, who is also a friend and because he is very talented, I'll get to learn something from him.



the people who are open to interesting content and it's easier for them to understand and digest new stories. New talent is getting much more attention and opportunities on the web.

TTI: Can you tell us what's the story behind your name, and what it means?

VF: My parents are fond of unique names (so am I now and I show extra interest in people with unique names) so they wanted to pick a very meaningful and unique name for me as I'm their firstborn. My name comes in 'Aayat-ul-Kursi' and it also means "royal woman" and "kind".

I have so many funny stories attached to my name that I can go on and on. But now I feel blessed and thank my parents for picking this beautiful name for me.

TTI: Do you think your name's meaning has an impact on your personality?

VF: Oh yes. I am totally under the impact of my name.

TTI: Tell our readers three of your habits that the general public is completely unaware of?

VF: One, I eat and sleep a lot. Two, I am way too clumsy. Three I cook really good food (not everything though).

TTI: Any learning from your past you want to give our readers about life?

VF: Never trust anyone blindly and never doubt your own gut feeling.

TTI: What are some of the hobbies you most enjoy?

VF: I love different types of arts and crafts. I like doing DIY projects such as making candles, painting furniture, doing pottery. Then I also do mandala art – the list just goes on.

TTI: What would you have been if not an actor?

VF: An artist.

TTI: What are you watching currently?

VF: I am currently watching 'The Fall'. Before that I finished watching 'Bridgerton' and before that, I watched 'Assassination of Gianni Versace' and I loved it simply because of Darren Criss who played the character of Andrew Cunanan. I wish I get to do a similar character in my career.

TTI: Do you call yourself a true Karachiite?

VF: I am originally from Islamabad. But it's been a long time since we moved here. I love Islamabad but I think Karachi is the best place to live in.

The Witches

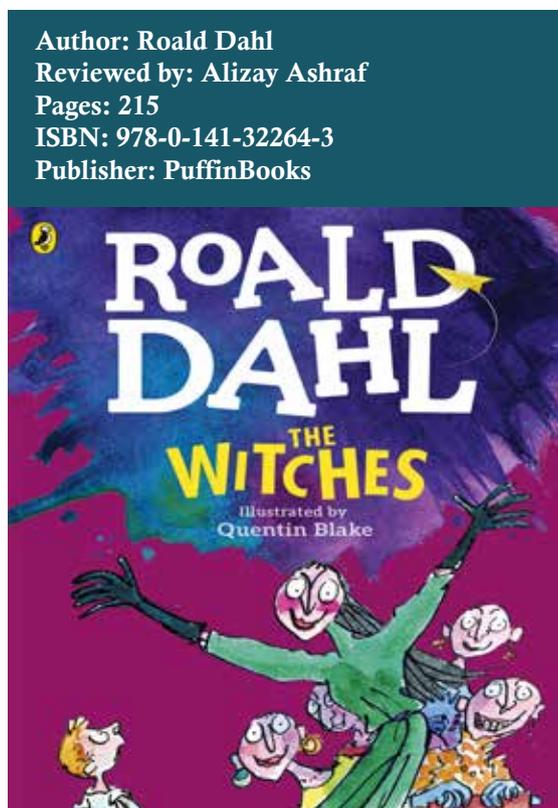
The Witches is about a boy, whose parents die in a car crash, so he goes to live in Norway with his grandmother. She tells him stories about witches, who have claws instead of finger nails, bald heads, large nose holes, square feet, and blue spit. The grandmother tells her grandson that all the stories are true and that he must be on the lookout for witches, who loathe children. The book is mesmerizing, creepy, mentally evocative and pure entertainment. The book was full of surprises and did not bore me for even a bit.

As in so many of his books, Dahl creates a fantastical world in which an innocent child sees right and wrong, and solves problems, more effectively than many adults. Dahl also has a knack for inventing original, compelling characteristics, so that his witches aren't just mean and scary, they're uniquely weird. Fortunately, the witches' creepiness is

counterbalanced by the warm, charming relationship between the young boy and his Grandmamma; they make a great team. Kids who have enjoyed other Dahl novels will certainly enjoy *The Witches*, especially if they like the thrill of getting a little scared.

The themes of the book are death and loss. Death is a clear theme in Dahl's *The Witches*, but the concept of loss manifests in many smaller ways, developing the theme throughout the book. The book opens with the boy's parents dying in a car accident in Norway, leaving him unscathed, orphaned, and in the care of his grandmother.

I really enjoyed this book and would recommend reading it if you are looking for something to make you laugh. This book is suitable for children above the age of 9.



Earthbound

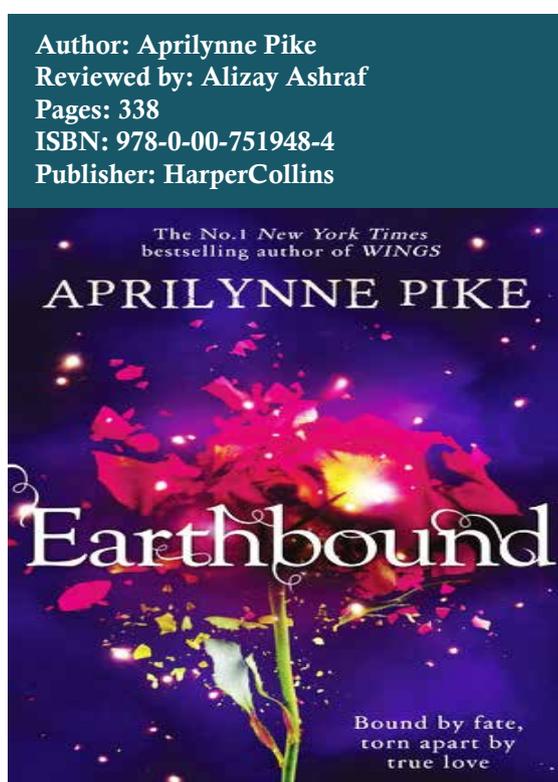
Tavia, 18, miraculously survives a plane crash that kills all other passengers, including her parents. As she recovers in the care of an aunt and uncle, she begins to see things others cannot see and is stalked by a man who hides behind sunglasses but fails to be inconspicuous. Her talent for drawing has been blocked by the accident, along with many of her past memories. In her struggle to discover who she really is, Tavia must decide whom she can or cannot trust — a handsome college librarian named Benson, her therapist, her aunt and uncle, or an attractive, green-eyed man named Quinn, who seems trustworthy and real, but who has a habit of unpredictably appearing and then disappearing.

There's a lot of action in *Earthbound*, which kept me glued to the book. There were many moments that put me on the edge of my seat and there's

no doubt that Pike does a fantastic job drawing her readers in. Pike is an awesome author and there's a little bit of everything in *Earthbound*: secrets, action, special powers, drama, and romance.

I really liked the mystery aspect to the story and Tavia's character really kept me intrigued. I couldn't decide until the end of the story who to trust, and what the meaning behind the mysteries were.

The writer has created a compelling story, a young adult novel which has some nice supernatural elements to it. The suspense kept me guessing and the mysteries behind the romance kept me turning the pages. Filled with secrets, curses and magic, *Earthbound* was an enjoyable read. I would recommend this children above the age of 10 to read this.



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