

# The Truth International

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Hafeez Sheikh's Political Defeat  
When else could one re-think and prioritize?

Bajwa's posturing for peace with India  
Military antagonism or regional peace & prosperity

Burden of COVID-19 on Pakistan's Economy  
Will accelerating economic activity improve revenues?

## Face Off: PDM Turning Faces Away From Political Battleground



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## Alarming

*By M. Ziauddin*

The third wave of the pandemic that the country has been experiencing since about more than a month now is proving to be alarmingly difficult to manage. The biggest problem that we as a nation has had to cope with since the advent of Covid-19 some two years ago has been our failure to comprehend the seriousness of the problem. The additional failure by the masses at an individual level to follow the simple preventive measures like using a mask, keeping a safe distance from other individuals inside and outside homes and frequently washing one's hands—the Standard Operational Procedure (SOP)—has confounded the problem manifold.

The relatively low incidence of the pandemic during its first and second waves in the country compared to many other countries including our immediate neighbors like India and Iran and most of the rich ones having more than adequate healthcare facilities like the US, UK, and Europe had caused the government.

Even at the Prime Minister's level to approach the problem with emphasis on saving the livelihood of the poor rather than their lives which in our case had seemingly appeared not to have been threatened as much as in other countries. This had seemingly led to the serious slack which one saw in the official approach to the task of enforcement of the SOPs.

The reasons for the low incidence in Pakistan during the first and second waves could not be fathomed scientifically. It could have been due to a weaker variety of the virus that invaded Pakistan. Or perhaps because of the large youth bulge in our population. Or still, perhaps because of the lack of adequate testing equipment and facility detection has remained on the lower side.

What, however, had worsened the situation by the time the country was caught by the

third wave was the totally irresponsible behavior of the country's political leadership—both at the government as well as the opposition level—since the very advent of the first wave. Not only the two had continued to refuse to discuss the problem mutually to arrive at some consensus approach on how best to handle it, they did not even miss a single opportunity to settle their political scores out in the open trying to contest their respective popularity among the masses. They contested elections in Gilgit-Baltistan with the full involvement of their supporters out in the open during the electioneering. One saw the same approach by the two when they fought a number of by-elections, and the opposition had remained one step ahead since around mid-2020 as it kept challenging the government in the open by holding huge public meetings and rallies.

The frequent angry bursts of the cabinet ministers against the opposition calling their leaders chors and dacoos and the provocative spins that its spin doctors regularly spewed via the broadcast and social media did continue to tempt the opposition into hitting back with equal force creating in the process a din of political abuses that pushed the fatal nature of pandemic into the background and took the eye of the people at large off the ball despite the timely establishment of the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) under the Army command to tackle the pandemic. The NCOC is the implementing arm of the National Core Committee (NCC), the government's lead agency in the anti-COVID-19 campaign, chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Still, with the political parties seen not strictly observing the SOPs, it was only natural for the general public which was seemingly already highly skeptical about the incidence of the pandemic to regard the

issue with any degree of seriousness. Violations of complete lock-downs and even smart lockdowns had become common and even quarantine rules were being broken with complete impunity.

And Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is supposed to be under quarantine after having tested positive for Covid-19, was photographed presiding over a meeting of his media team at his Bani-Gala residence. Maryam Nawaz, the Vice President of Opposition Muslim League (N) went one step ahead when she tried to mobilize a big crowd to accompany her to the NAB court which had summoned her on March 26. That it did not happen could be attributed to the sagacity of the NAB which canceled the court hearing in time.

According to the SOPs formulated by NCOC, a Covid-19 patient has to be quarantined for nine to 14 days. However, Prime Minister Khan attended the meeting only four days after testing positive for the disease.

In view of the alarming nature of the problem, the NCOC, in one of its latest moves has decided to impose broader lockdowns until April 11 with no mobility except for emergencies, in 10 cities where the positivity ratio is over 10pc. They are Islamabad, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, Peshawar, Swat, and Muzaffarabad.

And despite facing an alarming situation, Pakistan is still a relatively safer place compared to many other countries as it ranks 30th in terms of the number of deaths. Prominent countries in which more deaths, as compared to Pakistan, have been reported include Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Ukraine, South Africa, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Canada, Belgium, and others.

# Fissures Appear in PDM, Are Papered Over?

*While the opposition coalition teeters on for now, its internal contradictions are exposed to the public eye.*



By Khalid Wasim

It was not pretty at all. Leaders of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) engaged in recriminations in full public view, their diehard social media cohorts at one another's throats, each swearing by their own party's fidelity to democracy and highlighting the other's questionable provenance. For a while, it felt like the dirty nineties. And then, as if on the throwing of a switch, everything was brushed under the carpet.

Interestingly, cracks became visible in the 10-party opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) only days after the coalition scored a resounding victory for the senate election to the Islamabad seat. The position taken by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) over the proposal of submitting en masse resignations from the assemblies provided an opportunity to the PDM leadership to announce postponement of its anti-government long march slated for 26 March.

The decision regarding postponement of the long march was announced by a visibly perturbed Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUIF) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who is also the PDM president, while briefing reporters after presiding over nearly five-hour-long meeting of the heads of the component parties of the alliance in Islamabad on 16 March.

Declaring that the PPP had sought more time to reconsider its position on the issue of en masse resignations, he announced that "till the time the PPP will come back after an

in-house discussion in its Central Executive Committee (CEC), the long march stands postponed".

A piqued Maulana left the press briefing immediately after making a short statement, leaving behind the shell-shocked PPP and PML-N leaders to respond to probing questions from the reporters, who were only anxious to know whether or not the PDM still existed.

Claiming coalition was intact and justifying his party's position after the Maulana's statement, PPP's Yousuf Raza Gilani explained that his party had sought time after the PDM leaders "bracketed" the long march with resignations. He maintained it had become necessary for the PPP to refer the matter to its CEC again as the powerful panel in its last meeting had opposed the idea of resigning from the assemblies.

Later, the differences within the PDM on the issue of the nomination of the opposition leader in the Senate also became public when both the PPP and the PML-N, the two arch-rivals of the past made their claims on the key office in the Upper House of the Parliament.

PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari went so far as to visit the headquarters of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) at Mansoor to meet JI Ameer Sirajul Haq to seek support of the party's lone senator for the opposition leader's election.



During the course of arguments on the opposition leader's issue, Bilawal and Maryam also indirectly made some personal attacks against each other. However, due to Maulana Fazlur Rehman's timely intervention, the leadership of both the parties prevented their members from making any harsh statement against each other.

It was after the Maulana's telephone call to Asif Zardari on 24 March that the PPP had given the call to its workers to accompany Maryam Nawaz during her appearance in NAB in Lahore on 26 March.

The fact that the PPP had come to the 16 March PDM meeting with full preparations were evident from the proceedings which were intentionally leaked by it to the media. All the TV channels were simultaneously running identical tickers containing the points raised by former President Asif Ali Zardari in his speech while the meeting was still in progress.

Later, speaking at a ceremony in Peshawar, Maulana Fazlur Rehman criticized the PPP for "leaking the proceedings of the meeting" to the media, saying that discussions in such meetings are always kept secret as a trust and leaking the proceedings amounts to a breach of trust.

During the meeting, PML-N's vice-president Maryam Nawaz also reportedly had an argument with Mr Zardari when the latter taunted Nawaz Sharif, who was attending the meeting via a video link from London, asking him to return to the country and lead the campaign, if he was sincere in the efforts for the restoration of democratic rule in the country.

"Do not make such decisions which may force us to part ways," Mr Zardari was quoted to have stated in the meeting. Interestingly, both Mr Zardari and his son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari also attended the meeting through a video link from Karachi – a fact Maryam took time to point out.

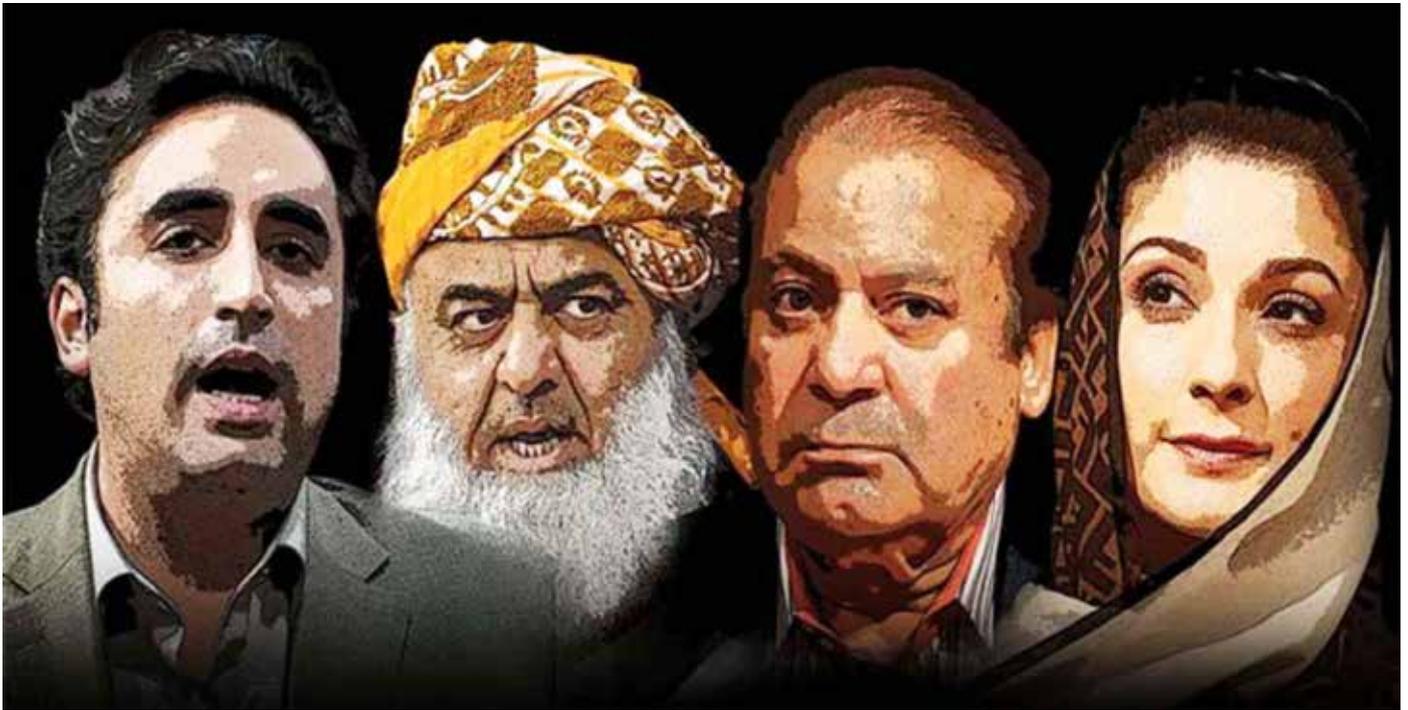
Mr Zardari reportedly said his party MPs were ready to hand over their resignations to Mr Sharif if he returned to the country with former finance minister Ishaq Dar, who has also been living in a self-exile in London for the past over three years.

In his speech, Mr Zardari also indirectly complained about the alleged discriminatory treatment of the provinces by the establishment when he mentioned that he had a domicile of Sindh province and said that Nawaz Sharif possessed the domicile of Punjab.

Responding to Mr Zardari's points, Maryam Sharif categorically declared her father would not return to the country due to the alleged threats to his life. Ms Sharif said the whole PML-N, including herself, was present in the country to face jails, and asserted no one had the right to ask Mr Sharif to return.

Soon after the development, political and media analysts during the TV talks shows were found discussing various factors that might





have caused the break-up of the opposition alliance with some of them alleging that the PPP has perhaps done so under some kind of an understanding with the establishment.

The PPP, however, rejected the perception, maintaining had the party reached any understanding with the establishment, Yusuf Raza Gilani would not have faced defeat in the election for Senate chairman office.

Instead, the PPP claims the PDM parties have failed to provide a clear roadmap and the post-resignation strategy. According to PPP secretary general Nayyar Bokhari, the PDM parties were repeatedly asked about the strategy which they would adopt after submitting resignations from the assemblies, but they failed to respond adequately.

According to the PML-N, even if the government decides to hold by-elections on the vacant seats and also in phases and according to its own choice of timing and place, then the PDM can again contest the elections jointly as they did in the recent by-elections, but only to resign again from the seats which will create a “perpetual crisis”.

The PPP believes that first of all the speaker will not accept the opposition’s resignations like the former speaker, Ayaz Sadiq did when the PTI members had resigned from the assembly during the famous 126-day Dharna at D-Chowk in 2014. The speaker can hold the resignations for an indefinite period as there is no mention of any time bar in the constitution or the assembly rules in this regard. Former Senate Chairman Raza Rabbani had also once held the resignations of the senators of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) for an indefinite period before rejecting them through a ruling.

Secondly, the PPP says the move can provide an opportunity to the government to go for by-elections in phases in the constituencies of

its choice, by accepting the resignations of the members one by one or in smaller groups.

Thirdly, the party says to stop holding of by-elections on their vacant seats, either they will be requiring the support of the establishment or they will have to create anarchy in the country and both the options are not good for the future of democracy in the country.

Anyways, the PDM’s decision to put off its long march has provided much respite to the ruling alliance headed by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) as the government ministers now believe that the PDM will have to start from scratch if it wants to launch any street movement against it. For them, the PDM’s balloon has been pricked only after six months of its formation.

The government has gained much strength after the Senate elections as well as the winning of the trust vote by Prime Minister Imran Khan from the National Assembly. It is said that after the PPP’s decision, it has now become more difficult for the other parties in the PDM to quit the assemblies.

The government ministers while lauding the PDM’s decision to cancel its long march have once again invited the opposition for a dialogue on the electoral reforms. The prime minister has already asked the speaker to constitute a bipartisan parliamentary committee on the electoral reforms and the latter has in turn informed the parliamentary leaders of all the parties about the government’s intention.

The PDM is yet to give a formal response to the proposal for the time being, although confusing and ambiguous remarks are coming from the opposition leaders on the subject.

*Khalid Wasim is Islamabad based senior journalist. He writes on political issues.*



## Sanjrani's Checkmate Outclassed All the Seniors, Seasoned & Superiors Politicians

*Straightforward Sanjrani played a master short in power play, repositioning opposition to confront one another in game of throne.*

For our so-called politicians, the words like principles, credibility, loyalty, commitment, and trust do not matter at all, especially when it comes to getting an office with perks and privileges, and above all protocol. The nation has watched political parties making u-turns, running away from written commitments, charters, and declarations many times. The latest such episode they witnessed during the recent Senate election.

Until the March 26 notification of Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) as the new Leader of Opposition, no one had an idea that this office would become so much important for the PPP that it would go to an extent of even not shying away from begging help from Sanjrani, whose election as Senate chairman it had challenged in a court of law only a few days back.

Mr Gilani has been nominated as the opposition leader after 30 members, including 21 from the PPP, announced their support to him as against 17 senators who had supported the candidature of Azam Nazeer Tarar of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Besides the PPP senators, Mr Gilani was supported by two members from the Awami National Party, one from the Jamaat-i-Islami, two independents from erstwhile tribal areas and four independents belonging to a newly-formed group under another independent Dilawar Khan.

Interestingly, all these senators have been sitting on the treasury benches and had voted for Mr Sanjrani on March 12 during the election of the Senate chairman against Mr Gilani. Three of these independents are known as the senators backed by the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), a party joined by Mr Sanjrani after winning the Senate election as an independent in 2018.

How the things were managed could be judged from the fact that Samina Mumtaz, who had recently won the Senate seat on the



BAP ticket, had also submitted an application to the chairman in favor of Mr Gilani. However, after realizing that she is not an independent senator, she was asked to withdraw the letter and the name of another BAP-backed independent was included in the list of Mr Gilani's supporters.

The PPP preferred the office even at the cost of the opposition's unity which the opposition parties had somehow managed to keep until the March 12 elections for the offices of the Senate chairman and the deputy chairman. The rest of the leadership of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) watched the PPP accomplishing the task of getting the opposition leader's while sitting at Jati Umra residence of the Sharifs in Lahore.

For many, the PPP's slogan Aik Zardari Sab Pe Bhari has once again worked. This slogan has different meanings for both the PPP supporters and the opponents. It is unfortunate that the PPP walas consider Asif Zardari a statesman because of his capability of wheeling and dealings and taking benefit (visible or hidden) out of any situation. This is what he has done now and at the cost of "credibility."

After agreeing to a formula regarding the distribution of top three Senate offices – under which the opposition leader's office was to go to the PML-N – the PPP has, no doubt, proved that in politics, commitments and words do not matter. The party, however, says that it was a number game which it has won. Previously, when Mr Zardari after betraying the famous Bhurban declaration in 2008, made a deal with the PML-Q and appointed Chaudhry Pervez Elahi as the deputy prime minister only weeks after calling the Q-League as Qaatil League, the PPP walas had praised him for his reconciliatory efforts.

In March 2018, Mr Zardari's directives to his senators to vote for an independent Sanjrani for the office of the Senate chairman despite being in a position of getting the office had surprised even the party members who were later found unable to defend the move. The only argument they gave at that time was that they had prevented their arch-rival PML-N from getting the office. And again, they have done the same.

There is no doubt that Sanjrani has played smart. A person who was a new entrant to



the politics prior to becoming the Senate chairman only three years back and who was often dubbed a “parachuter” by the opposition parties has outclassed the country’s experienced and traditional politicians through his maneuvering skills. And this is not the first time that he has done it. This is for the fifth time, at least, starting from his first election as the Senate chairman with the support of the PPP to his second election by contesting against the same PPP.

And during this period, he once successfully averted a no trust threat from the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) with the complete support of the whole opposition. And then, he survived a no-confidence motion pushed by the same opposition having 64 senators in the 104-member house.

Everyone remembers how the resolution to move a no-confidence vote against Sanjrani that had been passed comfortably by opposition senators with 64 votes faced a defeat when the opposition fell three short of the votes needed to send Mr Sanjrani packing when the results of the secret ballot were announced.

It was perhaps because of these skills that the ruling coalition lacking required numbers in the Senate once again nominated him for the top Senate slot. Prime Minister Imran Khan formally nominated Mr Sanjrani as the ruling party candidate a day after Finance Minister Abdul Hafeez Shaikh suffered a defeat at the hands of Mr Gilani in the National Assembly despite having the numbers. And the move paid off.

There is no doubt that Mr Gilani, who had previously served the country as its prime minister, was a suitable person for the opposition leader’s slot if compared to the present members sitting on the opposition benches and particularly with Azam Nazeer Tarar, who had been nominated by the PML-N for the same office, but the way he had got this position has definitely dented his political stature. Soon after Mr Gilani’s nomination, memes started appearing on social media dubbing him a “selected opposition leader”. A PML-N leader openly commented that Mr Gilani had become the opposition leader with “the BAP votes.”

Responding to the criticism, Mr Gilani in a news conference dispelled the impression that he would be a friendly opposition leader.

“Today, a senior office-bearer (of another opposition party) said that a majority has been formed after taking people from BAP. I am telling you, there are two people from (previous) FATA. Dilawar sahib has had contact with the PML-N. He has a group of four independent people. So calling it a ‘government opposition’ is not appropriate and we should refrain from saying this to keep the PDM intact,” said Mr Gilani.

Besides the issue of en masse resignations from the assemblies, the issue of the Senate Opposition leader had also created a rift within the PDM ranks as both the PML-N and PPP publicly claimed their right to the key office.

The PML-N maintains that the decision that the opposition leader in the Senate would be from the PML-N had been taken by a PDM committee and it had nothing to do with the outcome of the elections of Senate chairman and deputy chairman. The decision that the opposition leader’s office would go to the PML-N had been announced by PDM’s information secretary Mian Iftikhar Hussain in the presence of PPP’s Raja Pervez Ashraf.

The PPP, meanwhile, admits that it had previously agreed to give the office of the opposition leader to the PML-N in return for nomination of Gilani for the office of Senate chairman. But the situation changed after Gilani’s defeat.

Mr Gilani said Raja Pervez Ashraf had been tasked with presenting the party’s viewpoint regarding the Senate leader of the opposition in a meeting of the PDM steering committee, but he had not insisted on the position being given to the PPP at the time so that the Senate chairman election, for which he had already been nominated by the PDM, would not be “compromised”.

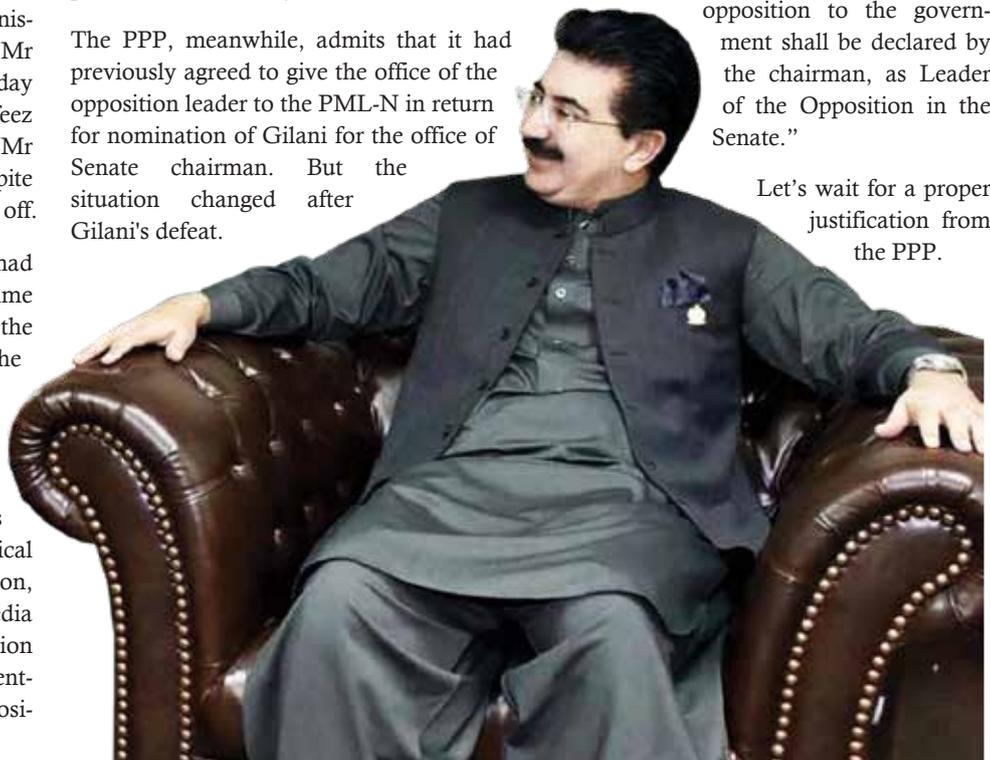
According to Mr Gilani, PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari had contacted various PDM leaders regarding the issue, but they refused the proposal for the opposition leader’s office to be given to the PPP, saying a decision in this regard had already been taken.

The PML-N is upset over the development. It says the PPP should not forget that today Mr Gilani is in the Senate only because of the 83 votes of the PML-N members in the National Assembly.

Whatever the PML-N says, one thing is clear that the PPP could have got the opposition leader’s office without seeking support from the treasury benches after succeeding to get the support of the ANP and the JI as the Senate rules state that “if two or more members have equal support for the office of Leader of the Opposition, the member belonging to the party having

largest numerical strength in the opposition to the government shall be declared by the chairman, as Leader of the Opposition in the Senate.”

Let’s wait for a proper justification from the PPP.





# Losing Wicket of Hafeez Shaikh on First Ball offered a key setback

*His Ability to Rise from Ashes of Political Defeat – Can He Be Really Resilient Perform, Perform, Perform ----- High time to re-think and prioritize....*



By Ashraf Malkham

There is no denying fact that the Government and allies victory on Chairman as well as Deputy Chairman senate slots and Prime Minister Imran Khan's swift move to secure a vote of confidence from the National Assembly on the heels of his party's failure to secure a Senate seat for Finance Minister Hafeez Sheikh was an astute measure and boosted the ruling party's morale.

PDM's failure to devised strategy for resignations from Parliament, long march and Sit in has boosted for the time being scattered major political parties which is sign of relief for the PTI and allies.

For one thing, it immediately stemmed the erosion of morale within his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, and for another, it denied the opposition the opportunity of staging a communications blitz around their electoral victory.

Having said that the setback his government suffered was not the kind that would go away on its own. Khan will have to work both hard and smart to repair the damage – if he can at all repair the damage that is, say political pundits in the federal capital.

What is more, Khan and his team have to realize they need more political savvy than bravado or cricketing strategy to recover from the hiccup. Win of the Chairman and Deputy Chairman Senate is not enough. The question, however, is if Khan can muster that kind of savvy and leverage it with adequate finesse in good time.

Also, the victory in senate and the vote of confidence do not render his government impervious to future shocks of this kind. First will be to contest writ petitions challenging chairman and deputy chairman senate election in courts of law. Much time will be consumed in discussing this case.

Unless he can conjure something truly outstanding, his government will have to pay a price for every day in office.

Nobody is in doubt that the PTI government needs to get its act together. Khan will have to re-think his priorities and rebuild his team, shedding dead wood and injecting more political savvy and clout having roots among masses, political wisdom as well as experience to run government affairs. Most importantly, he needs to improve governers at federal and provincial level, said a former bureaucrat now holding a political slot in the federal cabinet.

Presently there are at least ten advisors to the Prime Minister enjoying the status of federal minister but there is a big question as to what political role they are filling. Did they offer a helping hand in the election campaign of Dr. Hafeez Sheikh and later on in political crises, which erupted after



the defeat of Hafeez Sheikh in senate election.

To their credit, the opposition Pakistan Democratic Front (PDM), played all their cards right. But finally, this house of cards build in form of PDM is almost collapsed. If not collapsed, lost its ability to launch effective movement against government.

Former Speaker National Assembly and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani were always going to be a formidable candidate for the Senate seat from Islamabad. And the PTI lead government failed to devise any strategy to defeat heavyweight like Yousaf Raza Gillani. What PTI did to counter this expected move? Answers are nothing.

Interestingly, it is rumored Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) supremo former President Asif Ali Zardari was less than enthusiastic about fielding Gillani, only Bilawal's insistence forced Asif Ali Zardari to nominate Yousaf Raza as candidate for senate seat from federal capital. However, the fact that he came round to it goes to show how politicians can rise above their personal preferences for political gain.



On the other hand, Dr. Hafeez Sheikh, was hardly the most suitable candidate for PTI to field for the Islamabad seat. In fact, being the Finance Minister, he was by default the lightning rod attracting ire from all sides for unpopular economic policy decisions.

In all political show the only wise decision was to nominate Sadiq Sanjrani and Mirza Afridi respectively for the slots of Chairman and Deputy Chairman Slots. This decision remained helpful to win election on these seats. Who played a decisive role in this win? PPP or government or PTI? Yet needs a reply.

Prime Minister Khan must think about the non-political credentials of his team, especially the unelected advisors who do little beyond clustering around him on public outings and huddling with him in private. To say this lot has miserably failed to show its utility would be an understatement. The government is not doing anything to counter PDM moves politically, said a federal minister talking on condition of anonymity.

There is a long queue of such advisors who proved they were extra luggage and the government is paying a high price for keeping them. They humiliate elected members of assembly and cabinet. In the Senate election, their role at provincial as well as federal level was zero. Plus there were serious questions of their competence and financial credibility, commented another federal minister working in economic-related ministries.

Then there is the urgent task of fighting inflation and price hike, stemming chiefly from official mismanagement and business malpractice. The common man feels the pinch of these failures every day at the

checkout counter whether buying wheat flour or sugar or chicken meat.

Unless the Prime Minister has some genius trick up his sleeve, his catchy promise of millions of jobs and houses are truly coming back to haunt his government in a big way. He will do well to draft help from his cabinet colleagues to help placate the public and address the grievances of his party's elected lawmakers.

A federal minister holding an important ministry said a study of political govern-

ments' performance showed that the role of Principle Secretaries had been very important. This office had assumed a quasi-political role. But under Khan, federal secretaries have developed severe differences with ministers, and his party's parliamentarians from Punjab and Sindh are routinely overheard discussing the insults they suffer at the hands of these super bureaucrats.

Then there is the role of provincial governors. Khan's governors of Punjab and Sindh have no roots among the masses and no time-tested links in the political circles. Both are holding the highest offices in Punjab and Sindh without offering help to overcome solutions of increasing problems, a consensus among PTI parliamentarians.

Khan's coalition partner Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) holds some ground in interior Sindh but it has been totally ignored in the province. It is high time that he should allow politicians from interior Sindh their due place in the government, said federal minister from GDA.

In Punjab, Chaudhry Pervez Elahi has proved his worth by managing unopposed election of senators from the province notwithstanding the political polarization in evidence across the nation. PML-Q only Minister Tariq Bashir Cheema publicly expressed his grievances against Punjab and federal government.

That the Chaudhries have never been allowed a say in political decision-making in the center as it is Khan's loss. His move to visit their residence to hold talks ahead of Senate polls was a good move. He now needs to build on it rather than dropping the matter.

"Those cannot swim in Punjab drown in Islamabad" says an astute maxim of Pakistan's politics. Analysts say Punjab will be the target of an opposition onslaught in the days to come, and when that happens, the Prime Minister will sorely need the help of the Chaudhries of Gujrat.

There have been reports of contacts between Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Chaudhries. Khan should be mindful that given the composition of the provincial assembly, when the push comes to shove, the Chaudhries may well hold the key to who rules the province.

# Government's Covid-19 Strategy? 'Deal With It!'

*Pakistanis have been left pretty much to their own devices in the face of the third wave of the COVID-19 global pandemic.*



By Noor Aftab

After getting off relatively lightly from the first two waves of the Covid-19 global pandemic, Pakistan appears set to suffer some damage at the hands of the third wave of Covid-19 with no coherent national strategy and no mass vaccination program insight.

Already, the UK variant of the virus is taking its toll on the lives of the people and putting an enormous strain on the country's fragile healthcare system, especially in the federal capital Islamabad and the Punjab province.

As of 25 March, there are about 38,000 active cases of Covid-19 in Pakistan. The number of confirmed cases are nearing 641,000 and more than 14,000 deaths have been recorded. The positivity ratio at this point is above nine percent, which is quite high compared with the first and second waves of the pandemic.

According to the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), the rate of people testing positive in June last year was as high as 23 percent but dropped to 1.7 percent by September. It began to increase again, reaching 7.45 percent in January 2021 before dropping to 3 percent by mid-February and then climbing to 7.1 percent in March.

## The First Wave

The first case of Covid-19 in Pakistan surfaced on 26 February 2020 in Karachi. The lack of effective quarantine facilities and limited testing capacities at the Taftan border crossing resulted in import of the virus in the country that resultantly played havoc especially in the Punjab and Sindh provinces.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's government was always hesitant to impose complete lockdown and later introduced a 'smart lockdown' concept and the authorities hailed it as an effective tool to curb the virus.

But the sheer scale of outbreak exposed the gaps in the underlying healthcare system. A high population density, lack of public awareness, weak healthcare system, the resistance created by community dynamics and religious and cultural beliefs made the containment of virus a tough challenge in the country.

Initially, at the start of the outbreak in late February 2020 the testing by Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) for the virus was very limited and only symptomatic cases with travel history of high-risk countries were tested.

Lack of stringent policy and lockdown gamble paved the way for spread of coronavirus through social, political, religious, and business activities. The schools, colleges and universities were reopened for regular activities across the country.

The data compiled by NCOC revealed that Pakistan reached its first 100 confirmed cases (on 16 March 2020) twenty days after reporting the first case. The count reached 1,000 cases (on 24 March 2020) after 28 days; 10,000 (on 22 April 2020) after 57 days; and 20,000 (on 3 May 2020) 68 days after first reported case.

A total of 332,186 cases of Covid-19 were recorded in Pakistan during the first wave, 6,795 of them resulting in death.

## The Second Wave

The government announced the arrival of the second wave of Covid-19 on 28 October 2020 when the daily increase in cases reached 750 compared with 400 to 500 cases a few weeks ago.

Pakistan saw a pattern of the pandemic where the first wave occurred in the spring that substantially subsided during the summer in 2019, while the second wave emerged in the fall of 2020.

It was observed that more people were visiting hospitals during the first wave because Covid-19 was a new infection and there was less or no awareness in masses. But in the second wave people were somewhat aware of it and they preferred to remain in isolation till recovery.

At the peak of the second wave of the pandemic on 25 December, the national positivity ratio averaged at just over six percent, the highest observed in Karachi at 12.45 percent, followed by 10.96 percent in Peshawar and 7.81 percent in Abbottabad.

## The Third Wave

The third wave of pandemic again tested the healthcare system as the more virulent and a deadlier UK variant arrived. The positivity ratio raced 12.67 percent on 13 March in Lahore when 991 new cases were reported within 24 hours – the highest number of infections reported in the city in a year.

Earlier on 23 February, the NCOC had relaxed most of the restrictions on commercial activities, schools, offices, and other workplaces. Health experts say this combined with the arrival of the UK variant resulted in sharp spike in cases leading to the third wave of the pandemic.

Pakistan reported more than 3,000 Covid-19 cases for the second day in a row on 19 March as the country teetered in the grip of the deadly third wave of the pandemic.

## Irresponsible Attitude

When Pakistan was struggling against a global pandemic like rest of the international community, the attitude of many political leaders including government officials was generally disappointing. They largely failed to make people understand the potential threats related to the virus.

The people saw Prime Minister Imran Khan saying on national television that the Covid-19 would only cause flu and then the patients would regain health. Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman repeatedly made a mockery of the pandemic in his public speeches. Some even maintained Pakistan should go for herd immunity.

The shopkeepers and traders also took no serious measures to implement Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) introduced by the government to prevent spread of Covid-19. The local administration in the cities took some cosmetic steps but usually avoided taking action against violation of SOPs both by the shopkeepers and the visitors.

## Vaccination

In view of the increasing threats to the health of the people, the government decided to initiate vaccination process that could become a game-changer. A total of 104 vaccination centers were initially established across the country but it took them many weeks to start their work due to unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles.

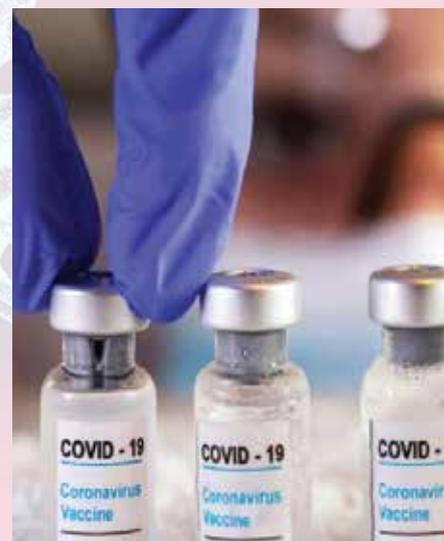
Unfortunately, the government's response to procure vaccines remains very slow and it is largely eyeing donations to vaccinate the increasingly vulnerable population.

Pakistan received half a million shots of the Sinopharm vaccine as a gift from China in the first week of February. The NCOC started registering frontline healthcare workers to receive the COVID-19 vaccine on 11 January this year. Later, it announced on 15 February that people over the age of 65 should also register for vaccination.

Later, the government announced that walk-in vaccination facilities would be opened from 16 March for people over 70 years of age and they could get vaccinated at the nearest health facility after registering at 1166.

National Health Services Secretary Amir Ashraf Khawaja raised many eyebrows when he informed the Public Accounts Committee the government aimed to combat Covid-19 through herd immunity and donated vaccines and had no plan to purchase doses at least this year.

NCOC head Asad Umer who is also Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives later clarified that 150 million dollars were allocated by the federal cabinet to purchase Covid-19 vaccines. However, there has still been no word of any government plan to purchase and administer vaccines to the general public.



## Vaccines Prices

The government has fixed the maximum sale price for the Chinese single-dose Convidecia vaccine at PKR 4,225 per shot. The Sputnik V Russian vaccine at PKR 8,449 for two doses and China's

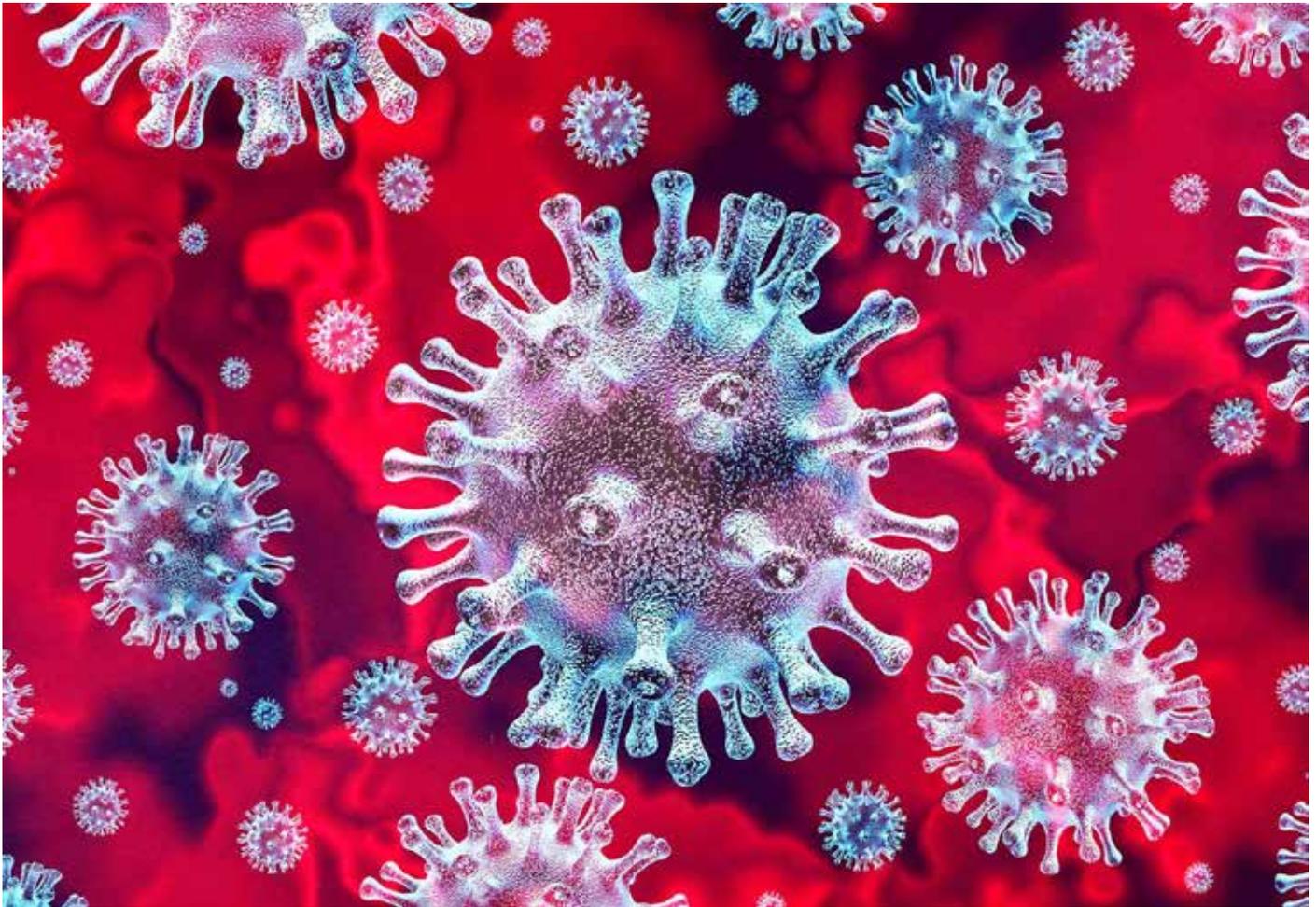
The price for the Russian-made two-dose two-vector Sputnik V vaccine (also called Gam-Covid-Vac) has been set at PKR 8,449 per pack of two injections, PKR 16,560 per pack of four injections, PKR 40,555 per pack of 10 injections, and PKR 81,110 per pack of 20 injections.

## Myths

Unfortunately, a numbers of myth about the infection and vaccination continue to percolate the society, further undermining any positive messaging and dissuading the masses from taking the requisite safety measures. Some of these myths are listed below.

- 1) Presence of virus in the vaccine can pose threat to the life of people: The WHO has clarified that there is no live virus in the vaccines, so they cannot infect anyone.
- 2) The vaccine would alter the DNA of the people. Scientists say injecting RNA into a person doesn't do anything to the DNA of a human cell.
- 3) If you get vaccinated, it could make you infertile. There is absolutely no data from the clinical trials nor any theoretical reason for the vaccines to cause infertility.

# Covid's Fair Treatment For Artificial Intelligence



By Maheen Dhanani

The COVID-19 crisis has for a long time left global public health care delivery at a standstill. The spread of the virus and its consequences have overburdened all sectors of the healthcare industry and it has been quite a puzzling year for many with the absolute chaos that has brought immense loss. However, the healthcare workers have consistently put up a fight and adapted to the evolving circumstances. The efforts have resulted in breakthroughs that have morphed the provision and accessibility of quality and efficient healthcare. Where Covid created many restrictions, it also brought out many new initiatives and new use of same tech differently. Technology is synchronizing with health care tools. Today, we are fortunate enough to be surrounded by digital technology which has helped us in every aspect of life to combat the hurdles placed by the outbreak.

This has been true for the healthcare sector as well and it has in many ways transformed patient care delivery. With standardized health information systems and electronic medical records, digital technology has made it possible for seamless flows of information about patient data and the virus itself. It has also made healthcare workers remotely and easily accessible to meet the unmet needs of

health seekers with telemedicine. The application of Artificial Intelligence within digital technology in the healthcare sector has been particularly noteworthy. Artificial intelligence has reinvented healthcare and intelligent machines can now process, analyze, interpret and present complex medical information and data in a simplified manner.

Artificial Intelligence has been prevalent in business and technology for the past few decades and as healthcare digitized over time, harnessing it has been very beneficial. It is exponentially increasing and rapidly simplifying health care for the payers, providers and even the hospital administrators. For instance, it has proven to be a tool to diminish the incidence of a misdiagnosis. In 2015, about 10% of deaths were calculated to have occurred because of a misjudgment by medical experts. With the use of AI, the prediction and diagnosis of a disease has been more efficient for the medical professionals, allowing them to mitigate any risks that come to play.

The artificial intelligence market in the healthcare sector was valued at US\$ 3,991.23 million in 2019 and it is projected to reach

US\$ 107,797.82 million by 2027; it is expected to grow at a CAGR of 49.8% from 2020 to 2027. AI applications are under trial for increased accuracy in cancer diagnoses, blood diseases, interpretation of radiographs and EKGs. Biopharmaceuticals are applying it to enhance drug development. Applications are also being developed for improving hospital administrations, with AI being used for patient flow optimization, tailored healthcare plans and increasing the access to healthcare providers. Digitization of Healthcare in some countries has provided a lot of digital data that can provide for mitigated hospital related risks.

Pakistan has also embarked on its journey to incorporate AI into the healthcare sector. Research is being conducted at The Aga Khan University Hospital platform where they are assessing the use of an algorithm to analyze the development of organs in a foetus with data collected by ultrasound imaging to assess risks associated with birth and stillbirths. In other research AI is being utilized to improve patient experience with data collected from the patient's in the emergency room, along with data being sifted through demographics. In addition, there is research being carried out on bridging Neuroscience and Artificial Intelligence for efficient understanding and applications in the fields of psychiatry and neuro-prosthetics.

As of 2018, data from the World Bank development indicators reports that 0.9801 Physicians per 1000 people are present in Pakistan. With most of them concentrated in the urban areas, there is significant improvement to be made for better provision of public healthcare throughout the country. Artificial Intelligence along with digital technology in this Internet Age could and will prove to be an important tool in revamping the healthcare system.



It gives an opportunity to access remote areas, to provide quality healthcare from a centralized platform to tackle prevailing diseases and quite possibly putting an end to endemics such as the Polio in the country. With the correct efforts, improvement of the quality of life for our citizens and the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, can be achieved with the powerhouse that is Artificial Intelligence.

*The writer is an author and a specialist in public healthcare delivery and administration.*



# The Realpolitik behind Gen Bajwa's Public Push for Peace with India

*While a policy statement coming from the army chief's bully pulpit did ruffle some feathers, the army chief did it with good reason.*



By Umer Farooq

High-level diplomatic signaling by a top general seems incongruous, even in Pakistan. Gen Qamar Bajwa's posturing for peace with India, therefore, drew mixed responses. But realpolitik has its own exigencies, not always compatible with the sensibilities of political correctness. What some have seen as a gaffe may well be a diplomatic masterstroke delivered by a seasoned exponent of the art.

It all began on 25 February 2021, when the Director Gen Military Operations of Pakistan and India met on the hotline between the army headquarters of two armies. After reviewing the situation on the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, the two sides announced a ceasefire between the land forces of two countries which are standing eyeball to eyeball in the disputed territory of Kashmir.

Before this ceasefire agreement the exchange of fire between the two armies had become a norm across more than 700 km of Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir.

"In the interest of achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders, the two Directors Gen of Military Operations (DGMOs) agreed to address each other's core issues and concerns which have a propensity to disturb the peace and lead to violence," a joint statement said, referring to the military operations heads of the two countries.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the DGMOs of the two countries held discussions over the established mechanism of hotline contact. The two sides reviewed the situation along the Line of Control (LoC) and all other sectors in a free, frank, and cordial atmosphere. They reiterated that existing mechanisms of hotline contact and border flag meetings will be utilized to resolve any unforeseen situation or misunderstanding.

This agreement is apparently a good omen for future Pak-India relations but there is a problem: Pakistan-India relations seems to have been down-

graded from the level of high-level diplomatic world of Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, and foreign secretaries to the level of senior military officials.

This may not seem problematic in Pakistan where it is customary for military officials to be more powerful than the political leadership. But this clearly is not the case in India, where military officials do not enjoy such a high status in the power structure of the country. The military officials in India occupy much lower ranks in the power hierarchy of the country.

This, in other words, would mean that India has handed over its Pakistan policy to lower echelons of the power hierarchy.

Ironically this development may add another feather to the cap of our own military leaders but this would mean downgrading the importance of Pakistan and its political system in the diplomatic and security world of this region.

In diplomatic terms this would mean that neither Prime Minister of India nor foreign Minister of India considered it up to their status to pick up the phone and talk directly to the Prime Minister or foreign minister of Pakistan to bring down the military tensions in Kashmir. They relegated the task to their uniformed minions.

Someone can put forward an argument that the ceasefire on the Line of Control is a technical military matter and has to be dealt with at the concerned military officials' level. The valid argument to the extent that military technicalities have to be dealt with at the military officials' level in the context of Pakistan and India, but reaching a ceasefire agreement between two countries that are political and military rivals is purely political and diplomatic decision.

In the past ceasefires between Pakistan and India had always been decided at the political level and military technicalities were dealt with at the military officials' level only after a political and diplomatic decision had been made at the appropriate level.

This time, however, the current accord seems to have come without any participation from political leadership from either side – although the optics for the two capitals were in stark contrast. In New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared very much in command, delegating a task to his military aides and receiving their report; in Islamabad, it was quite another story.

Perhaps we could keep up the appearances of Prime Minister Imran Khan delegating a task to his military aides and receiving their report – but for a public relations coup by the military leadership.

First, the new of a two-star Gen reaching a ceasefire agreement with his Indian counterpart pushed our Foreign Office in the background at least as far as public imagination is concerned. Then, less than a month later, Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff, Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa delivered a speech in a security seminar in Islamabad, which by all means could be construed as a policy statement as far as relations with India are concerned.

Again Prime Minister Imran Khan and our foreign ministry are nowhere visible as far as public imagination is concerned—it was a military official who reached a ceasefire agreement and it was COAS who laid

down an India policy for the Pakistan government.

“Stable Indo-Pak relation is a key to unlock the untapped potential of South and Central Asia by ensuring connectivity between East and West Asia”, Gen. Bajwa said addressing the security dialogue in Islamabad. “This potential, however, has forever remained hostage to disputes and issues between two nuclear neighbors. ...

“It is important to understand that without the resolution of the Kashmir dispute through peaceful means, the process of subcontinental rapprochement will always remain susceptible to derailment due to politically motivated bellicosity. However, we feel that it is time to bury the past and move forward.”

This was not for the first time that Gen Bajwa has offered an olive branch to India, “It is our sincere belief that the route to peaceful resolution of Pak-India disputes – including the core issue of Kashmir – runs through comprehensive and meaningful dialogue,” he said while addressing the passing out parade of Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) cadets at Kakul in April 2018.

Gen Bajwa's speech, though, was not an example of a simple one-way message. It contained all the elements of Pakistani diplomatic jargon aimed at convincing the world and the domestic audience that the Pakistani state believes in peace, “while at the same time it remained adamantly committed to its claimed status of equality with India”.

The COAS talked about a peace dialogue “with sovereign equality, dignity and honor”, adding Kashmir as a precondition for a comprehensive dialogue process. Similarly, in his latest speech, Gen Bajwa again stressed the need for India to create a conducive environment in Kashmir for the Pak-India peace process to resume.

The army chief's statement on India did not come out of the blue. It was preceded by a major flurry of activity by senior army officials aimed at publicly projecting that the Pakistani army was not opposed to the idea of peace with India. Regular ceasefire violations along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir followed a proposal from the military's Gen Headquarters that Pakistani and Indian director generals of military operations should meet face to face in an effort to reduce tensions.

Similarly, a senior army official posted in Balochistan, where India's Research and Analysis Wing is accused of fomenting trouble, offered India to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor along with other regional countries.

In the past 15 years, some fluctuations in the army's attitude towards India seem to be personality-driven. But on closer inspection, military analysts say, the variation is because of the changing situation on our western border. During the time of Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the army told the government, led by Pakistan People's Party (PPP), that talks with India were a necessity in order to avoid a major conflict on our border.

“Gen Kayani was telling the PPP leadership that keep talking with India as the army does not want a major conflict ... but don't get too close with India,” a senior Foreign Office official who is now retired once told me.

This was in complete contrast with the army's policy during the tenure of Gen Raheel Sharif. The situation on the LoC remained tense and political analysts say the army employed its manipulative tools to keep Nawaz Sharif away from the idea of normalizing ties with India. The two Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-led agitations were also seen in that light.

So why did Gen Bajwa give a full-fledged policy statement expressing the army's willingness to normalize relations with India? If Pakistan's domestic political situation is any indication, the army chief is the most prominent center of power, and the army the only institution that has the standing to issue a policy statement to the world.

Besides, Pakistani military establishment is sponsoring a peace process in Afghanistan between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The Pakistani army has wholeheartedly embraced a mega-regional connectivity project which in Pakistan goes by the name of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In such a situation it would be an anomaly of the highest order to continue military antagonism.

The world must be in no doubt that Islamabad understands the necessity to make peace with India in the interest of regional peace and prosperity – which after all is in Pakistan's interest.

## Afghan Peace Process in Overdrive

*With only a month to go before the 1 May deadline for withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the peace process is finally picking up pace.*



By Tahir Khan

Afghan peace process is finally shifting to a high gear with all parties to the conflict scrambling to come with solutions for a transition to a political dispensation acceptable to all.

The Truth International (TTI) can report that each of the three parties to the conflict – the Taliban, the United States, and the Afghan government – has now floated its own proposal to end the 20-year war and decide a future set-up.

The Taliban, who have rejected calls for a ceasefire up until now, confirm they are holding deliberations for a three-month reduction-in-violence (RIV) plan.

“American have generally described the proposal as good,” Taliban political spokesman Dr Mohammad Naeem told TTI last week, adding discussions were underway to finalize the details of the plan.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has told TTI the Taliban had floated the plan in the wake of claims that the Taliban have not decreased the level of fighting after signing last year’s agreement with the United States for withdrawal of all foreign troops by 1 May 2021.

“The RIV is presently a proposal. There had been questions that the Islamic Emirate has not decreased operations despite the fact that we had practically decreased the level of fighting and we were forced to fight in some areas because the other side had made advances and tried to enter our areas, forcing us to defend our areas,” Mujahid said last week.

“We had floated the proposal to prevent the objections and to put in place a mechanism for reduction in violence,” the Taliban spokesman said, adding the final contours

of the plan will emerge only once the other parties to the conflict have had their say.

Asked if the Taliban would launch their spring offensive that marks new fighting season, he said the Taliban usually announced the offensive sometime in the month of April. He claimed the Taliban had not launched the offensive this year because of the Doha Accord. “We wanted to keep the level of operations down and not to launch new operations”.

“The decision about the offensive [depends upon] the political situation”, Mujahid said. “We have to see how the parties concerned respond to our proposals and what mechanisms emerge. The decision whether or not to launch our [spring offensive] will depend on this”.

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken had also mentioned the three-month’s RIV

proposal in his letter he had sent to Afghan president Ashraf Ghani earlier when the U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad also shared a plan for the establishment of an interim set up.

“We have prepared a revised proposal for a 90-day Reduction-in-Violence, which is intended to prevent a Spring Offensive by the Taliban and to coincide with our diplomatic efforts to support a political settlement between the parties,” Blinken said in the letter.

Also last week, another Taliban leader privy to the negotiations with the U.S. told TTI that the Taliban had shared the RIV proposal earlier than Blinken’s letter to “create a conducive atmosphere for the negotiations among Afghans”.

Kabul. “We’d really like to see that violence come down. And I think if it does come down, it can begin to set the conditions for, you know, some really fruitful diplomatic work”.

Austin, who paid his first visit to Afghanistan as Secretary of Defense, said he wanted to listen to President Ghani and to “understand what his concerns were, see the landscape through his eyes.”

While the Taliban and the U.S. have announced their proposals to press forward the peace process, the Afghan government is busy finalizing its own proposal.

President Ghani intends to unveil a plan in the upcoming meeting in Turkey in April that proposes early elections but will demand a six-month ceasefire, according to reports.

process could be suspended, allowing intra-Afghan warfare to continue until one side is weakened enough to accept the conditions of the other, “he argued.

Besides a rise in the casualties suffered by Afghan forces in the Taliban attacks in recent months, the war continues to take a heavy toll on the lives of Afghan civilians in attacks by all sides.

An assessment released last week by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) concurs with a February report by the UN Human Rights Office in recognizing there had been a surge in civilians killed and injured in Afghanistan following the start of peace negotiations in September.

The Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Annual Report 2020



The intra-Afghan negotiations started in September last year to thrash out a political roadmap and a ceasefire. However, the negotiations are deadlocked with the two sides yet to agree on an agenda.

The Afghan government has not yet commented on the Taliban proposal. However, Rahmatullah Andar, a spokesman for Afghanistan’s National Security Council, said last week that foreigners were safe in Afghanistan since the Doha agreement but Afghans were still being killed as the war was focused on Afghan citizens and security forces.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who held talks with President Ghani in Kabul in March, called for reduction in violence.

“But what I will say is that it’s obvious that the level of violence remains pretty high in the country”, Austin told reporters in

A former Taliban official who spoke to TTI last week disagreed with the notion of RIV maintaining this approach did not address the concerns of war-weary Afghans.

“I do not understand the logic and interpretation of the ‘RIV’ as it means violence will continue to kill more Afghans from both sides,” said Dr Amin ul Haq, who served as an official during the Taliban rule (1996-2001).

“Will the RIV mean 10 Afghans will die daily instead of 50 today? Will it mean the police will not be killed and the military will be? This is a naïve idea,” he said.

Haq was of the view both sides could reach an agreement in short order given a strong enough motivation.

“The world is weary and could leave the two Afghan sides locked in fighting, which would be catastrophic. If there is no progress in the Qatar negotiations, the

documents the appalling level of harm inflicted on civilians and traces the disturbing spike in violence against them to the last quarter of the year.

Deborah Lyons, the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan laments 2020 could have been the year of peace in Afghanistan. “Instead, thousands of Afghan civilians perished due to the conflict”.

In 2020, the UNAMA documented more than 3,000 civilians killed in a single year for the seventh consecutive year, with Afghanistan remaining among the deadliest places in the world for a civilian.

Afghanistan peace negotiations that began between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Qatar in September failed to alleviate the scale of civilian harm, a key indicator of violence levels. Instead, there was an escalation of violence with disturbing trends and consequences.

# Power dynamics and Pakistan's foreign policy concerns, CPEC AND FATF

*SPECIAL INTERVIEW WITH AMBASSADOR MUNIR AKRAM*



**By Nadia Alimuiddin**

Few days back TTI had the honor of interviewing the Ambassador Munir Akram who laminated on Kashmir, CPEC, FATF and relations of Pakistan with other developed and neighboring countries.

When asked about his opinion on Kashmir issue and peace between India and Pakistan, he said that living together was never going to be possible, because the partition of the subcontinent had a strong logical foundation. That logic being Muslims could not get along and prosper within a Hindu majority country, and time has shown us that logic proved to be correct.

“The two-nation conclusion was reached much earlier than the creation of Pakistan. I think that the subsequent history has proved the correctness of the conclusion that was reached by Pakistan's founding fathers.”

He further said that these conclusions were immediately confirmed after the partition, as India held back our money, migration riots, and later killings. Still Pakistan is fighting for the right of Kashmir in United Nations Security Council.

There was some hope at the partition of a friendly Subcontinent. The sentiments of bridging the gap or living together or creating a monetary or customs union, all these were possible because the economies were self-dependent and people knew each other, the leadership of both countries knew each other, the bureaucracy knew each other.

While talking about how Pakistan appears globally, he said that Pakistan has become Islamic and more fundamentalist, that's true we are more Islamic, but on the other side, India is much more Hindu. The people of India are not only the people who led the Hindu Muslim riots, but they are

also the same people who killed Mahatma Gandhi because he was considered too soft on the Muslims.

He further said, “I think the division that happened in 1947 has been exasperated by political disputes, by military competition, by the strategic competition and but also because the nature of the two countries has changed, India is much more Hindu and Pakistan is much more Islamic.”

The compulsions for a peaceful relationship, even if it's not a friendly relationship, is much higher on Pakistan than on India, because, as a country, we cannot deploy the same resources for military, or the economy, etc. However, there are certain fundamental problems, which will not go away unless we address them.

On mentioning the fundamental problems between the countries, he said that the first

problem is the Indian oppression in Kashmir, the Pakistani public will always object to that. There will always be people in Pakistan wanting to help the Kashmiris no matter what the governments think, or whether one wants to believe that it is the ISI who is doing this or that. The sentiment on our side will always be such that people will want to go and support the Kashmiris.

So, some way we need to eliminate the oppression in Kashmir, even if the problem is not fully solved, there has to be some way to stop the killing in Kashmir.

The second problem, which has compounded the problems between the two countries, is the fact that Indians have used and are using Afghanistan as a base for subversion and terrorism in Pakistan. They consider it as a payback for Kashmir.

When asked about his views on Pakistan China relations, he said that he was hopeful that these two countries are having good friendly relations. CPEC first phase projects are complete; United States does not participate in it. Second phase of CPEC is starting in which focus will be on investments, industrializations, manufacturing and creation of economic zones etc. Project



is on track it is preceding and it will proceed, we will achieve our objectives with regard to the implementation of CPEC in accordance with the time table between China and Pakistan.

“In the current Pandemic situations financial assistance is the main problem for developing countries to keep their economies afloat. Prime Minister Imran Khan has proposed five point agenda for the developing countries which had been appreciated by all.”

At the end of the interview, TTI asked Mr. Munir on how he observes Pakistan's current position regarding FATF, he said that they had proposed fourteen point's countries where these illicit financial flows go out. They should cooperate with us in order to identify these illicit flows which they are holding to return those flows. “We will be negotiating this with General Assembly resolutions decisions by the economic social council in order to these safe heaven countries to cooperate in return to stolen asset for the country.”



# Cabinet Panel Snubs Pitch for Second Port at Gwadar

*Advocated by an influential minister, the proposal was dropped after the high-powered CCoCPEC argued it would undermine Pakistan's sovereign commitments with China over the existing port.*



By Abdul Moiz

A radical new proposal to build a second seaport at Gwadar failed to win approval of the Cabinet Committee on China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CCoCPEC) after a key minister took a dim view of the idea based on how it would reflect on Pakistan's commitment to the existing port project.

Buoyed by the twin advantages of close proximity to the oil-rich Middle Eastern region and a large landmass for setting up of heavy industries, Gwadar Port is a key project of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The proposal to build a second seaport in close proximity to the existing port came from Minister for Maritime Affairs Ali Zaidi. This interesting development was shared with the Federal Cabinet on 10 March 2021 in the shape of decisions taken by the Cabinet Committee on China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CCoCPEC) headed by Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Asad Umar.

Zaidi and Umar are close friends and are seen hanging out together.

The Gwadar Port master plan was prepared in 2006 by Foreign Consultants (Arthur D little, Lyon Associates & Indus Associated Consultant). The Plan envisaged a seafront about 50 km deep and about 9,000 hectares of industrial port land excluding reclaimed land.

Approved in the Gwadar Policy Board (GPB) which met with the then Prime Minister on 23 July 2007, the plan entailed prompt acquisition of the proposed land-bank to secure unhindered developments of Gwadar Port to its full potential over the next 50 years.

Gwadar Port Master Plan envisaged multi-use area-1 of 361 acres, of which 128 acres was acquired in 2006, i.e. before finalization of Gwadar Port Master Plan at a cost of PKR 28 million under the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP). Multi-use area-2 comprised of 2,283 acres, which was acquired in 2015 at a cost of PKR 6 billion under PSDP.

Port-industrial area-1 consisting of 6,474 acres and a post-industrial area-2 comprising 12,355 acres were yet to be acquired. However, due to a ban on land acquisition and non-approval of PC-I for the project, the proposed industrial areas could not be acquired.

On 17 June 2019, a summary was presented to the Prime Minister, Imran Khan requesting lifting of ban for acquisition of land as per Gwadar Port Master Plan. The Prime Minister directed the Ministry of Maritime Affairs to make a presentation to him on the matter. However, no meeting has yet been held.

The documents presented before the Cabinet further disclose that PC-I for the project for land acquisition for Gwadar Port as per its Master Plan, amounting to PKR 48 billion was submitted to the Planning Commission for approval. The Planning Commission returned the PC-I with the remarks that "the project for which funding was not available or source of funding not clarified should be returned to the sponsors, as per NEC

directions conveyed in its meeting held on June 10, 2013 and as per decision of ECNEC on August 28, 2013. Further action on land acquisition as per Gwadar Port Master Plan should be taken after finalization/ approval of Gwadar City Master Plan”.

Recently, the Government of Balochistan approved an Integrated Smart Port City Master Plan and constituted a Committee comprising of Minister for Planning, Minister for Maritime Affairs, Advisor to PM on Finance & Revenue, and Advisor to PM on Commerce & Industries to deliberate on the issue of reserve area in Gwadar land use plan, and make recommendations to the Cabinet for consideration.

The meeting of the Committee was held on 30 October 2019, wherein Advisor to PM on Commerce and Investment, Abdul Razak Dawood and Chairman Board of Investment supported the viewpoint of Ministry of Maritime Affairs. Minister for Planning & Development argued that instead of permanently designating the area for port activities, it should be marked as “first right of refusal for the port”. The Minister for Maritime Affairs had also taken up the matter with the Prime Minister on 31 October 2019.

The Ministry of Maritime Affairs is of the view that all the major ports of the world had integrated industrial areas, affording industries the advantage of proximity to the port in order to reduce cost of doing business. Ports like Jabl-i-Ali (UAE), Salala (Oman), Singapore, Port Qasim, etc., all have designated industrial areas managed by the concerned port authorities. The designated industrial areas at Gwadar Port, envisioned in the Master Plan, had been conceived in view of the international best practice.

The documents further disclose that on 22 February 2021, the Ministry of Maritime Affairs submitted the following proposals for the considerations of Cabinet Committee for CPEC:

(i) The Government of Baluchistan may be requested not to alienate any part of Gwadar portland as per Gwadar Port Master Plan 2006 and preserve the sanctity of the Port Master Plan, which was approved by Gwadar Policy Board meeting, chaired by the then Prime Minis-

ter and comprising of all the stakeholders, including the Government of Balochistan;

(ii) The Government of Balochistan may be requested to lift ban to the extent of Gwadar Port for acquisition of land as per the Gwadar Port Master Plan; and

(iii) The Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives may be directed that PSDP project titled “land acquisition as per Gwadar Port Master Plan” may be restored with significant allocation to enable Gwadar Port Authority to start land acquisition accordingly. The total allocation of PKR 48 billion may be divided into four equal installments. This cost may vary based on the prevalent rates set by Collector Gwadar.

However, when discussion started on the proposal of the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Minister for Maritime Affairs Ali Zaidi was of the view that while approving the Integrated Gwadar smart Port City Plan in August 2019, the Ministry of Maritime Affairs was not consulted although it was a concerned stakeholder.

He argued that the plan could hamper the prospects of future port expansion, and he suggested that possibility of setting up another port at Gwadar could also be explored to increase business activities in the area. He also expressed concern over the construction of a 300-MW coal-fired power plant at port area of Gwadar because of its environmental implications.

Makhдум Khusro Bakhtyar, Minister for Economic Affairs stated that non-availability of uninterrupted power supply and scarcity of water was the main hindrance in generation of business activities in Gwadar. He also proposed that more powers may be delegated to Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) to take necessary decisions independently and instantly to fully operationalize Gwadar port without any further delay.

Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Asad Umar, who is heading the entire set up on CPEC projects observed that once a decision or commitment was made by the Government, it had to be honored. He opined the Government should not establish a competitive port operation at least during the period of agreement with Chinese concession holder.

He also observed that specific evaluation of future prospects for investment must be made by the Board of Investment (BoI), which should help devise viable plan for maximum utilization of Gwadar port potential.

After threadbare discussion on the controversial proposal of Ministry of Maritime Affairs, the meeting took the following decisions

(i) The government should not set up another port at Gwadar in competition with the existing port;

(ii) The Ministry of Maritime Affairs to expedite work on strategic plan at Gwadar, as per the decisions taken by the Prime Minister during the meeting on South Balochistan Development Programme held on 29 October 2020;

(iii) The Ministry of Maritime Affairs and the Concessionaire for Gwadar Port and Free Zone to make a presentation to the CCoCPEC on the Concessionaire's business plan, within two weeks. Power Division to submit a summary on options for power supply to Gwadar within two weeks;

(iv) The BoI to present an independent assessment of investment potential of Gwadar Free Zone, along with recommendations on necessary measures to unlock the potential. The report/presentation shall be submitted in two months' time;

(v) The BoI to also, present a comparative assessment of the CPEC SEZ investment incentives and those offered by other countries in the region to similar zones; and

(vi) Ministry of Maritime Affairs to explore the possibility of establishment of a joint holding company for all its ports with a view to reducing reliance on PSDP and utilization of the resources available with various ports for development of new infrastructure and facilities.

The Federal Cabinet, in its meeting also ratified the decision of Asad Umar led committee on CPEC as there was feeling that any such decision would send a negative message to Beijing, already queasy over some decisions taken at different forums.

# Iran



Officially called the Islamic Republic of Iran and known to many as Persia. Iran is a country in the West of Asia, bordered by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Oman, and Pakistan. With a population of approximately 83 million, it is the second-largest country in the Middle East with its capital in its largest city Tehran. Culturally, Iran is home to one of the oldest civilizations with origins spanning back to the Elamite kingdoms in the fourth millennium BC.



## Interesting Facts about Iran

- Iran is the 18th largest country in the world, approximately 1,648,195 sq km.
- Most areas within Iran have climate as that of a dry desert.
- Iran is home to 10% of the world's oil reserves.
- The majority of the Iranian population is under the age of 30.
- Iran is known for its culture and more specifically its poetry.

# Cyprus

Officially called the Republic of Cyprus, the country is an island state with the third-largest population on the Mediterranean. It is bordered by Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt as well as Greece. Its capital is also its largest city called Nicosia. Historically, the earliest human activity that was found dates back to the 10th millennium BC and it is believed that Mycenaean Greeks were settled in the land back in the 2nd millennium BC. Due to its strategic location, it was occupied by various empires including Assyrians, Egyptians, and Persians.

## Interesting Facts about Cyprus



Cyprus is home to some of the oldest water wells across the world.



The area was seized by Alexander the Great in 333 BC.



It is believed that Aphrodite – the Greek Goddess of Love – was born in Cyprus.



Despite being an island nation, people in Cyprus do not fish.



The shape of the country is that of a cigar pipe.

## Is PM's ARU a Witch Hunter's Tool?

*The opposition continues to question the legal basis for the elite unit with premier investigating agencies at its beck and call.*



By Azeem Waqas

Prime Minister Imran Khan's Asset Recovery Unit (ARU) continues to draw ire from the opposition for its alleged unbridled powers to engage to conduct witch-hunts against the government's political opponents.

"I agree with the dissenting judges of the Supreme Court of Pakistan that there is no legal basis for this Assets Recovery Unit", said Dr Nafisa Shah, a Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Member National Assembly, talking to The Truth International (TTI).

Dr Shah raises serious objections to the ARU's Terms of Reference (ToR) and legal basis to recover assets from abroad. "If the PTI government wants to recover any asset from abroad what legal mechanism is available?"

An eight-member bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan has ruled by a 6-2 majority that the ARU is a legal body formed by the federal cabinet under the Prime Minister of Pakistan through an executive order. The two dissenting judges maintained the ARU had no legal basis.

Dr Nafisa Shah said: "The ARU was supposed to bring money from abroad but my question is still unanswered that if there is any [tainted] asset found abroad, how will it be repatriated or transferred to Pakistan and under what rule or law?"

Although the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), and the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) each have certain

powers to recover money, the ARU has no powers to recover assets from abroad, says the PPP lawmaker. Recovery of assets held in foreign jurisdictions by simply setting up an ARU is beyond my understanding and it is simply impossible, she asserts.

Dr Shah makes a point of differentiating between principled opposition versus objection to the legal basis for an institution. The PPP is opposed to the NAB on principle but does not question its legal basis. Questioning the legality of the ARU, therefore, is quite another matter.

Similarly, FBR has certain powers and has signed some agreements with international partners, which is all well and good. What ARU is doing is something in the air.

Dr Nafisa Shah alleges that "There are suspicions which are now confirmed that this is just a gimmick and it is the only survival for Khan Government which victimizes the opposition and all the challengers who challenge Imran Khan's illegal powers and especially his rhetoric of anticorruption".

Noting the ARU has not recovered anything from abroad, she asserted its only object was to target the opposition.

During the hearing of the case Senator Raza Rabbani argued before the Supreme Court of Pakistan that the cabinet had decided to establish an asset recovery unit for the recovery of unlawful offshore assets. The purpose behind setting up the agency was not the collection of material, but to conduct an inquiry.



Senator Raza Rabbani took strong exception to the fact that its ToRs empowered the ARU to request any intelligence agency at the federal government's command to assist it in the collection of material, any citizen including judges. This amounts to giving a carte blanche to intelligence agencies to invade the privacy of any individual and strengthening the executive's hand against judges.

Rabbani said he did not know of any other organization in the world with such vast, unbridled powers.

The federal cabinet approved the establishment of the ARU under the chairmanship of Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) on Accountability on 5 September 2018 with representation from the FIA, NAB, FBR, State Bank of Pakistan, and the private sector for implementation of recovery of unlawful assets abroad.

Being a coordinating unit, the ARU provides a forum to law enforcement agencies and relevant institutions to trace and detect new cases and fast-track all existing cases targeting eventual repatriation of unlawfully acquired offshore assets.

SAPM Mirza Shahzad Akbar vehemently rebuffs the opposition narrative. "There is no illegality in the formation and ToRs of ARU," he told TTI. He said that the Supreme Court's majority decision had settled the matter and the opinion of the two dissenting judges had no legal consequence.

He reiterated that the ARU was a coordinating body and it was not against the opposition "The opposition has a feeling which is not a

fact. They should point out a specific case in which the ARU has targeted them".

Akbar said that courts were free in the country, all the appeals, decisions and bails were being granted by the courts and nothing was being done by the ARU against the opposition.

He maintained the NAB had recovered more than PKR 400 billion in the last two years compared with PKR 100 billion recovered over the last 10 years. "Likewise, the data unearthed by the International taxation unit of the FBR is commendable. These are the good things that ARU is doing to revive the institutions of Pakistan", said Mirza Shahzad Akbar.

He further maintains, "The role of the Asset Recovery Unit is coordination between the law enforcement agencies working for asset recovery. The Assets Recovery Unit does not recover anything itself – it just coordinates with other agencies because when you work in coordination it provides better results".

ARU has made partnership with the UK in 2018 on justice and accountability initiative under which the UK and Pakistan worked on a number of cases, said the SAPM.

The SAPM said that the Assets Recovery Unit had unearthed hidden properties worth PKR 318 billion. "The FBR has recovered foreign assets of PKR 37 billion. Likewise, the FIA has recovered properties worth PKR 6.1 billion. Cumulatively, NAB has made recoveries of PKR 900 billion during the last two years".

## Economy on the Upswing

*A broad-based recovery seems to be underway although inflation is likely to continue to inflict considerable pain on the common man.*



By **Khalique Ahmad**

After hitting the rock bottom last year under the devastating burden of the Covid-19 global pandemic, Pakistan's economy – buoyed by agricultural performance, large-scale manufacturing, and workers' remittances – appears to be staging a recovery.

Pakistan suffered an economic contraction of 0.4 percent last fiscal year as the worst health emergency in a century laid waste economies worldwide, throwing millions out of employment and plunging millions into poverty.

Based on this downturn, the government had initially set a modest growth target of 2.1 percent of GDP for the current fiscal year. However, economic indicators began to improve slowly but surely as various sectors of the economy started to adjust with the new realities of life.

This encouraged the State Bank of Pakistan to revise the growth projection to 2.5 percent of GDP by the second quarter of current year on the back of healthy agriculture performance except for cotton crop

and better industrial recovery supported by the construction and export sector.

At the conclusion of first quarter of the fiscal, the government also appeared confident to project economic recovery. "Prospects of economic growth are showing visible signs of improvement during Jul-Jan FY2021 which strengthen expectations about economic recovery", said the ministry of finance on the conclusion of first half of current fiscal.

The government claims credit for the uptick to the timely measures against the pandemic in terms of fiscal stimulus, easing mobility restrictions, timely arrangement of vaccination, together with an accommodative monetary policy that allowed economic activities to continue at this difficult time. Officials say a broad-based economic recovery is on its way and may accelerate in the coming months.

In its latest monetary policy statement, the SBP upgraded its growth forecast to 3 percent of GDP. This is despite the fact that almost all the international lending

agencies – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank – projected a growth rate of 1.5 percent of GDP or less.

In agriculture, the cotton output fell short of the target by over 3 million bales, necessitating import of at least 5 million bales. Pakistan's textile industry's consumption has varied between 12 and 16 million bales per annum over the past few years but domestic production this year is estimated at about 7.7 million bales, leaving a shortfall of at least 5 million bales.

Therefore, the government early this month allowed the import of cotton from Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics (CARs) through Torkham border to bridge the gap between supply and demand and to ensure availability of cotton to support textile exports. However, necessary arrangements with reference to Plant Quarantine Rules would have to be put in place to meet Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) requirements for overland import of cotton.

Better yields for other Kharif crops are

expected to mitigate the risk. Also, for Rabi season 2020-21, wheat crop production is expected to achieve production target as almost 99 percent target area has been sown. On the basis of better input availability and favorable weather forecast, the production of wheat is expected to meet its target.

Large Scale Manufacturing (LSM) was an area most exposed to external conditions as the activity was recovering from two consecutive crises. First, in 2019 the BOP crisis necessitated policy adjustments to curb unsustainable external deficits which depressed LSM. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic required measures to preserve peoples' health which caused industrial output to fall significantly, especially in March, April, and May 2020.

Yet LSM surpassed its pre-COVID level of production in January FY2021, witnessing a 9.1 percent growth on a YoY basis from -5.7 percent in January FY2020. Tractor production and sales rose by 52.9 percent and 52.6 percent during July-February 2020-21.

After a very strong month-on-month (MoM) increase in December 2020, partly due to seasonal effects, imports came back to the normal levels in January 2021, resulting in a MoM improvement in the trade balance. Although they remain supported by the ongoing economic recovery and further increases in international commodity prices, imports in March 2021 are expected to remain lower than or at roughly the level observed in January 2021.

On the other hand, exports are expected to soar on the back of incentives offered to export-oriented industries. Already, exports during July-February FY 2021 increased by 4.4 percent to USD 16.3 billion against USD 15.6 billion last year with textile sector exports increasing by 6.7 percent YoY.

As a consequence, in the baseline scenario, the trade balance is expected to show further improvement as compared to the two previous months. During Jul-Feb FY 2021, remittances rose to USD 18.7 billion compared to USD 15.1 billion last year, posting a growth of 24.1 percent. These strong inflows are expected to help further narrow down the trade deficit.

The resurgence of the COVID-19 infection placed considerable strain on the fiscal side of the economy during the first half of the current fiscal year. Despite significant challenges, the revenues side performed better on the back of improved tax collection both at the federal and provincial levels. This was an indication of growing economic activity even in the wake of challenges posed by the second wave of the pandemic.

With the economic activity accelerating, revenues are expected to improve further. On the other hand, the expenditure side is expected to remain under pressure due to COVID-related expenditures.



The government has extended tax amnesty till June 2021 and the fixed tax regime till December 2021. This supports special package for the construction sector announced by the prime minister last year to increase employment opportunities in the country in the wake of coronavirus outbreak.

The International Monetary Fund has also supported the package for economic revival. Some of the main incentives include an amnesty scheme for all new investments in the construction industry which means this will remain exempted from investigation from tax departments.

The Fixed Tax Scheme is based on a tax calculated per square yard or square foot of construction. If investment or construction is

for the Naya Pakistan Housing Scheme, 90 percent of the profit will be exempted from this tax. The government is also providing a PKR 33 billion subsidy for the Naya Pakistan Housing. Moreover, the construction industry has been exempted from withholding tax on payment for goods and services except for the payment to cement and steel supplier and manufacturers.

Inflation has remained a challenge. From 5.7 percent in February, the inflation measured by consumer price indicator has increased to 8.5 percent in February as electricity tariffs and wheat and food prices increased substantially. The trends indicate the upward trajectory of inflation will continue in the near future.

Tax revenues grew by 6 percent to PKR 2,915 billion during July-December 2021 from PKR 2,750 billion for the comparable period last year. The primary balance posted a surplus of PKR 416 billion in the first half of FY 2021 as compared with PKR 153 billion last year. Pakistan's total liquid foreign exchange reserves increased to USD 20 billion by the end of February 2021. The present reserves level provides the import cover of almost around 3 months.

In other good news, the KSE 100 Index crossed the 46,000 mark for the first time since April 2018; and the PKR gained strength against USD with the reduction in trade deficit and current account deficit.

*The writer is an Islamabad based journalist.*

# PM Should Kick Out the Deep Rooted Economic Problems to Kickstart the Economy

*With Shy Finance Minister, PM IK Should Be Economic Spokesperson of the Country Apart from Reviving Its Growth*

By Oroba Tasnim Siddiqui

As Pakistan's economy transits from one crisis to the other, The Truth International sat down with leading economist and expert Dr. Ashfaq Hasan Khan. Dr. Khan is currently serving as the Principal and Dean of the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at NUST and has also been part of PM Khan's economic advisory council amongst several other key government positions that he has held previously, the Economic Advisor in Ministry of Finance, Pakistan.

**In the current scenario, what do you think are the most pressing economic concerns of Pakistan?**

I believe Pakistan suffers from four major economic challenges. These include slowed real economic activity, higher budget deficit, balance of payment as well as debt crisis. There is also an additional minor challenge that I would term the current power sector issue or more specifically the circular debt. Going into greater detail, I feel that Pakistan's real economic activity has slowed down considerably in the past couple of years.

For a country like Pakistan where 1.2 million youngsters enter the job market annually, it needs to have approximately 6-7% growth per annum. However, with the current rate of growth, we are creating an endless pool of unemployed people. Just in the past 12 years, our economy has slowed by close to 3% per annum and in the past 2 years particularly, the average economic growth has been 0.75% which is exasperating to witness.

With slowed economic activity, naturally a rise in unemployment and poverty will be observed which continues to rise over the years. What is oft overlooked in mentioning is that Pakistan's living standards have remained stagnant around 1% since 2008-09 whilst inflation has remained extremely high. This places immense pressure on the low-income category of people. Similarly, if we are to glance around to other Asian developing nations, our fiscal deficit is far higher than theirs'.

Similarly, if we are to look at the exchange rate, there has been massive devaluation. A single rupee worth of devaluation means approximately 100 billion rupees additional public debt. With devaluation on the one hand and high interest rates on the other causing around 160 billion additional interest payment per 1% hike, the total expenditure continues to go up. In this government alone, interest rate was raised from 6% to 13%. When the Prime Minister exclaims that interest payment covers half the expenditure, he is right.

But who else is to blame if not the current government? Who devalued the currency? Who raised interest rates? It was the present government under the IMF program. What we must answer now is whether this program is in fact benefiting Pakistan or damaging it?



**Do you really believe that the IMF has failed to revive Pakistan's economy? Why does Pakistan continue to revert to the Fund if it truly has failed?**

In my humble opinion, it is truly hurting Pakistan. Not only has it slowed down economic activity but it has also raised poverty standards and drowned Pakistan in immense debt which is typical of the IMF. To add to that, we have the NFC award which I feel will never allow Pakistan to achieve financial stability. There are far too many manufacturing defects built into the NFC which need to be addressed, otherwise we will lurch from one crisis to the other.

Another great problem that Pakistan suffers from is the balance of payment crisis which is also why Pakistan was brought into the fold of the IMF. When this particular government came into power, they inherited a large current account deficit and Pakistan needed approximately \$30 billion. Why did we face this crisis, you may ask? This crisis peaked in 2017-18 and it was primarily due to an extraordinary growth in imports due to CPEC related products while a surge was seen in non-essential imports. On the other hand, our exports remained stagnant, which raised the trade gap. And the government felt there was no option but to resort to the IMF.

**Why do you think Pakistan has been unable to raise its level of exports in the past few years?**

This problem has persisted for years. The previous government withheld refunds and rebates of the exporters and with senseless taxation to meet IMF targets, the cost of business rose considerably. Additionally, the government raised electricity and gas prices leading to a lack of competitiveness in the international market.

Looking at Pakistan's exports, there are basically two ways they may increase. One is the price effect where you fundamentally export the

same quantity of goods but because of higher prices, the monetary value goes up. The other is the quantity effect through which the number of goods sold actually rises. As per empirical evidence, in the past two and a half years, our exports rose by \$380 million due to price effect whereas the quantity effect merely shows a rise of \$280 million. Meaning the net effect is only about \$100 million, which is neither because of government policies nor due to the efforts of Razaq Dawood (Federal Minister of Trade & Commerce).

Similarly, during Christmas and New Year's in Europe and North America, buyers placed orders for Indian textile but due to the COVID crisis in India, factories were closed so they were unable to meet those demands. As a result, since our industries were already open (due to low Covid), trade was diverted to Pakistani textile mills. But is this sustainable? Definitely not. Because once the factories open back up in India, our exports will fall drastically because we have failed to create trade in this arena.

**Another problem you mentioned was the debt crisis, could you elaborate upon that?**

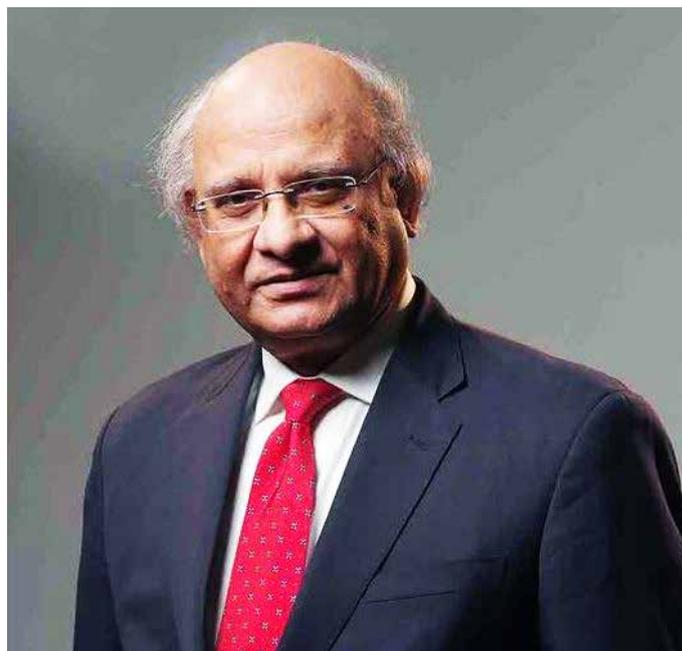
In Pakistan, the debt problem originates from persistence of large current account and budget deficits. As debt rises, so too does its payment. We have also been consistently borrowing to build our foreign exchange reserves and perhaps, our greatest problem lies in the fact that we borrow with pride and pleasures. Headlines in the newspapers are stamped such that our ministers and leadership flaunt it with pride. We believe it manifests the confidence of the international community or at least that is what we explain to the public. But the fact of the matter is that we have our priorities set all wrong which shows a very sad state of affairs.

Looking back in time, there are certain periods where debt accumulation was rampant. Dr. Ishrat Hussain terms the nineties the lost decade while I believe the decade from 2008 to 2018 was also a lost decade because we added a cumulative of \$73 billion in debt in just these two decades, meaning more than 3/4th of our total debt. What were the commonalities, you may ask? 'Baari Baari (turn by turn) regimes' and the IMF program. With the third party now also joining the same league, we are in for some more trouble.

**Would you attribute the failures on the economic fronts to COVID at all?**

The pandemic did affect the entire globe including Pakistan and approximately 80% of the world's economies faced negative growth. However, I believe Pakistan has actually benefited immensely from the coronavirus and that is a shocking fact, which has not been brought to Pakistan's notice. While our economy did contract, because of the suspension of the IMF program, all kinds of prices were lowered, including electricity and gas, which was previously always on the rise due to IMF targets.

Similarly, interest rate was lowered and it declined to 7% whereas no further devaluation of the currency took place. This attracted the private investors and they drew confidence as they felt Pakistan's economic policy was finally predictable. On the other hand, the trade diversion I previously talked about was also due to COVID. Because China and India were ravaged quite severely by the pandemic and Pakistan was not, we were able to pick up our exports. That is not all. Due to the oil crisis in the international



market, we were able to lower our import bill by \$5 billion and with debt relief amounting to \$2.5 billion from the G-20, we were able to secure a handsome relief package. However, now that we have resumed the IMF program, all the gains we were able to make are slowly dissipating which needs to be stopped.

**What is the way forward out of this economic mess that we have created?**

In my view, Pakistan has committed a massive blunder by going back to the IMF but for our credibility, we must revive and complete this program. However, the Pakistani authorities must ensure that no further devaluation or hike in interest rate should take place. In fact, I believe the State Bank should reduce the discount rate to 5% through two or three monetary announcements.

Electricity tariff has already been increased but we must understand that this is not the solution. It only strengthens the status quo. What we truly need is reforms in all sectors including power, agriculture, industry, tax, governance etc. If we resort to hiking up prices, it is merely a defeatist approach and one that will prove unsuccessful. We need to address the root cause and then fine tune the process. Our industry has gained some momentum, let this continue and grow strength.

There are several great things that the government has been up to but because of a failed communication strategy, the public is unaware. With a shy Hafeez Sheikh as minister, the public will not know. While Hammad Azhar is a good man, he is a barrister and not an economist. The government requires a spokesperson who is well versed in economy to be able to communicate to the public.

Moreover, the Prime Minister must engage regularly with the public because he is from the people and they have elected him. Unfortunately, he has confined himself to the Prime Minister house and his own residence in Bani Gala. But he must now address the public regularly. It is time that he goes about the country and galvanizes the people if he is to truly revive the fire that he once ignited.

# Reinvigorating Pakistan's National Security Discourse

*Pakistan open up its National Security discourse to allow participation by a wider swathe of the country's intelligentsia.*

By Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri

Pakistan's security discourse has always been the preserve of the high and mighty. It was traditionally a closed-door affair, with input restricted to intelligence sleuths and very few policymakers from the civilian side. In other words, the invisible establishment, as the top tier of the civil-military officialdom is referred to, called all the shots and took all the decisions.

But that seems to be changing for good in the 'New Pakistan' under the vision of Prime Minister Imran Khan. That was confidently evident as the National Security Division in collaboration with the National Security Policy Division hosted a two-day conference under the theme of 'Islamabad Security Dialogue' in the federal capital.

One single point that made this elite gathering of power-brokers make headlines across the world was the categorical utterance from Prime Minister Imran Khan and the Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa that Pakistan is prepared to bury the hatchet and willing to make peace with India. This was not merely a ceremonial or applause-driving statement; it came as an indication of policy approach from a position of strength.

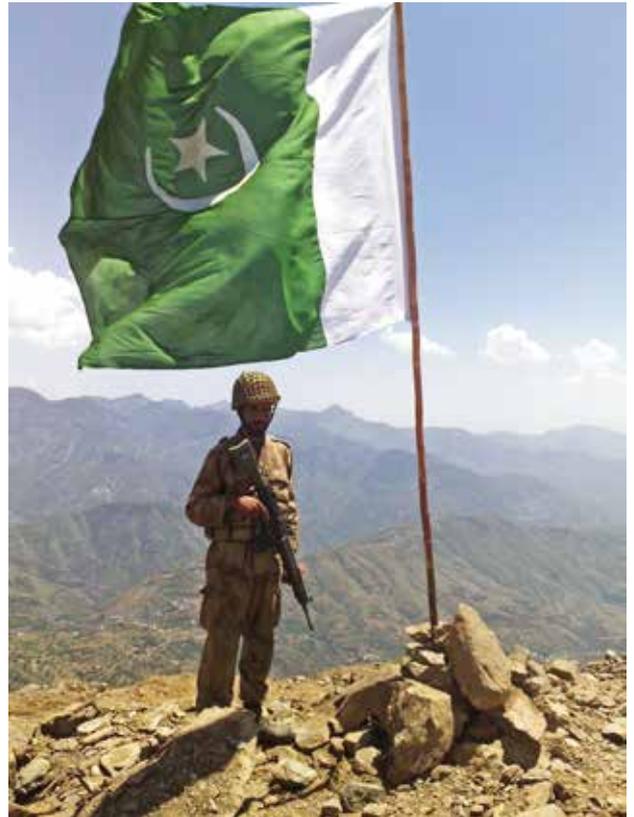
The army chief was candid, as he expressed Pakistan's willingness to "sit with the Indians across the table and start talking: Sir Creek, Siachen Glacier, Indus Water Treaty and other irritants." This statement came at a time when the recently agreed ceasefire across the LoC is holding.

The point that General Bajwa made, "Kashmir issue can wait till other disputes are amicably addressed" with the initiation of comprehensive dialogue between the two countries reflected the zenith of confidence and power. "It is our desire. Not under pressure," the army chief asserted. New Delhi has been squarely put in the dock, and its high time India reciprocates in all sincerity.

With the theme, 'Together for Ideas', Special Adviser to the Prime Minister on National Security, Dr Moeed Yusuf took a leap forward as he articulately brought to fore five major think tanks namely: ISSRA-NDU, CASS, IPRI, ISSI and IRS to foster a framework of 'future dialogue' on National Security among policy-makers, intelligentsia, academia, and the commoners.

This is a remarkable departure, and the first of its kind. It could be conveniently called the era of Renaissance for Pakistan's stability to seek a dialogue in pluralism for a multi-ethno-lingual populace of more than 220 million.

If graduated in years to come, this could turn the face of Pakistan and put it in the true light of solidarity and genuine



security, as the policy approach shall be backed and complemented by people from all walks of life. This is, indeed, the Pakistan of consensus that Jinnah and Iqbal wanted to build in all sincerity.

Let's take a paradoxical look at what makes this initiative so important! Prime Minister Imran Khan's earnest desire is to broaden the framework of National Security, and make it comprehensive to the core. He pinpointed many firsts in his approach, as he listed out climate change, food security, getting to know what the common men think on security, as well as the intelligentsia, and last but not the least seizing the opportunity to ensure peace and connectivity with all of its neighbours, especially India and Afghanistan.

This new psyche cannot be merely brushed aside as a political gimmick from a chief executive whose wafer-thin majority government hangs in balance. Rather, it pitches itself in a formidable policy approach as the government and the State apparatus are eager to solicit views and inputs from more than 100 universities and think tanks across the country. Such serious profiling of national security agenda is no stunt.

Prime Minister Imran Khan sounded sagacious as he pointed out that security is not only empowering the armed forces,

but the new paradigm of security is all about making the common man realize that the State and the Government is responsive, and is alive to their whims and aspirations. This is the notion of Peoples' Security and, indeed, serves as a shot in the arm for the military establishment to help make it fool-proof and further tighten the horizons of stability by eliminating dissent and parochialism from the national fiber. Had this thinking been in vague, Pakistan would never have been dismembered in 1971.

SAPM on National Security Dr Mooed Yusuf, who deserves full marks for harnessing this epoch-making consensus of broadening the agenda -- as he plays the role of an interlocutor between the civil and military echelons rightly said: "The deficiency is that Pakistan never had a strategic document vision in one place; and in one document." He went on to elaborate that the country never had a National Security Policy in 70 years. Courageous words, indeed, to be delivered from the podium and that too at a time when Pakistan is at the crossroads of its security dynamics.

What made him categorize the genuine consensus, which had been simmering underneath the common man's mentality for decades is, "why should we shy away from our narrative as long as it caters to Pakistan's national security." Thus, it is all about crafting a Pakistan-specific narrative, one which is indigenous, genuine and broad-based.

Perhaps, this is what the Prime Minister meant as he remarked, "it is not necessary that a person from Balochistan should have the same perspective and thinking on national security, as eulogized by one from Punjab." This is a leadership approach and endorses pluralism. It is the sine qua non for coexistence and survival in a

millennium that is characterized by hybrid warfare, 5G intrusion and penetration of non-state actors.

Three contours could be drawn from the new realization that has dawned at the Islamabad Security Dialogue.

First, the State of Pakistan is opening up and is confident enough to take along a multitude of views when it comes to drafting a new national security policy.

Two, Pakistan's defense is impregnable and is better placed to share horizons of connectivity with its traditional adversaries, too, in an attempt to further national interests in an era of alliances.

Third, change is indispensable, if Pakistan has to rise to new challenges of geo-economics and strategic maturity – and that too by encompassing the inherent aspirations of its true sovereigns.

To quote Army Chief General Bajwa, "Yesteryears' solutions cannot be applied to today's challenges." Incidentally, the Prime Minister is on the same page of thought as he curates an aura of concord among the divergent mosaic for a renewed consensus on a new national security doctrine.

This radical change in thinking at the highest echelons is a welcome development. It is, indeed, the realization of the simple thought that the status quo hasn't delivered. The need of the hour is an inclusive approach as a State and a Nation; and to rewrite National Security in endurance and resilience.

*Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri is a senior journalist and foreign policy analyst.*



## Progress is a Cacophony

*While Women's March has ruffled more than a few feathers, it ultimately promises to emancipate all genders and classes – including its detractors – from the oppressive rule of patriarchy.*



By Zainab Umer

Women's March has given rise to the ruckus of epic proportions over social media, with everybody shouting at the top of their voices and nobody prepared to listen. Inclusive and holistic by its very nature, the social media is a contested space; divided and divisive, polarized and polarizing as our society itself.

The ever-vigilant and self-important gatekeeper, the mainstream media presents a more muted picture, amplifying one set of voices and fading out others.

Notwithstanding the negative reviews, it often garners, social media is the saving grace of our times. It has played a vital role when it comes to advocating for women's rights, providing a platform for women to come forward and raise their voices.

According to a research conducted by the Qatar Computing Research Institute (QCRI), women in countries with larger gender inequities in offline life are more likely to have significant online presence. In Pakistan, for example, women on average have more

followers on Google+ (25 vs. 16) and Twitter (600 vs. 222) than their male counterparts.

While women of our time are still underrepresented in the media generally, social media levels the playfield, allowing a wider array of voices to be heard, with or without traditional power to be heard. However, many of the challenges the women's movement faces can be traced back to how various traditional media – broadcast, print and film – portray the movement and the issues it tries to address.

“The press is increasingly responsible for supplying the information and images through which we understand our lives”, says Amy Farrell, the Professor of American Studies and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Dickinson College. “For any social movement, the media play a crucial role in shaping public consciousness and public policy. Journalists’ standard framing devices of selection, exclusion, emphasis, and tone can profoundly affect cultural perceptions.”

Every year marches are organized in major cities of Pakistan to highlight issues facing women and condemning incidents of violence against them as well as gender discrimination, economic exploitation, and misogyny. According to the organizers of these marches, the coverage of these events by the mainstream media tends to be quite biased and sensationalized. Hence the Aurat March Lahore decision to issue media passes to encourage women and transgender reporters to cover these events.

Traditional media is a series of filters through which a certain piece of information is dragged through before it hits the market and shapes the public perception. Social media however is a much more raw form when it comes to the generation of information. It is much similar to a dinner table conversation where one speaks what one thinks. Moreover, social media also prevents our opinions to become diverse in their nature. Due to social media filters that only show you information that is parallel to your previous search history, promote a confirmation bias of our own opinions.

Aurat March Lahore fell victim to various forms of bullying. Shmyla Khan, who manages the cyber harassment helpline at Digital Rights Foundation, stated that 22 social media accounts had been reported to FIA in the wake of online threats faced by the organizers and participants of Aurat March. Threats fell under the categories of abusive comments, non-consensual use of information, bullying, and defamation. Numerous tweets by Aurat March protesters surfaced claiming that they were being harassed due to their participation in the March.

Alongside this, Women March activists took the internet by storm as they shared their posters and slogans on social media letting their presence be known by the

world proving that all women are united and standing strong to demand their rights. Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook flooded with slogans like “Mask ooper, ankhain neeche” and “Girls just wanna have fun walk home safe”.

Some women repurposed well-known lyrics to carry the message they wanted to convey. “Mundiya dupatta chad mera, consent bina chanta khayee ga” particularly settled in the hearts of young girls who found the struggle with consent a lifelong complication. All in all social media highlighted the very strong and raw emotions of women across the country. Women who despite certain obstacles still marched the streets of Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi, etc., to be heard and understood.

Conventional media on the other hand cuts out the emotions from the agenda along with any information that leans towards a bold topic. “There has been mass censorship over the years”, said Zebunnisa Burki, a woman journalist, in a recent interview. “It has become virtually impossible to give out a report to present whatever you want to say.”

Anchor-woman Asma Shirazi agrees: “There are a number of topics that TV and the print are not covering”. What is more, says she, “If you are watching a campaign on social media, you always need a counter-narrative to a narrative. People eventually turn to TV or papers to confirm what they see on social media.” Hence the lack of coverage on these matters causes discomfort within the society.

An article published recently by Dawn quotes Rizvan Saeed, a researcher, and development consultant who has been studying online activity against Aurat March, as saying: “In a

country where even men are constricted by rigid patriarchal structures, the notion of women exercising their autonomy and agency, not to ask but to demand their rights, creates a deep sense of discomfort.”

Adds author Reem Khurshid: “Little wonder then that many would rather dismiss Aurat March by imagining that such women are not speaking for themselves, but at the behest of a ‘foreign hand’”.

The Pakistani women’s movement is still at a very early stage. Women are just starting to get used to their newfound voice. Demanding such changes in society takes a lot of blood, sweat, and tears – and time. This fragile progress needs to be protected by the state and civil society so that these nascent processes can continue to grow and hopefully someday bloom, leading to a much safer society for all genders.



# Social Media and Democracy

*Social media platforms have lowered the threshold to ever wider information and networking – but does it help or harm democracy?*

By Mishaal Ashraf

In recent years, technological developments and the liberalization of media markets have fueled a fiery change in media and communication with profound implications for how people are informed, how they interact with each other, and how they participate in public life. With the advent of social media applications like Twitter and Facebook, there now seems to be an endless pool of information floating in the digital space.

Social media has revolutionized how we consume and spread opinions and news, but it is not all for the better. The core elements of democracy – trust, informed discourse, mutual consent, and citizen participation – are being tested by certain features and traits of social media.

The speed and spread of information exchange and innovative ways of communicating can bring democratic, economic, and social benefits, but they can also worsen political polarization and social conflict. There is no doubt social media is making our world more and more informed, more and more connected. But a more informed, more connected world does not automatically become a more democratic world. There are key challenges to overcome before that can happen if at all.

Disinformation and misinformation are the two kinds of content that are created and disseminated by both state and non-state actors on social media. For instance, populist leaders use these forums to communicate directly with their constituencies. In using these mediums, they sabotage established protocol, shut down dissent, marginalize minority voices, project soft power across borders, normalize hateful views, showcase false momentum for their views, or create the impression of tacit approval of their appeals to extremism.

Adding more to it, social media platforms have also become a favored medium for advertising. Reason being, that it widens the gap between the interests of the publishers and journalists and erodes traditional news organizations' revenues by using monetization models to drive businesses reliant on the capture and manipulation of data.

Furthermore, some social media platforms have user policies and technical features that enable unintended consequences, encouraging uncivil debate. This can lead members of frequently targeted groups to censor themselves or opt-out of participating altogether in the public discourse.

Social media apps were first created in the late 20th century and early 21st century with a promise of democratic revolution, but with the passage of time this voice seems to be eroding. The biggest example can be seen in the Arab Spring. Fueled largely by social media, the popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 were tagged "Twitter Resolutions".



The impacts of these developments are unparalleled. From facilitating political engagement beyond Election Day to foreign meddling in domestic affairs, to the uncontrolled spreading of misinformation that spurs political divergence, even to the decaying of established democratic systems.

A free and independent media plays a central role in a healthy society – providing access to information, holding power to account and offering platforms for debate and negotiation. The potential for media to support hate speech, inflame conflict and reduce political accountability has increased.

While social media has created positive opportunities to network and engage, it has also created a range of new problems, from bullying children and adults in the virtual space to abuse of privacy to stalking to identity theft to companies' unbridled surveillance of users.

States like Russia have gotten very good at tapping social media to ostracize domestic insurgents and undermine foreign democracies. Authoritarians benefit from circulating deceptive propaganda about their adversaries, sowing panic about minority groups, and undermining people's trust in the impartial media.

Nowadays, the new normal in our media is the manipulation of our media environment by both foreign and domestic actors. Warnings have been sounded by the World Economic Forum about "digital wildfires" – unreliable information going viral – as one of the biggest dangers facing governments and communities. It is important to heed such warnings, as the impact of social media on a state cannot be underestimated.

As more people flock to online platforms, racists, homophobes, misogynists, etc., have found niches to reinforce their radical views and contribute towards violence. Social media platforms also offer violent actors the chance to publicize their acts. Should limits be imposed on social media and compromise citizens' right to freedom? Sometimes, weeds are killed by plowing entire fields, but even then some weeds grow back.

# Legal Battle Brewing over Opening up of Many More Provincial Posts to Federal Officers

*Provincial civil service cadres believe the rule change is both unconstitutional and otherwise detrimental to provincial civil services.*



By Asif Malik

Provincial civil service associations are threatening to move court over a controversial rule change that opens up more than 800 new provincial positions to members of the federal bureaucracy.

As per the notification issued on 12 March 2021, the Establishment Division changed the Rule 17 of the Civil Service of Pakistan (Composition and Cadre) Rules, 1954. As a result, the share of federal bureaucrats in the provincial bureaucracy has increased from 299 seats to 1121.

Tariq Malik spokesman of The All Pakistan Provincial Civil Services Association (APPCSA) strongly rejected the amendment and vowed to vigorously pursue the pending petitions related to the encroachment of the federal bureaucracy upon the provincial bureaucrats in the high courts.

He said that the Rule 17 of the Civil Service of Pakistan (Composition and

Cadre) Rule, 1954 in the Peshawar High Court (PHC). He said that a similar petition was pending before the Islamabad High Court (IHC). We will also challenge the said notification before the appropriate forum, he said.

After the amendment, the Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS) formerly known as District Management Group (DMG) also keeps five posts of additional chief secretaries/members Board of Revenue in Balochistan, 21 in Punjab, 16 in Sindh and 11 in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) – besides retaining four posts of chief secretaries in four provinces.

As far as the posts of division commissioners and administrative secretaries are concerned, the federal took 30 seats in Balochistan, 85 in Punjab, 67 in Sindh and 47 in KP total 229 seats. Likewise, there are 25 deputy commissioners in Balochistan, 117 in Punjab, 59 in Sindh, and 67 in the KP – totaling 268 seats; and 26 additional deputy

commissioners in Balochistan, 155 in Punjab, 85 in Sindh, and 52 in KP – totaling 318 seats.

Likewise, a total of 247 seats of assistant commissioner handed over to the federal bureaucrats include 21 in Balochistan, 65 in Punjab, 98 in Sindh and 63 in KP.

According to the APPCSA spokesman, the federal government can take control of the entire province through its chief secretary and such a large number of administrative officers in respective provinces, which practically made the provincial governments and assemblies, irrelevant.

Naveed Shehzad Mirza deputy commissioner Hafizabad and the incumbent President of the Punjab Management Service Officers Association said that this amendment was made in violation of Article 240 of the constitution which deals with the bureaucracy.



Under clause (a) of the said Article, in the case of the services of the federation, posts in connection with the affairs of the federation and All-Pakistan Services, by or under Act of Parliament. Clause (b) on the other hand empowered the Provincial Assemblies to deal with the “posts in connection with the affairs of a province.”

When asked the reforms allowed absorption of the provincial officers in the federal bureaucracy, Mirza said the establishment division had offered this as “lollypop” to provincial bureaucrats.

He said that after absorption the provincial officer will be at the bottom of the seniority of federal bureaucracy. Moreover, the officer of Punjab could be posted to Balochistan under these arrangements, he said.

A joint declaration issued by Presidents of Management Services Officers Association of Punjab Naveed Shahzad Mirza, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Farhatullah Marwat and Balochistan Tariq Ramzan denounced the notification of the establishment division as illegal.

It stated that “the Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS/Ex CSP) has earmarked for themselves a huge number of provincial posts. By doing so, they have usurped the authority of the Provincial Assemblies vested in the Provincial Assemblies under

Article 240(b) of the Constitution. Moreover, by earmarking more Federal posts for themselves they have usurped the authority of the Parliament as enshrined in Article 240(a).”

Special assistant to the prime minister on establishment Mohammad Shehzad Arbab on the other hand is of the view that recent changes in cadre schedule of Pakistan Administrative Service (PAS) were made, keeping in view the unwieldy cadre strength of the service, and it is an attempt to rationalize the cadre strength in line with the available officers.

According to him, this has been done as part of the civil service reforms, and about 729 posts of PAS cadre have been opened up for promotions and induction of Provincial Management Service (PMS)/Provincial Civil Service (PCS) officers of all provinces.

In 1993, a post-sharing formula was decided between the Federation and the provinces and the percentages therein were applied to full cadre strength of the provinces. This application of percentages to total number of posts intimated by the provinces took the sanctioned seats of PAS to almost 1739 in the provinces. However, the actual number of officers available for posting to provinces was not sufficient and there was a persistent shortage of PAS officers in provinces.

The government is of the opinion that in order to overcome these shortages, an exercise was started in 2019 to identify the posts where PAS officers had not been posted historically but such posts were being used for calculation of cadre strength of PAS. After identification of such posts, in consultation with provinces, it was decided that these posts should be subtracted for the purpose of application of percentages decided under the 1993 formula.

After deduction of number of seats, where PAS officers were never posted, the post sharing formula was applied on the remaining seats which brought down the cadre strength of posts in Provinces to 1061 from 1739 in BS-17 to BS-20.

This rationalization of cadre strength will serve two purposes. On the one hand, it will reduce the shortages of PAS officers in provinces, while on the other hand, it has given the provinces leverage of 678 posts, deducted from PAS Cadre, which can be utilized for promotions of Provincial Services Officers.

Further, in addition to above 678 seats, the Federal Government has decided to induct 51 BS-19 officers of Provincial Management Services (PMS) and Provincial Civil Services (PCS) into Pakistan Administrative Service against the cadre strength of Service in Federal Secretariat.

# Political Voices on PDM



## Maulana Fazal Ur Rehman Tweet

We are talking about the respect and full enforcement of law, democracy & constitution. We are loyal to the country and we are with Pakistan and we want to amend its problems. No body should take himself above any criticism, with any mistake the criticism will come along from our side, we will keep highlighting the mistakes. Powerful of the country should not back a weak and incapable government.



## Maryam Nawaz Sharif

PDM is standing in front of you. We are also standing with each other and will cooperate in every way possible.



## Asad Umar

Internal differences within the opposition have emerged. Neither an ideology nor a national thought, only in pursuance of vested interests. They have achieved nothing but failure upon failures.



## Qamar Zaman Kaira

It is true that political parties do not need each other but it is wrong to signal that. We are united against the government. We were committed together in the bye elections, the senate elections and we hope to continue this coalition in the future as well.

# Western Colonialism in the Dock

*How the White Man's Burden crushed the non-European world, dealing death and destructions on a scale that laid waste whole continents.*

By Azmat Mumtaz Saqib  
(Part 1)

The European Renaissance (14th – 17th centuries) and the Age of Discovery and Exploration (15th – 17th centuries) strongly pointed in that direction. But the Ottomans' conquest of Constantinople (1453) and their subsequent denial of spice and silk trade routes to India decisively pushed the seafaring European nations towards the high seas.

God, glory, and gold propelled the nations of Europe to become the marauders of the high seas, filled by the spirit of morality and exploration. Rudyard Kipling called this "the White Man's Burden". He claimed that native people were incapable of governing themselves. They needed the white British colonialists to provide and maintain order.

The only way to liberate Africa, David Livingstone believed, was to introduce the three Cs: Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization. It was the Papal edict which sanctified the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) between Spain and Portugal, which divided their spheres of influence on the Globe for exploration. Subsequent Popes continued to encourage the colonialists to deliver the heathens to the Lord.

Experienced seaman and cartographer, Columbus left Italy like many other Genoese fortune hunters and reached the Iberian Peninsula to find a lucrative commission. Prince Enrique (Henry) of Portugal, like modern-day venture capitalists, invested in seafaring explorers.

Due to a massive increase in trade tariffs by Muslims (1000 times) both Portugal and Spain, the two leading seafaring nations, sent expeditions around West Africa to find a sea route to India for spice and silk trade, highly valued in Europe. Columbus unsuccessfully sought financiers at Lisbon, Castile, and London to go westward, proposing a shorter route directly to India. Nobody believed him.



During the last decade of the sixteenth century, the spirit of Reconquista was aflame in Spain. Soon after the final defeat of Muslims by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand in 1492, Columbus was granted the required support by the royal couple. If successful, Spain would monopolize the lucrative trade.

Columbus had a landfall in August 1492 near the Bahamas, greeted by the natives with support. He was sure he has reached India and met Indians. Although rewarded by the Royalty, many doubted his claim of reaching India, before his death in 1506 he journeyed three more times to the Americas.

In 1519, Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortez reached modern-day Mexico (then Aztec Empire), with 500 armed men and cavalry guns. The locals greeted and helped him. But he had other plans. He allied himself with tribes hostile to the King and marched towards the capital.

Aztec King Montezuma II extended the hand of friendship but on reaching the Capital, treacherously Cortez imprisoned the King and later killed him and declared himself the governor with the endorsement of the Spanish

Royalty. Through treachery and the spread of plague (an unknown disease for the natives that wiped out a large number of resisting natives), the Spanish overran the whole modern-day Mexico region with battles raging between 1519 and 1530.

The Mayan Civilization was spread over a vast mountainous region between modern-day Mexico and Guatemala. Using spears, arrows, and daggers to defend themselves against firearm and cavalry guns, the natives were at a heavy disadvantage. Yet the Mayan guerillas put up stiff resistance and kept a diminishing but independent state for almost 200 years till their last outpost was taken over in 1697.

The Inca civilization ruled the eastern side mainly in modern-day Peru and Chile regions. From 1532 to 1572, with superior arms and germ warfare (Typhus and Smallpox), Spaniards defeated the Incas, resulting in an estimated 7.7 million indigenous deaths.

Cacao, sugar, cotton, tobacco was the main cash crops of occupied Central America which were marketed abroad. Made from Cacao, the Aztec delicacy xocolatl (chocolate) became all the rage

in Continental Europe. Gold and silver were mined and shipped from Spanish-controlled South America.

At their peak, Spanish colonies' trade started from the Philippines to Mexico to Spain and back. During the sixteenth century, Spain held an equivalent of USD 1.5 trillion (1990 terms) in gold and silver received from New Spain. This area included the entire modern state of Mexico, Central America, Florida, California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Complex regional issues of the colonies were governed by a governing council in Lisbon while colonies were headed by Viceroy.

The Portuguese developed caravel, a small highly-maneuverable, and swift sailing ship that could sail windward and prove matchless in the 15th century. The first expeditions of the Portuguese were sent to the Western coastline of Africa. Prince Henry wanted to know the extent of Muslim occupation in Africa.

In 1498, Vasco De Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and reached India, the land of spices and fine cloths. As per the 1494 Treaty, Portugal's sphere of influence started from an imaginary vertical line 1100 nautical miles west of Lisbon to a vertical line passing through Indo-China. For almost a century Portugal was the only power in the sea trade between Lisbon and Indo-China via India. It had trading posts and fortresses on the coastlines of Africa, Hormuz, and India with Goa in India as its headquarter.

One of the greatest seafaring feats in European history occurred when Portuguese seaman Pedro Álvares Cabral while going to India drifted and accidentally made landfall on Brazil in 1500. Again, strangely the sailors brought smallpox, influenza, and measles resulting in wiping out a huge number of natives. Some died due to the violence of the Portuguese.

It is estimated that of the 2.5 million indigenous people living in the region of present-day Brazil, less than 10 percent survived till the 1600s. The colonists shipped out of Brazil wood, sugar, gold, diamonds, cotton, and tobacco. As a typical colonial power, Portugal's policy tended towards stripping Brazil of its

resources rather than developing the local economy.

The Portuguese dominated oceanic trade for almost a century across vast spaces between Atlantic and Indian oceans covering the ports of Europe, West Africa, Brazil, India, and Indo-China. They traded in Chinese silk, Indian cloth, Borneo's minerals, and Timorese sandalwood – among other things.

Portuguese Christian missionaries were able to spread their faith and culture in the colonies. Yet, their presence was more as traders and less as military occupiers.

Due to weak tolerance against European diseases, missionary conversion rights, and lack of religious motivation for work, the natives of Central and South America were not fit for forced labor plantation and mining jobs. So Portuguese and later Spaniards brought slaves from West Africa for the hard work.

half of the sixteenth century. They did not recognize the division of seas between the Iberian powers. England established its first colony in 1607 at Jamestown (in present-day Virginia) on the east coast of North America. The first French colony in North America was Port-Royal (in Nova Scotia). New Netherland was located on what is now the east coast of the United States, viz., New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Connecticut, with small outposts in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island.

From the European point of view, Columbus's discovery of America and Vasco De Gama's sea route discovery of India were the two most important events in the age of discovery and Renaissance which eventually ushered in global supremacy and domination of the West.

For the natives of the Americas, however, it proved to be a curse that winked out their



A triangular mercantile colonialism developed in the Atlantic Ocean. Manufactured goods and textiles were brought to Africa and the Americas from Europe. Slaves were brought from West Africa to the Americas for forced labor. Diamonds, gold, silver, sugar, tobacco, cacao, cotton, etc., were shipped from the Americas to Lisbon.

Britain, France, and Holland entered the competition of colonization in the latter

civilizations and decimated their population.

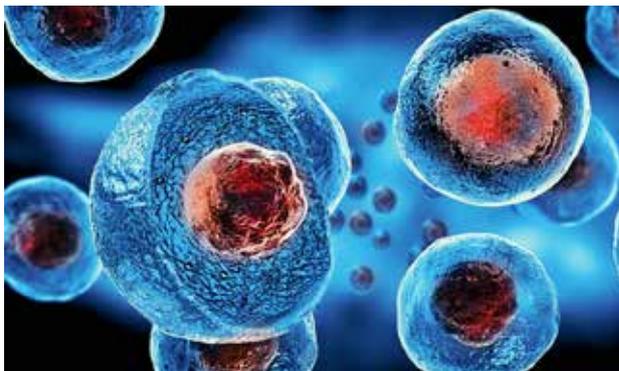
The White Man's Burden was thus a reality although not in the sense Kipling meant. The White Man's Burden was for the non-European world to bear – and it was so hefty it snuffed out whole civilizations, laid waste vast lands, and killed tens of millions of natives.

(To be continued)

# Revolutionary Stem Cell Therapies Arrive in Pakistan

*In Conversation with Dr Tauqir Ahmad, Founder, London Aesthetics and Rejuvenation Centre (LARC)*

By Haider Riffat



With a team of expert doctors, Dr Tauqir Ahmad has founded LARC in collaboration with Dr David L. Greene of R3 Stem Cell International to introduce in Pakistan cost-effective stem cell therapy treatments that can mitigate a number of diseases.

Stem cell therapy is among the new advances that are revolutionizing the medical science a newer still in Pakistan. LARC therefore should be seen as a major development.

The brain behind LARC, Dr Ahmad chats with Haider Rifaat of The Truth International (TTI) about this innovative venture.

**TTI: Can you give our readers some insight into stem cell therapy treatments and what do they accomplish?**

**DTA:** Stem cell therapy treatments are designed to work on the root cause of the problem. They may not necessarily cure the condition but would help in potential remission or slowing of progression. It is an ever-expanding field, and as our knowledge in the field increases, we will be able to provide more advanced treatments.

**TTI: Why did you decide to introduce stem cell therapy treatments in Pakistan at this point in your career?**

**DTA:** I decided to introduce stem cell therapy in Pakistan because the future of medicine is regenerative medicine, which is a new avenue for disease management. We want to bring the best of current treatments to Pakistanis.

**TTI: What makes your collaboration with R3 Stem Cell International revolutionary in Pakistan?**

**DTA:** The fact that it brings together two companies with a similar vision, which is to provide excellence in their fields. It has brought together both, US and UK-based companies motivated to providing the latest treatments. We pride ourselves on achieving excellence in results and patient management.

**TTI: What kind of conditions can stem cell therapy fully cure?**

**DTA:** I don't think stem cell therapy can fully cure any

conditions just now. It does help with controlling diseases and preventing the progression of diseases. This is still a rapidly developing field and there will be extensive, ongoing work regarding stem cell therapy. Hopefully, being attached with R3 International with a large research and development team, we will be at the forefront of any new developments as they occur.

**TTI: Cancer is one of the leading causes of death in Pakistan. As the leading stem cell therapy outlet, do you plan to collaborate with Dr Greene and local stakeholders, to produce stem cell treatment options for cancer?**

**DTA:** No, we will not be using stem cell procedures to work with cancer at the moment until there are further studies available that allow us to move in that direction.

**TTI: Are there any side effects to stem cell therapy treatments that our readers should know about?**

**DTA:** The worst possible side effect of stem cell therapy is no effect, so in that regard, it is a very safe treatment for patients to have done.

**TTI: How cost-effective are these procedures?**

**DTA:** They are very cost-effective because, in Pakistan, they are one-third of the price that is usually charged overseas.

**TTI: How can people reach out to you and your team for one-on-one sessions?**

**DTA:** People can reach out to us via the numbers available on our website as well as all our social media platforms that we operate through live chat.



# Why is Captain Babar Azam Upset Ahead of African Safari Tour?

*What does the tiff between the young skipper and the selectors over the squad named for African Safari mean?*



By Ali Abdullah

With the two-nation African Safari tour just around the corner, skipper Babar Azam is not happy about the squad named by the selectors – and he is not taking it lying down either.

The Pakistan captain for all three formats of cricket says he was allowed no opportunity to have a say while choosing the players.

According to an extremely reliable source, Babar has said that he is disappointed with the selection that has come out based on four-five PSL matches. With the T20 World Cup approaching, the captain believes that players should be tried consistently rather than dropping them from the squad after two or three matches.

He says that there should be a combo of juniors and seniors in the team rather than an entire inexperienced squad. Babar Azam is of the view that there should be proper opportunities for the players and their performance should be judged before eliminating them without a single trial game.

He added that PCB should learn from the past mistakes that cost selecting Naseem Shah in the same scenario. A player is initially productive does not mean he will be showing consistency forever.

Azam is against the six selections made and wanted Haris Sohail to be in the ODI squad. Besides, he wanted for spinner Yasir Shah in the test squad rather than a few of the players who have been involved.

The relationship between Babar and PCB does appear to be wobbly as he demands a justified captaincy role rather than having no opinion or right to choose players of his will. He

believes that he should be given authority in such critical decision-making.

Babar Azam also said that selecting players from T20 leagues for Test teams will not do any good to the players as it will ruin their careers. Babar Azam gave an example of Naseem Shah as he did not have much first-class experience but he was capped for the test team. Shahnawaz Dhani does not have first-class experience. This is not to discount his talent, but the experience is essential for international cricket.

Azam questions Imad Wasim's exclusion from the squad as well.

An all-rounder who can be in the team for power hitting, Wasim can also be a useful bowler throughout the innings. Considering Pakistan has to play the T20 World Cup, such experiments should not be done at this time, thinks Azam. They should prepare the final team for the world cup.

This is not the first time the PCB officials have disdained a captain like this at a crucial juncture. Sarfraz Ahmed who captained the side from 2017 to 2019 met similar treatment.

With him at the helm, Pakistan became the number one team in T20 International cricket. One of his major wins was downing arch-rivals India in the finale of the 2017 Champions Trophy. Later Sarfraz Ahmed was sacked by the PCB as captain although he is still part of the squad as a substitute wicketkeeper.

Is something going on between captain Babar Azam and PCB? Is this the officials' way of paving the way for his ouster or are they "just putting him in his place"? The rumor mill is in overdrive but let's keep our fingers crossed as Babar Azam and PCB are on the same page.

## Eight Teams, Two Legs, Zero Margin for Error

*As the epic quest for the European football crown enters the final stretch, Zidane's Los Blancos are down but are they out?*

The UEFA Champions League quarter-final draw has fans on the edge of their seats and is causing quite the ruckus on social media already in March with European football's fiercest clashes set to take place in April.

With Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain, Liverpool, Chelsea and Real Madrid competing against each other to win the prestigious trophy, this draw will probably be a very crucial moment in this intense season of European football.

After the defeat that the Paris Saint-Germain faced at the hands of Bayern Munich in last year's champions league final, they will definitely be ready to take their revenge this time, especially since Bayern Munich have not shown their best this season. Kylian Mbappe stunned Barcelona in the round of 16 and will be intent on making his mark on this game.

Manchester City have drawn Borussia Dortmund in the quarter final draw. According to reports, Pep Guardiola and Manchester city are very keen on recruiting Erling Haaland in the Premier League. The Norwegian striker has played exceptionally for Borussia Dortmund this season and is unlikely to hold back against one of his potential destinations next season.

The Chelsea fans on social media were absolutely delighted by the Blue's quarter final draw. However, they should not be too quick to celebrate considering FC Porto have shed light on their ability to unexpectedly succeed despite all odds in their performances against Juventus.

Regardless of the difficult time that the teams have faced this season, both Real Madrid and Liverpool have played some intriguing games in the past and are now set to compete against one another. Real Madrid is arguably the better team at the moment. The game will also see Mohamed Salah face Sergio Ramos for the first time since the latter's infamous tackle in the UEFA Champions League final in 2018.



Even though Real Madrid have made their way into the UEFA champions league quarter finals, the Los Blancos are not the favourites to win the tournament this year. According to Marca, the La Liga giants have been named the sixth favourite by the bookmakers to win the tournament this season.



Real Madrid are the only La Liga side left in the tournament that now has three teams from the Premier League, two from the Bundesliga and one from the Primera Liga. According to the bookmakers, only the FC Porto and Borussia Dortmund have lesser chances of winning than the Spanish side.

Manchester City, Bayern Munich and Paris Saint-Germain are considered the favourites to lift the trophy. Liverpool and Chelsea are also placed ahead of Los Blancos. Real Madrid were eliminated from the Champions League in the Round of 16 by Manchester City last season. Since Los Blancos failed to strengthen their squad over the summer, their chances of winning seem very slight.

Eden Hazard, currently tending to his muscle injury, has only been able to play three out of the eight games of Real Madrid. Even if the Belgian player regains his strength, it's unlikely that their chances of winning will increase.

Real Madrid were drawn in a tough group in the Champions League this season alongside Inter Milan, Borussia Monchengladbach, and Shakhtar Donetsk. However, the La Liga giants still managed to make it to the knockout stages of the competition. Zinedine Zidane's wards won three of their six games in the group stages while losing twice, but they managed to top the group with ten points.

In the knockout stages, Los Blancos won the away leg against Atalanta 1-0 and then secured a 3-1 victory at the Santiago Bernabeu to win the tie 4-1 on aggregate. However, bookmakers are only offering a share of €11 per bet for Real Madrid winning the Champions League. It's on the Zidane to surprise us and prove the critics wrong.

The quarter-final ties are set to be played across two legs, the first on 6-7 April and the second on 13-14 April. Venues for the ties will be confirmed in the upcoming days. However, due to the coronavirus pandemic, some teams might have to play at neutral venues.

By Ali Abdullah

# Theatres Struggle to Hold Out Until Show Time

*Laid waste by the pandemic even as it struggled to regain its feet, can Pakistan's movie exhibition industry hope to stage a comeback any time soon?*



By Hasan Kazami

More than 10,000 jobs and billions of rupees in investment are on the line as Pakistan's latter-day movie exhibition industry – hit hard by the shutdowns caused by the Covid-19 global pandemic – strives to keep its nose above the surface. The prospects for a turnaround are diminishing every day with no clear roadmap to a return to normal business.

Like the rest of the world, Pakistan also imposed lockdown from the first half of 2020 as a result of which cinemas all over the country were completely closed down and still are. A few theatres opened on a trial basis last October but were soon shut down again as the second wave of the pandemic hit. This has increased the frustration of those belonging to the industry.

The onset of the pandemic caught the Pakistani movie industry in the early stages of revival after a near-total collapse in the final decades of the last century. The decline peaked in the 90s with theatres closing down one after the other until there were only a few left at the turn of the millennium.

During 2014, as part of efforts to revive the cinema industry, new theatre houses started to pop up. When the pandemic hit, there were a total 160 screens active in the country.

## On the Line are Thousands of Jobs

Manzar Javed, who used to work in one of Karachi's multiplexes has been jobless for the last eight months. He told The

Truth International (TTI) that he remained on job and got his monthly salary even after lockdown till Eid Ul Azha last year, but after that the administration regretted saying they would contact him again when cinemas open.

About 300 employees from the cinema also lost their jobs with him. "We used to earn only PKR 20,000 to 25,000 a month – which left little scope for saving. Now we are making both ends meet by selling out items from our home."

## The Trials of Bringing It Back

The pandemic has scuttled the government's ambitious plans for the revival of the movie industry.

Nadeem Mandwiwalla, Chief Executive Officer, Mandwiwalla Entertainment Cinemas emphasized the need to view cinema industry from a global perspective. "At the moment, cinemas are closed all over the world and how to reopen them and start operations again is the priority concern."

Mandwiwalla elaborated: "A cinema needs a new movie every week. Bollywood is banned in Pakistan that is why we are looking towards Hollywood. In other words, the Pakistani cinema industry should be able to restore its operations as soon as Hollywood starts releasing its new films again."

He said that at the speed at which the vaccination process is continued in western countries, most of their population

would be immunized in the next few months, which will ultimately control the virus and get life back to normal.

### No New Releases Mean No Shows

Mirza Saad Baig, General Manager Cinepax Distribution, was of the view that cinema could only be opened if we had something new to show.

"It is useless to reopen the cinemas in situations when nothing is being released. Last year, when the spread of COVID was at its lowest, the government allowed reopening cinemas with 50 percent capacity. That did not suit many cinema owners because in doing so they were unable to cover their expenditures."

He further said that even the producers who have their projects ready would not think of releasing their films on 50 percent theatre capacity.

### Time is Running Out

Mirza Saad Baig further said that the whole last year remained dull because of corona and this year too, there is very little chance of business resuming. "If this situation persists till the eid and beyond, the future of the industry is bleak and people related to it would have to look elsewhere for employment."

Baig expressed his hope from the new film policy by the federal government in which a few positive amendments or steps are expected.

### A Film Policy From federal Government

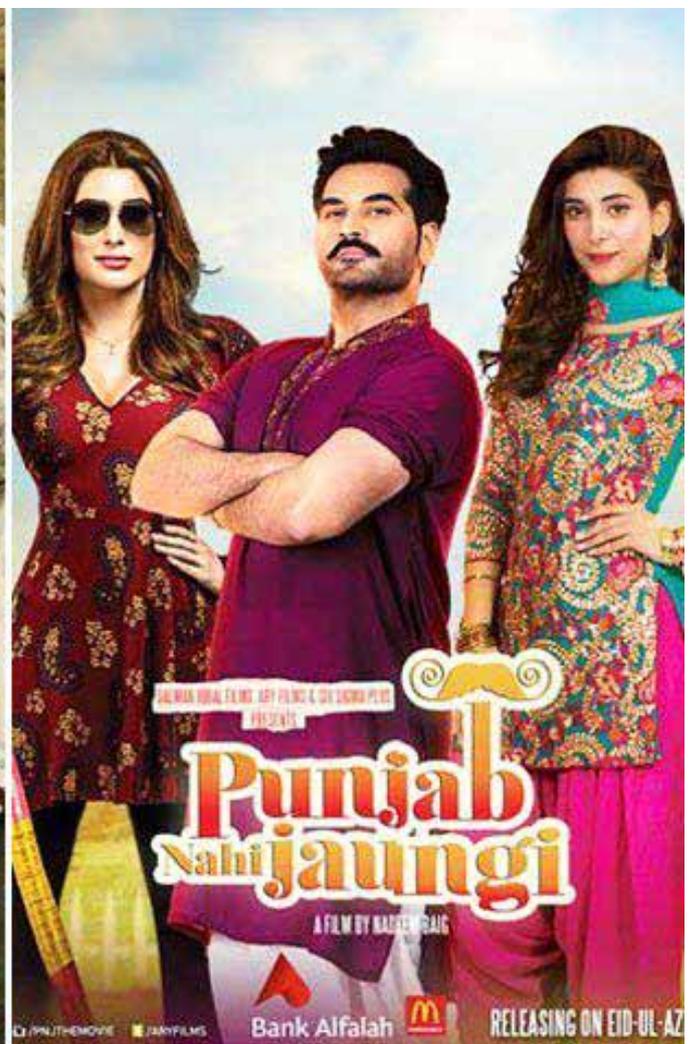
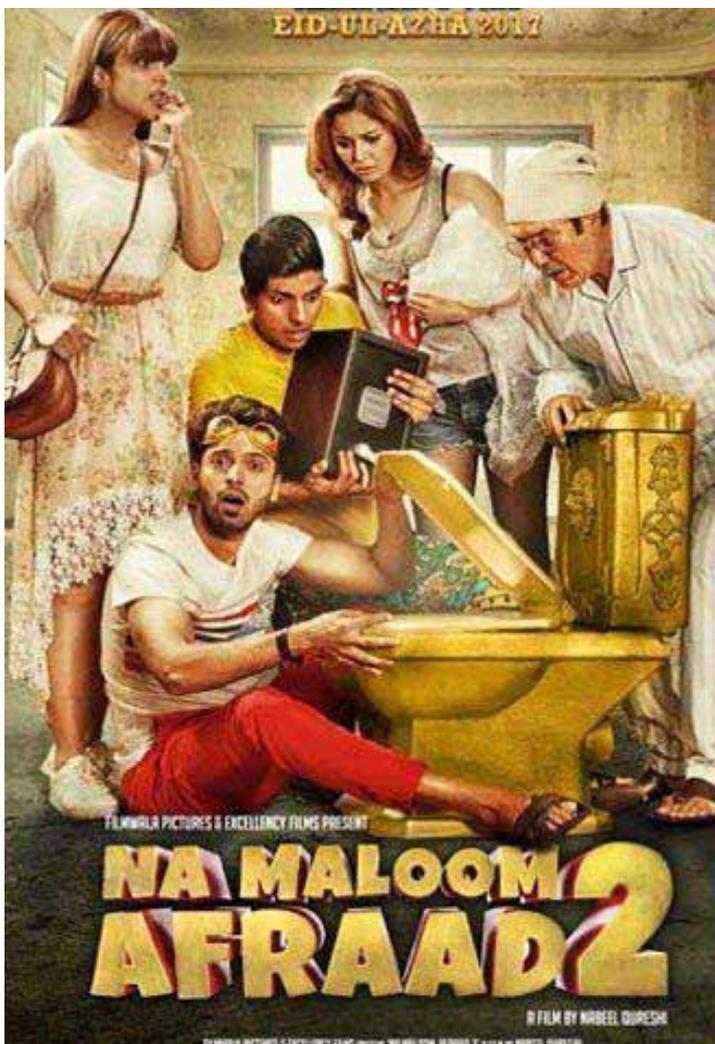
Federal Government of Pakistan has announced to release a comprehensive policy for the betterment of the film and cinema industry. The government sought inputs from many industry veterans to help formulate the policy.

Shibli Faraz, Federal Minister for Information, has also confirmed that the basic structure of the policy is ready and after completing the details, it would be announced officially soon.

"We want this policy to be comprehensive and applicable. That is why we are working on its sections very carefully," the minister said.

In the times when there is a ban on indoor dining at the restaurants and weddings are limited to open-air ceremonies, to show a film in confined halls of cinema is almost impossible.

Experts say there are news of reopening cinemas and releasing news films coming from neighboring India, there is a hope that the Pakistani cinema may also, be able to resume business.



# Meet the Sultan of Morning Shows

*Abdullah Sultan believes in using his platform for progressive causes including the women's movement.*

By Palwasha Khattak

It is important that we use our platform to raise a voice against intolerance and patriarchal control, says Abdullah Sultan, who anchors Pakistan's pioneering morning show GEO Pakistan along with cohost Huma Amir Shah.

Sultan started his career in 2008 as a newscaster with the Lahore-based City 42. He soon moved on to hosting his own shows and, after a few iterations, landed at GEO News with GEO Pakistan. The Truth International (TTI) had a one-on-one with him for our readers. The following is an abridged transcript of the conversation.

**TTI: As a morning show host, what motivates you to wake up every morning and do a two-hour show?**

**AS:** I consider myself one of those lucky ones who are doing what they always wanted to do in their professional life and that is why I love my job. Also the constant positive feedback I receive from our viewers on different social media platforms is like the cherry on top. I have been doing this show for years now and with our hard work and consistency, we are number one. All these things keep me quite motivated.

Since I wake up early morning for my show every day so now it has become one of my good habits. Now I am a morning person and if someday I skip waking up early, I feel I have wasted a significant productive part of my day. Besides other economic factors, it is our job so all this positive energy around helps keep our spirit high.

**TTI: When you graduated, which field did you want to join first?**

**AS:** I wanted to join TV from the beginning and I knew this since my school days even though the concept of private television channels did not exist back then. I graduated in 2010 and I knew my destination was a TV channel. Even before graduating with my degree of bachelors in Business Administration, I started working in the Lahore based TV Channel City42.



My mother wanted me to get a professional degree which is why I opted for Business Administration. On the other hand, I knew since childhood that I would end up being on TV because I had always been into public speaking. I would be on stage at every event in school, college, and university.

**TTI: What would you be if you were not a television host?**

**AS:** If I wasn't a TV show host, I would either be a teacher or a professor. In the end, it had to be something related to public speaking.

**TTI: Every channel has its own morning show. How do you feel about the competition and how do you manage to stand out?**

**AS:** I would like to rephrase your question: Every channel has its GEO Pakistan. When any news channel starts to plan their

morning show, they plan to start another GEO Pakistan. We were the pioneers and we are the leaders. Also, I believe that everyone is doing great in their own capacity. Although I find little opportunity to watch other shows because all morning shows on TV channels go on air at the same time but we too, at times, get to learn a lot from them. I want to wish everyone the best of luck for doing their shows. Personally, I believe that the duo on Hum TV is doing a great job and their show has a very presentable screen.

**TTI: What are the major topics that you enjoy the most including in your program?**

**AS:** I like including social issues the most and particularly those issues that are difficult to discuss on such platforms. For example, issues arising from the patriarchal systems we live in – like women's rights,

Aurat March, and child abuse. Most often when we talk about these issues, we have to face nasty criticism and ugly backlash from a specific segment of society. But it is highly important to talk about these issues because our conversations will set things up for the next generations to talk about. Therefore, if we are not outspoken about it today and refrain from calling a spade a spade, our next generations will have no awareness and no conscientious position on these grievous issues.

I also prefer to raise a voice on issues like intolerance and polarization in our society and how our opinions are getting more and more extreme. For example, if a few women march streets with some placards, there are people who feel entitled to slinging all kinds of muck at them. If you take a careful look, some groups have a deliberate strategy of smearing people and groups in a way they would be open to lynching without a legal trial. These practices should never be normalized.

**TTI: Who's the most talkative and who gets irritated first, you or Huma Shah?**

**AS:** Although I guess that Huma is more talkative but it also depends on certain situations because I sometimes find myself talking way more than her. But there is a balance between us. Also, I guess Huma get easily irritated more than I do.

**TTI: You guys must have received many offers from other channels, any specific reason for sticking with GEO?**

**AS:** I think the best response to this question would be, "GEO is GEO". That's why other offers don't matter much but also because GEO is like a family which is why we have been here for a very long time. Except for that, let's see what the future holds for us.

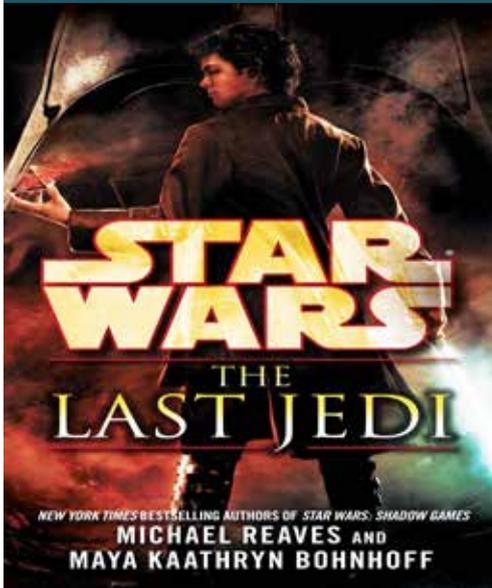
**TTI: What are your future plans, any clothing brand or YouTube channel in the pipeline?**

**AS:** Our future plans do not include a clothing line but instead, we have started our business of interior design named Home Edit by Huma Abdullah. Currently, we are working on that. A few exciting projects are in the pipeline and we have done a few projects as well, but for now, it's Home Edit by Huma Abdullah.



## Star Wars: The last Jedi

**Author:** Micheal Koggi  
**Reviewed by:** Alizay Ashraf  
**ISBN:** 978-0-6035-7513-6  
**Pages:** 202  
**Publisher:** Egmont



From the ashes of the Empire has arisen another threat to the galaxy's freedom: the ruthless First Order. Fortunately, new heroes have emerged to take up arms—and perhaps lay down their lives—for the cause. Rey, the orphan strong in the Force; Finn, the ex-Stormtrooper who stands against his former masters; and Poe Dameron, the fearless X-wing pilot, have been drawn together to fight side-by-side with General Leia Organa and the Resistance. But the First Order's Supreme Leader Snoke and his merciless enforcer Kylo Ren are adversaries with superior numbers and devastating firepower at their command. Against this enemy, the champions of light may finally be facing their extinction. Their only hope rests with a lost legend: Jedi Master Luke Skywalker.

The most welcome of these motives come from the Supreme Leader Snoke's personal thoughts about events as they unfolded. His greatest reveals come in

one of the chapters, where we learn some things about his origins, but more about his motives. More or less, he's been controlling everything since Return of the Jedi and is a perfect replacement for the manipulative Palpatine.

The blossoming relationship between Rose and Finn is also given much more background, with Finn being almost goofy at times. The Canto Bight sequence also felt like it sat better in the story, possibly because the book doesn't spend too long on the Fathier escape sequence and ensuing chase.

Overall, the book is a solid effort, clearly the product of a labor of love for the author, a long-time Star Wars fan, and frequent contributor to the canon. The book is very interesting and makes you want to read more and more. I would recommend this book for children above the age of 8.

## The Underground

Now Rachel, the other Animorphs and Ax, have a new weapon against the Yeerks which sounds good but is not because it means another trip to the Yeerk pool. And the possibility of running into Visser Three. And of not being able to get back up to the surface. The Animorphs and Ax have taken chances before and been very lucky. But this time their luck might run out.

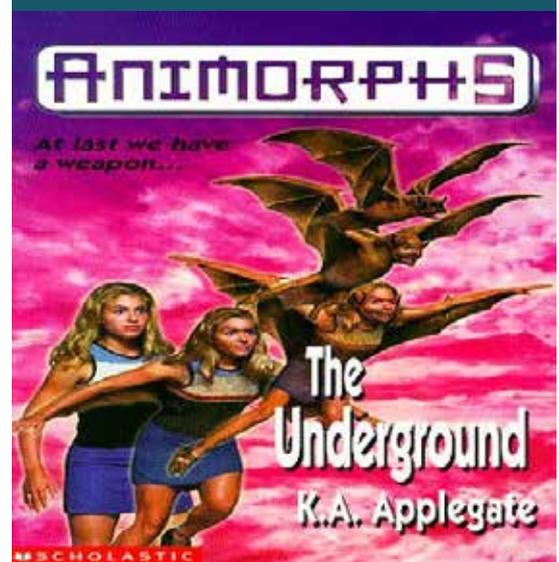
I feel that this book would be a whole lot better regarded if the device that this book revolves around was something other than oatmeal. Given how seriously the rest of the book treats itself, I would imagine that if the drug the book utilizes was something less absolutely out there, the fanbase as a whole would consider it one of the defining points of how dark the Animorphs series can be because this book genuinely gets dark at points.

It's one of the books that — if you look past the fact that 'it's oatmeal' shows the lows that the Animorphs have to go to for the sake of winning their war.

I love seeing this maturation of the Animorphs as a team. Visser Three is a formidable threat, but he can be beaten. He can be outsmarted and outmaneuvered—and that's exactly what they do here. Amidst the seriousness of The Underground's main plot, we see a glimmer of hope for the future.

This book is kind of dark and serious but it gets really interesting at a point. I really enjoyed reading it however, there were some parts in the book that might be too disturbing for some of the readers. I would recommend this book for children above the age of 10.

**Author:** K.A Applegate  
**Reviewed by:** Alizay Ashraf  
**ISBN:** 0-590-49436-8  
**Pages:** 169  
**Publisher:** Scholastic



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