

# The Truth International

1<sup>st</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> M a y 2 0 2 1

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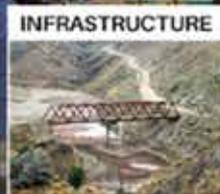
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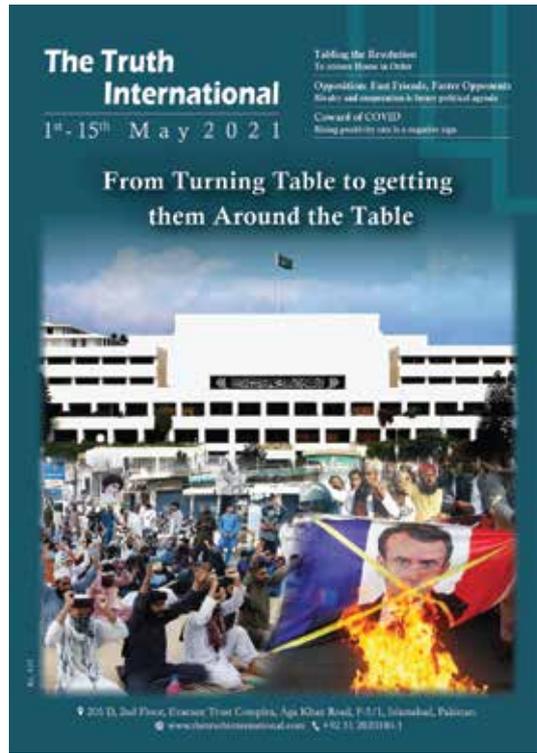
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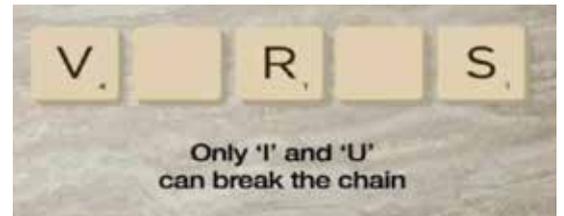
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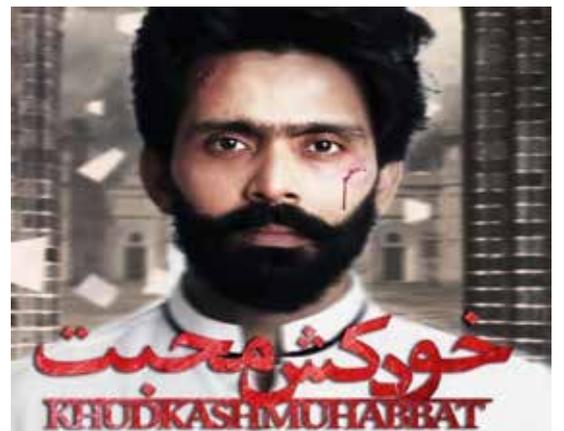
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# War within

By M. Ziauddin



As per the government's agreement with the Tahreek-i-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) a resolution seeking the expulsion of the French ambassador was tabled the other day in the National Assembly. But as per government's strategy to avoid any damaging repercussions of turning it into an officially mandated call the NA was prorogued without a debate on the resolution. Still, the sentiments of the House were conveyed to France rather unofficially by having both the opposition and the treasury benches jointly besiege the speaker's rostrum in a rare show of unity, demanding the eviction of the French ambassador from Pakistan for blasphemy.

This is all very clever. But in the ultimate analysis, the approach only added to the already escalating nuisance value of the TLP, a banned political entity which had emerged as the third largest party in Punjab following the 2018 elections. Had the state acted firmly against the group when in October 2017 it had occupied the Faizabad bridge protesting against what had appeared to be a self-perceived watering down of the blasphemy law, the country would have been spared the frequent disruptions of civic life with the government as frequently forced to accept unlawful demands of the TLP. The Faizabad bridge occupation before it was vacated also saw the state itself forcing the government of the day to sign a 15-point agreement with the LTP which was virtually a surrender document attested by a uniformed officer who distributed money among the arrested TLP workers on being released. This, as expected, further embold-

ened the TLP leadership to continue punching much above its weight.

When Asia Bibi, Pakistani Christian who was charged with blasphemy was acquitted and then flown out of the country, the TLP went rampaging all over the country bringing it to a standstill. Quelling the riot, the police carried out an operation and arrested the Chief of TLP, Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi along with some 50 members of his party on 23 November 2018 following which protests spread out and the situation deteriorated further forcing the government to once again sign an appeasement accord with the rioters.

On 12 April 2021, Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi's son, Hafiz Saad Hussain Rizvi was arrested by police while he was coming back from a funeral prayer prior to a planned protest by the party on 20th April, 2021. The planned protest's motive was to pressure the Government of Pakistan to deport the French ambassador in Pakistan over the controversy of some blasphemous cartoons.

State institutions seem to nurse sympathy for all sorts of religious groups, except when they start challenging the state's turf itself. The TLP has been testing the limits of the state institutions for some time and the state adopted its conventional approach of appeasement whenever TLP supporters came out onto the streets. But unfortunately, the religious groups acquire undue legitimacy and excessive political power whenever the state enters into an agreement with them. Such commitments give the impression that the state institutions are not capable of chalking out a long-term strategy to deal with such groups or perhaps such militant entities are created, funded and protected by the establishment itself to be used as its armor when challenged by mainstream political parties.

TLP was founded by Khadim Hussain Rizvi on 1 August 2015 and banned on 15 April 2021 by the Government of Pakistan under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 Rule 11. The party rose to fame, after the hanging of Mumtaz Qadri, a convicted murderer, which the TLP states was unjustified.

Most of the party's members belong to the Bareilvi school of Islamic thought.

When you claim to be a Muslim, it is a given that you believe, to the core of your heart and mind, in the finality and honour of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). So, with most of the Pakistanis claiming to be Muslims, no matter to which political party one belonged to, one is considered as good a Muslim as the next one. In such a socio-political milieu emergence of religio-political parties subscribing to various schools of Islamic thought can only end up dividing the nation into various factions, each one fighting for its supremacy, in the process pushing the nation into a war of attrition with itself.

Extremism is the biggest enemy of the nation, which is not only weakening the already deteriorating governance system in the country but also undermining national dignity and Pakistan's global image.

There are at least 247 religious groups and parties operating in the country that have more or less similar motives and agendas. The inception phases of many of these groups have also been similar; they largely grew from either the Khatm-i-Nabuwat movements of the 1960s and 1970s or sectarian groups' campaigns of the early 1980s, which deepened the sectarian divide in society.

Since the establishment of Pakistan, each decade has seen different religious groups that have hedged or amplified religious-ideological sensitivities around various issues. But the finality and honour of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) have remained the most important themes for sensitising the people. In recent history, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) had led violent protests in 1989 over the issue of Salman Rushdie's blasphemous novel. From 2005 to 2012, it was the banned Jamaatud Dawa which mobilised and brought together religious organisations under the banner of the Tehreek-i-Tahaffuz-i-Hurmat-i-Rasool over the issue of the blasphemous images of the Prophet published in different European countries.

# The TLP is banned, long live the TLP

By Hammad Ghaznavi

Despite the government's claim to the contrary, the Tehrik e Labaik Pakistan crisis is far from over. The government asserts that it has fulfilled its agreement obligation with the TLP by presenting the French ambassador eviction resolution in parliament, and that's it. This is yet another unenviable handling of an extremely sensitive issue that is bound to return, sooner than later, to haunt, not only the government but the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The TLP came into existence in the wake of the hanging of the murderer of Governor Salman Taseer, Mumtaz Qadri, and his mammoth funeral in 2016. That funeral convinced many of the potential of the TLP; hence, its entry in politics. The 2017 Faizabad dharna against the PML-N government and the distribution of cash by the state representatives among the TLP workers represented a picture that didn't need a caption. The TLP, many argued, was sponsored by the powers that be to dent the PML-N votebank, particularly in Punjab, and this end was successfully achieved when in 2018 elections the TLP affected the results of at least 14 National Assembly seats in favour of PTI candidates. Soon the TLP felt powerful enough to turn against its makers, leading to Khadim Hussain Rizvi's arrest last year.

The genesis of present crisis can be traced back to the TLP's protest call last year against the blasphemous content produced in France. Here begins a tale of government's head-in-the-sad response.

The government-TLP agreement on 20th November 2020 said in three months the government would banish the France ambassador in Islamabad, boycott the French products, and the TLP would cancel its long march to Islamabad. The parliament was not consulted as for the agreement. Three months passed and the government didn't do a thing in this regard. The deadline was then extended by two months, till 20th April. The parliament was still a stranger to the agreement.



To say the least, it was a mindless agreement, just to buy time, without realizing that time has a habit of passing by. Come April 12th and the government arrested new TLP chief Saad Rizvi, crowned after his father Khadim Rizvi's demise. There ensued the nationwide TLP protests that turned violent, leaving four policemen dead and many injured. The next day government banned the LTP under the Terrorism act, and a stern action was taken against the TLP protestors leading to an unconfirmed number of deaths. Many rounds of government-TLP talks followed, leading to a resolution presented through a private member in parliament. The resolution merely said the parliament may discuss the 'French ambassador eviction issue.'

The government claimed the agreement was restricted to just one point – tabling of the resolution concerned in parliament. Really? If it was that simple why didn't the government do it earlier? A timely resolution could have saved human lives, a dozen or more, besides saving public and private property. The writ of the government wouldn't have become a joke. Did the agreement say that a private member would table the resolution? Then why all the fuss? Who were the signatories of the agreement, the TLP and the private member? Now

the government doesn't seem keen at all even to discuss the issue in parliament, claiming that the agreement is fulfilled.

This entire episode has seriously damaged the morale of the police. The force was told not to be rash the first two days that led to the deaths of four policemen and a couple of hundred injured. The policemen were literally thrown before the angry mob and the outcome was easy to predict. Then the agreement with the TLP was reached without taking the Police into confidence, at a time when the Police was convinced it was at the edge of wrapping up a successful operation.

The TLP is bound to strike back. Their slogan has a mass appeal, even the Prime Minister said that he totally agreed with the TLP aims and only their methods differed. TLP supporters seemed convinced they were treated ruthlessly in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for raising the Namoos e Risalat slogan. It's an extremely sensitive issue, and its mishandling is certain to have repercussions. The political space for the extremist parties seems expanding. It's an alarming situation. Banning such outfits has not yielded results in the past as these elements assume new names and move on.

Once the genie is out of the bottle even its masters cannot put it back.

# The Mullah's Marauders

*The violent conflict between the extremist TLP and the Pakistani state unwound itself as mysteriously as it had spiralled to engulf the country, leaving in its wake an uncertainty pregnant with untold fear.*



By Mansoor Malik

Hopefully, the standoff is over. The government has released many of the activists of Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) arrested for violent activities, and the Sunni extremist group has called off its many sit-ins in several cities around the nation.

The resolution the government tabled in the National Assembly was a face-saver for both the parties. The TLP can now say they got what they were demanding, while the government can say it did not give in to the TLP's demand to expel the French ambassador.

In its wake, the episode left lingering fears of further violence and a series of questions: How could the government allow the situation to deteriorate like that in the first place? What emboldened the rabid cohorts of TLP to the extent that they thought nothing of murdering police personnel and holding them hostage? Has the tiff been resolved for good or has it gone underground for the moment, to surface again at some point in the future?

The opposition is also chiding the government for not taking it into confidence in

such a sensitive matter, which is close to the hearts of every Muslim at home and abroad.

The matter harks back to the publication of blasphemous caricatures in a French magazine last September that hurt the religious sentiments of Muslims across the world. The Muslim world again vociferously reacted when French President Emmanuel Macron supported the displaying of caricatures saying that he would always defend the freedom to speak, write, think, and draw in his country.

In a sharp rebuke in October, Prime Minister Imran Khan accused Macron of attacking Islam. He tweeted that this was a time when President Macron could have used a healing touch and denied space to extremists rather than creating further polarisation and marginalisation that inevitably nurture extremism.

The TLP assumed the stewardship of the matter, agitating across the nation and Prime Minister Khan's government ended up signing a written agreement with the TLP on 16 November 2020, agreeing on a set of measures that it could not really implement.

The government bought further time by signing another deal on 16 February this year. The prime minister also committed in a televised interview to put up the TLP's demands regarding the French Ambassador's expulsion from Pakistan in the Parliament for debate.

As it happened, the government went back on its commitments with the TLP. However, it could neither assess the consequent threat nor was it able to control the TLP once its reaction started to unfold in the form of street protests across the country. In particular, the government was totally unprepared for the severe TLP backlash after its chief Saad Hussain Rizvi was taken into custody by the law enforcement agencies on 13 April.

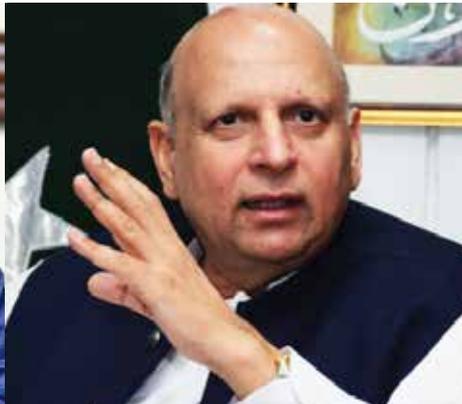
The protesters unleashed violence against law enforcement agencies' personnel and blocked highways and main roads leaving the traffic snarled and people along with families, children stranded. Many ambulances and trucks carrying oxygen cylinders were also stuck in the blocked traffic.

The clashes left many including four policemen dead, over 800 injured, 40 police

vehicles burnt, and private property worth tens of millions of rupees damaged.

As soon as the government realized that the situation was slipping out of control and its writ stood challenged, it immediately slapped ban on the TLP.

During the week-long demonstrations and clashes, the Punjab government detained over 2,200 TLP activists under the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) Ordinance of 1960, while many others were booked under the Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), involving charges of murder and other heinous violence across the province. The government also placed 214 TLP activists on the Fourth Schedule – a power delegated to the Punjab government by the federal government.



The government eventually realized that the activists' arrests and proscribing the TLP were not helping it control the situation that was slipping out of hand, it did an about-face and started peace negotiations with the TLP.

The PTI government then emerged as a winner as it reached an agreement with the TLP's Central Shura and the latter announced to call off the protests stating that the resolution about expulsion of the French Ambassador had been presented in the National Assembly. However, no written agreement was available from either side.

The TLP leaders, who were not in a meeting with the government team, said they were also expecting that ban on the organization to be lifted and its chief Saad Rizvi and all detained activists to be released.

Following the agreement, the Punjab government released some 700 TLP

activists detained under MPO in six divisions in Punjab, while the release of over 1,500 activists detained in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Gujranwala divisions was still under consideration.

Sources say the Punjab government is not ready to immediately release the TLP activists instrumental in inciting others to join the clashes and block roads, and those who attacked violently on personnel of law enforcement agencies as well as public and private properties.

The government also made it clear that all activists booked under different charges would need to follow the due course of law to secure bails from the courts of law. Similarly, the 214 TLP activists placed on the Fourth Schedule would be required to

move the court for the removal of their names from the Fourth Schedule as well as their release within a month.

"These individuals have one month to move the court and then the Punjab government has powers to take a final decision in a time span of three months," a source in the Punjab government said and added that this meant that these 214 activists would remain behind the bars for a while.

Though the prime minister had made it clear in his address to the nation that expulsion of the French Ambassador would not serve any purpose but Pakistan might face problems in its relations with the European Union leading to slashing of businesses and increasing joblessness in Pakistan. The government still allowed tabling a resolution in the National Assembly through a private member to debate expulsion of the French Ambassador.

Defending the emerging situation, interior

minister Sheikh Rashid said it was agreed with the TLP that the state would decide on matters related to international relations. "No individual, group, or party can exert pressure illegally on the matter of Pakistan's relations with the comity of nations," he added.

While Punjab law minister Basharat Raja is terming the government's agreement a breakthrough and a good omen for the country, the TLP leaders and activists are voicing their concerns over the denial of TLP chief Saad Rizvi and other party leaders and activists' release from jails across the province.

Some observers believed that the situation may start turning rough yet again in the days to come as the TLP had already

developed its critical mass in the country to threaten the writ of the state at any given time. They also say the opposition parties and some anti-state forces had also become active to cash in on the turmoil prevailing in the country. The state agencies have reported that some 200,000 people from India were spreading disinformation through social media in Pakistan.

Law minister Basharat Raja, however, said both government and the TLP would ensure implementation of the decisions taken. Slamming the opposition, the law minister said it was reprehensible for the opposition to exploit politics in such a tough situation in the country. "Normalization of government's relations with the TLP has thwarted the anti-national agenda of some politicians," he said and urged the opposition to support the government to ensure national security.

# The Rise of TLP as an Electoral Force to Reckon With

*Contrary to the general perception, Imran Khan's PTI suffered more in Punjab than did Nawaz Sharif's PML-N because of the TLP's emergence as the third electoral force in the 2018 general election.*



By Abdul Sattar Khan

It can be said with certainty that in the electoral history of Pakistan, no political party has seen a swifter rise than the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) to become the third force in the political equation.

In closely contested constituencies in particular, a potent enough third force can often determine the outcome of an election, virtually holding the casting vote.

Contrary to general perception that the TLP ate away in the last elections at the vote bank of PMLN, which had earned the wrath of powerful establishment, the upstart party did more damage to Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

The TLP got more votes than the margin of victory between the winning and runner up candidates in 177 constituencies of the country in the last general elections of 2018. Of these 177 constituencies, 49 were National Assembly constituencies, 97 Punjab Assembly, 24 Sindh Assembly, six KP Assembly, and only one was Balochistan Assembly constituency.

Here is a look at the parties winning and losing because of TLP getting more votes than margin of victory between the winning and runner up candidates.

Scrutiny of electoral data reveals that the Chaudhary brothers' Pakistan Muslim League - Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) was only political party to benefit from TLP becom-

ing the third largest political force. It won eight seats without losing even a single seat in constituencies where TLP vote bank was larger than the margin of victory between the winner and runner up.

Parties	Won	Lost	Total
PTI	75	79	154
PML-N	61	53	114
IND	11	17	28
PPP	9	12	21
MQM	11	11	22
PML	8	0	8
PAR	0	2	2
MMA	1	1	2
GDA	1	1	2
BNP	0	1	1

The PML-Q won all its National Assembly seats and half of its Punjab assembly seats from constituencies where TLP emerged as a decisive factor. If some party is winning in one such constituency the same political party is losing it in another constituency for the same reason.

Study of party-wise vote bank reveals that TLP is standing at number six with 2,231,697 votes after MMA's 2,541,520. It is amazing how within a short period of time, the TLP has come from nowhere to upset the established order.

Official data about election history in Pakistan does not offer a single instance other than TLP which emerged as the third electoral force in such a short time span, becoming a decisive factor in those constituencies where it emerged enjoying more

votes than the margin of victory. The advantage gone in favour of one party in one constituency but has gone against the same party in another constituency.

There were a few other new-born religious-political parties, which many believed would damage the targeted parties at the ballot, but they completely failed to meet those expectation of the powers that be.

Among such parties are Allah-o-Akbar Tehreek (AAT), which got only 171,000 votes, Tehreek-e-Labaik Islam (TLI) mustering 57,000 votes and Pakistan Rahe Haq Party (PRHP) was only able to garner 55,000 in the 2018 elections despite winning one seat.

Out of total 49 such constituencies in National Assembly, 35 belong to Punjab, 11 in Sindh, 2 in KP, and Balochistan having only one such constituency.

But amazingly, out of total 11 National Assembly constituencies in Sindh, there is not a single such constituency in interior Sindh as all the 11 such constituencies are situated in two mega cities of Sindh – 9 in Karachi and 2 in Hyderabad.

It is difficult to say if this was because of TLP have a strong voter base in Karachi or because of the political vacuum left in the wake of the rather unceremonious demise of the MWM, the only party of Karachi.

Out of nine such constituencies in Karachi, five have thrown their weight behind PTI

while MQM was still able to hold on to three seats. One seat went to the PPP.

The table below shows the 49 constituencies where TLP emerged as third political force winning more votes than the margin of victory between the winning and runner up.

Political parties	Won	Lost
PTI	23	17
PML-N	12	15
MQM	5	3
PML	3	0
PPP	2	2
IND	3	4
GDA	1	0
MMA	1	1

## Punjab

Punjab has always played a decisive role in giving any political party a majority in the Parliament. Also, Punjab proved particularly fertile ground for TLP to emerge as a dark horse, although it won no seats.

Although the general perception is that TLP was contesting election to steal the votes of PML-N, the hard data tells another story.

Out of total 97 constituencies in Punjab where TLP emerged as the third force getting more votes than the margin of victory between the winning and losing candidates, PTI emerged victories in 37, but lost 48 seats as compared to PML-N which won 47 such seats and lost 34 such seats in Punjab.

The table below presents the data on the 97 Punjab Assembly constituencies where TLP emerged as the third political force winning more votes than the margin of victory.

Political Parties	Won	Lost
PTI	37	48
PML-N	47	34
IND	8	10
PML	5	0
PPP	0	4
PAR	0	1

At-least to the extent of Punjab TLP has, apparently without having any pre-planned strategy, created more of a dent in PTI' selectoral strength as compared to PML-N's.

City wise analysis reveals that the TLP has captured more votes than the winning

margin in all the major cities of Punjab. Almost all the big cities of the province have witnessed such trend of TLP becoming the third largest party attaining a potential to influence the outcome of the elections either way.

In this connection Lahore emerged as the leading city in Punjab where 12 constituencies have witnessed the trend of the TLP becoming the third electoral power. Out of these 12 constituencies, nine went to the PML-N and three to the PTI.

Besides offering four constituencies in National Assembly, Faisalabad attained the number two position having eleven such constituencies, seven of which went to the PML-N and four to the PTI.

Gujranwala is only city which solidly stood behind PML-N as all six such constituencies, the PML-N candidates emerged victorious. Gujranwala is also enjoying a unique position as not a single such constituency is located in Gujranwala on account of National Assembly seat while having six such seats in the Provincial assembly constituencies.

Muzaffargarh having six such constituencies yielded two each to the PML-N, PTI and Independents. Gujarat has five such constituencies, the PTI winning three and the PML-N two. In Bahawalpur, with five such constituencies, two each went to the PML-N and PTI and one to the PML-Q.

Finally, on its way to becoming third political electoral force in 97 constituencies of Punjab, TLP had itself become the runner up in one constituency of Hafizabad.

## Sindh

Amazingly, after its nine National Assembly constituencies becoming TLP hotspots, Karachi re-emerged with greater force in Sindh provincial assembly constituencies as well. Out of the total 24 such constituencies where TLP emerged third political force, 21 are situated in Karachi.

Political Parties	Won	Lost
PTI	11	10
PPP	5	4
MQM	6	8
MMA	1	0
GDA	1	0

The table below show the 24 Sindh Assembly constituencies where TLP emerged as the third political force winning more votes than the margin of victory.

The PTI emerged the single largest party by winning 11 of the 21 constituencies where the TLP emerged as the third force followed by the erstwhile political kings of the city, the MQM with six seats. PPP got three while one went to the MMA.

The strength of TLP in Karachi can be gauged from the fact that besides becoming the third force in nine National Assembly seats in Karachi and 21 provincial assembly seats in Karachi, it also emerged as the runner ups in four constituencies of Karachi, losing three constituencies to the MQM and one to the PTI.

## Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa

The only interesting aspect of KP is that the TLP assumed its role of third political force to disallow the historically grassroots-political force, the ANP, to win two seats, though two independent candidates also lost.

The table below shows the six KP Assembly constituencies where the TLP emerged as the third political force winning more votes than the margin of victory.

Political Parties	Won	Lost
PTI	4	1
PPP	1	1
PML-N	1	0
ANP	0	2
IND	0	2

## Balochistan

Balochistan it seems is not ready to welcome another religious-political party as it allowed TLP in only one constituency to become the third political force behind two towering political personalities.

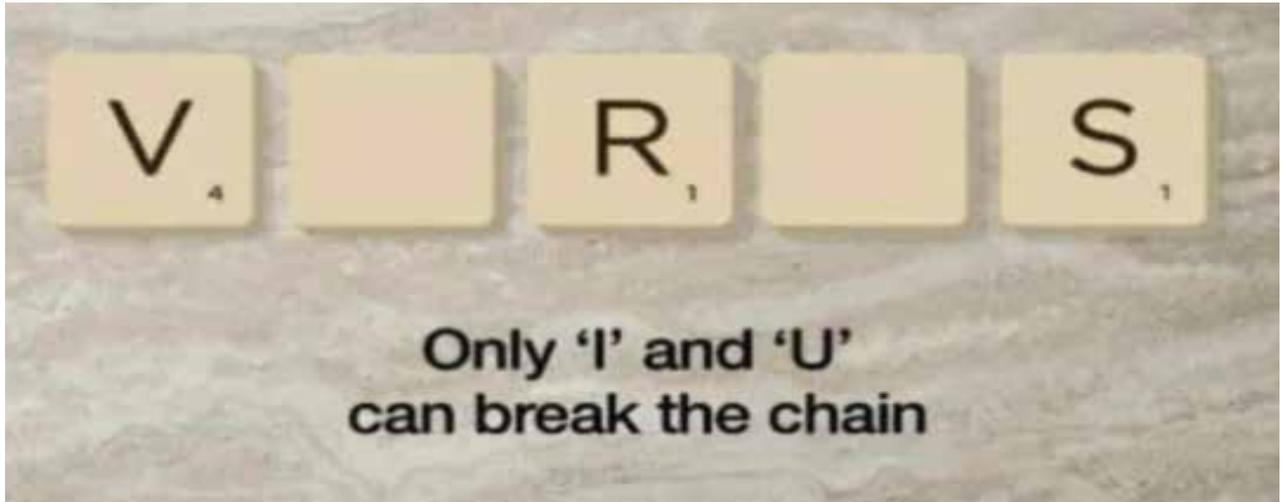
The table below shows the only Balochistan Assembly constituency where the TLP secured more votes than the margin of victory in the 2018 general election.

Political Parties	Won	Lost
PML-N	1	0
MMA	0	1



# No Room for Complacency as Third Wave Continues to Surge

*How Pakistan fares with the third wave of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic is down to how much caution the citizenry exercises.*



By Noor Aftab

With the myth of South Asian immunity against the Novel Coronavirus put to rest in the neighbouring India where the third wave of the disease is wreaking untold havoc, caution and prevention are still Pakistanis' best friends as the government scrambles to scale up inoculation in the next few months.

Pakistan is experiencing an upswing in coronavirus cases and hospitals and medical facilities are running out of beds, ventilators, and other vital equipment. The shortage of medical staff has increased considerably as large numbers of doctors and nurses contracted the infection.

Prime Minister Imran Khan after chairing a meeting of National Coordination Committee (NCC) on 23 April decided against implementing a full lockdown across the country but urged the public to follow Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to prevent spread of the coronavirus disease.

Smart lockdown and mini lockdowns are serving the purpose to some extent but it remains to be seen how Pakistan weathers the third wave of the pandemic set off at least in part by deadlier and more virulent variants of the bug.

## The situation

The overall positivity ratio that was 3.3 percent in the end of February has increased more than three times in last four weeks and now it hovers around 11 percent.

According to the data compiled by National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), the highest positivity ratio is in Peshawar (22.3 percent), followed by Gujranwala (19.7 percent), Lahore (18.6 percent), Muzaffarabad (18.6 percent), Faisalabad (16.9 percent), Rawalpindi (15.2 percent), Swat (14.3 percent), Multan (12.2 percent), Mirpur (10.6 percent),

Islamabad (9.1 percent), Hyderabad (9 percent) and Abbottabad (8.5 percent).

The disease trajectory has already entered a critical phase, and only proactivity can slow the spread considerably in coming weeks. Given the alarming surge in coronavirus cases, the government is devising a plan to implement 'broader lockdowns', with stringent enforcement protocols where no mobility will be allowed except in emergencies.

The implementation of SOPs still leaves a lot to be desired, at least in part because of the government's refusal to use strict enforcement measures. On the upside, the majority of restaurants and food outlets in major cities are now following the SOPs and serving their patrons in line with the NCOC guidelines.

## Healthcare crisis

With the rise in infections, Pakistan has seen a spike in hospitalization of patients. Majority of the hospitals are not able to maintain adequate staffing levels or offer staff adequate support. The shortage of specialized providers, needed to meet the anticipated patient surge, has raised concerns that staff exposure to the virus may exacerbate staffing shortages and put further pressure on the already overworked staff.

Hospital administrators are also expressing concern that fear and uncertainty are taking an emotional toll on staff, both professionally and personally. Hospitals are facing a surge of patients that require special beds and rooms to treat and contain infection. The shortage of ventilators in the hospitals is also a major issue that needs to be addressed.

## The most dangerous wave yet

The comparison of first, second and third wave of coronavirus pandemic in Pakistan shows a different picture with

regard to level of threat, number of cases, infection rate and daily death rate.

The first wave reached its peak in 53 days on 22 April 2020. The second wave started on 3 October 2020 and peaked in 65 days. The third wave started on 22 February 2021 and on the 50th day showed no signs of peaking yet though the highest number of patients infected in a single day in the third wave has already touched 5,329.

The third wave's scale of rise is much steeper than the previous two pandemic waves.

## Past & Present

According to a report jointly prepared by a team of seven Pakistan based medical experts, when Covid-19 started hitting major cities in Pakistan, the National Institute of Health (NIH), activated Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) on 22 January 2020.

The NIH issued advisories, national guidelines, and SOPs regarding COVID-19 detection, transmission and prevention. It shared information on trainings on surveillance; rapid response teams; effective case management; Infection Prevention and Control (IPC); and sample collection, and transportation and the coordination mechanism with other stakeholders.

The government established a National Coordination Committee on 13 March 2020 to prevent spread of the disease. It cancelled Pakistan Day Parade, closed the border with Iran and Afghanistan and shut down all educational institutions in the country.

It also ordered to close down marriage halls and shrines and sealed all land borders with neighboring countries. The International flights were suspended for two weeks on 21 March and screening of domestic air travelers was made mandatory at all the airports. The government imposed lockdown on 24 March until 7 April and troops were deployed nationwide and available medical resources were put in place to curtail outbreak.

Initially, Pakistan lacked diagnostic facilities and samples of suspected cases were sent to foreign laboratories. Indigenous Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing capacity has since been developed and COVID-19 test centers have been set up in all provinces.

NCOC has conceived a well-structured IT based national framework for credible health resource mapping. A Resource Management System (RMS) has been rolled out and, presently, spans about 4,000 Covid/non-Covid hospitals across the country. It also powers public utility app Pak Negheban that provides its users location based guidance to nearest Covid treating hospitals.

The government is also pursuing a strategy that involves imposition of micro smart lockdowns in areas showing multiple positive cases; closure of commercial markets and amusement parks by 20:00 pm; ban on indoor services in restaurants and community centers; presence of only 50 percent staff in workplaces; cancellation of all sports and cultural events; and closing down of schools for a specific period.

## Herd immunity: truth or fantasy

In the early days of the pandemic, former US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson publicly mooted

herd immunity and failed to orchestrate adequate response early stage of the pandemic. Now the United States and the United Kingdom like rest of the world are racing against time to vaccinate their people as early as possible.

Although the discussion of herd immunity has since stopped in the United States and the United Kingdom, some local experts in Pakistan continue to believe the people can achieve herd immunity if the government accelerates its efforts to combat the coronavirus disease.

According to them, the people under the age of 18 will not require a vaccine. If we take out all Pakistanis under the age of 18 from the total population 220 million, that leaves roughly 100 million people. Now they believe that if 70 percent of them are either infected with the virus or vaccinated, the Pakistani nation would have acquired herd immunity.

## Vaccination

Nearly 1.5 million people, including health professionals and people above 50 years old have so far been inoculated. China is still primary source for vaccines but the government has planned to acquire 34 million doses of these vaccines by June this year. Pakistan will get 14.6 million doses of AstraZeneca through the global vaccine alliance GAVI.

The NCOC says it has sufficient funds to purchase vaccine for coronavirus but demand and supply gap was creating problems. The government has engaged the stakeholders at the highest level to address this issue at the earliest.

Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umer who is heading NCOC maintained that the government has set a target to get 20 million Pakistanis vaccinated in next two to three months that would cover most of the people over the age of 50. The people from all age groups are likely to be allowed to register for vaccination after Eid-ul-Fitr. Presently, the available vaccines include Sinopharm, CanSino, Sputnik-V and AstraZeneca.

Many vaccine developers are reportedly working on booster shots and new inoculations that could preserve a high level of efficacy against the variants. But there is still much to be learned about the ability of immune system to combat the coronavirus.

## Hoping against hope

The Sindh government is still on high alert due to the looming danger but its early vigilance seems to be yielding dividends as the overall positivity ratio in the province is less than four percent. Analysts say if other provinces also respond promptly and come up with pragmatic policies, they can also flatten the curve of coronavirus spread.

Reports suggest that our behavior either starves the virus or feeds it, as there is no in between. There is no immediate end in sight and the timeline depends on some crucial variables. Experience with influenza in the world have clearly shown that the incidence of infection is very likely to subside all of a sudden at some point.

Experts cite the examples of two devastating influenza pandemics—the 1957 Asian flu, which killed up to 4 million people and the 1968 Hong Kong flu, which killed up to 3 million. Both disappeared as quickly as they had appeared.

## Giving the Devil Called Coronavirus Its Due

*The human yearning for intimate social contact is too strong to be dampened by the fear of Covid-19, but pandemic safety is imperative.*



By Zainab Umer

Humans are known to be social beings. The human need for small, intimate social gatherings remains indispensable. Aristotle, a great Greek philosopher claimed, “Man by nature is a social animal and any antisocial individual is either beneath our notice or more than human.”

But the Novel Coronavirus might just have lain Aristotle’s saying to rest as anyone being social during the pandemic is seen as odd and insensitive towards the very serious issue at hand.

On the other hand, people are finding it increasingly harder to sit tight at home, idle and isolated.

In January 2020, as WHO declared Covid-19 outbreak a world health emergency. People stocked up groceries and restricted themselves to their homes as if a zombie apocalypse had finally hit planet earth. The first wave of coronavirus instilled a new kind of fear in the majority of the people. There was a visible decrease in public gatherings like parties and weddings. Even funerals were reduced to small gatherings consisting of a few family members who followed the basic SOPs issued by the government.

The definition of normal has taken a one-eighty in a very short period of time. As an article published by Dawn recently argued, people find friendships and social interactions nurturing. “They need to have contact with people to feel better. Every human needs a friend who can provide love, comfort, a shoulder to rely on, someone to talk to.”

Thanks to the pandemic, a majority of the population has been stripped of this very basic need. The spread of this uninvited guest has caused people more distress in two years than most have experienced in a lifetime. Social distancing, although necessary, has caused people to experience several other health issues. Mental health issues are highly prevalent these days.

Some help is on hand. According to an article by Sage, “Some local civil society organizations such as Amazai Development Program and Sarhad Rural Support Program are actively working in collaboration with local administrations to extend facilities to manage mental health issues especially in rural communities of the country”.

Then there is the issue of people flouting the

pandemic safety protocols. Dr Abdul Aziz Memon, the president of the Sindh chapter of the Pakistan Islamic Medical Association (PIMA) recently told a conference the situation could become much more dangerous as people were not taking the pandemic seriously.

He noted that all normal activities had been restored and almost no SOPs were being followed. Large number of doctors were becoming Covid-positive while some of them had lost their lives as well, said the PIMA chief. He emphasised it was worrying that even doctors who were not in direct contact with Covid-19 patients had contracted the infection, which indicated the severity of the disease.

Unfortunately, many Pakistanis do not understand the concept of social distancing – due in large part to the government’s failure to mount a consistent communications programme around the issue. The upshot is that it’s almost as if the announcement of the second (and late the third) wave of Covid-19 was a cue to hold all kinds of events. Many celebrities took to Instagram to share the highlights of their mid-Covid-19 weddings and not to forget

the after-party shenanigans. Mid-Covid-19 weddings have almost turned into a trend at the rate they are going.

Weddings might just be considered a vital part of life that cannot be put on hold just because Covid-19 has planned to overstay its welcome. The problem is that Pakistanis show no signs of tampering their pre-Covid-19 entertainment preferences. Covid-19 did not hold back University students and teenagers from having fun at concerts, parties, and large public gatherings.

Then there are more mundane reasons – like keeping the wolf from the door. The working classes find social isolation impractical because they must be out and about by day to ensure there will be bread on the table in the evening. Some public health experts have warned city slum dwellers in Pakistan and across developing countries may emerge as one of the most vulnerable populations to the disease.

Urban slums everywhere by definition lack running water, sewage or drainage, and reliable electrical power. What is more,

says Urban Planning activist Professor Nausheen Anwar, "...officials don't keep data on these communities, making it very difficult to formulate good policies".

Then there are the inhabitants of rural areas, who still continue the handshakes and double embraces as there is no fear of the Coronavirus. It seems like a stroke of pure luck that the Covid-19 has not spread like wildfire in our villages. Experts say the wide open spaces could be a factor.

The question is why despite this very real threat of contracting the virus people have seemed to dismiss rationality and are still very much gathering in large social settings and close intimate hangouts. It is as if the people of Pakistan have conducted a short cost & benefit analysis and have decided that a temporary state of euphoria they feel while on an adventure with their friends is much better than the fear of contracting the Coronavirus.

In Pakistan, a decrease in coronavirus cases began around the same time the government started implementing smart lockdowns in areas where the most corona-

virus cases were being reported. But residents said these lockdowns were not particularly strict, nor the compliance with them anywhere near total.

The third wave of the deadly pandemic has now arrived in Pakistan. According to BBC there is a concern that "With large numbers of domestic tourists leaving Pakistan's major cities, heading for rural areas, following the lifting of restrictions, there are particular concerns the virus could spread to less developed areas, where there is even less healthcare and surveillance." To most who remain unaffected, contracting the Coronavirus still seems like a far-fetched possibility.

During a virtual briefing, the WHO Director General Tudor's Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, "If basics are not followed, the only way this pandemic is going to go – it is going to get worse and worse and worse."

The drift is that despite the need for social interaction, the government and people of Pakistan alike will do well to pay more heed to pandemic safety if they want things to go back to the original normal.

## Primary Healthcare is a Human Development Imperative

*Can Pakistan use the pandemic as a strategic pivot to set its development priorities right – and bring its primary healthcare up to scratch as a first step?*

By Maheen Dhanani

Pakistan spends less than 1 percent of its GDP on healthcare, a statistic reflective of the low priority the government attaches to the public health delivery system and infrastructure and indicative of the country's healthcare outlook. The fact that spending has stagnated at about this level for many years now means it may well remain this way unless strategic and swift action is taken not only by the government but also by the public.

We were hit by the COVID-19 crisis last year, and that has been devastating for the entire country. We spent the initial few months amid chaos and confusion. Nineteen years ago, the Pak-Afghan border region was hit by a contagious virus very similar to the feared Ebola virus. A hospital was set up as a special isolation facility and the federal government was appealed for extra resources to handle the setbacks.

Even though the scale of the virus was very small compared to Covid-19, it should have nudged the health ministry to look towards the future. To some extent, Pakistan is still not to blame for



being ill prepared for an unprecedented and deadly pandemic that has infected almost 800,000 people in the country. What we must blame Pakistan for, however, is being unequipped for even the basic primary healthcare needs of its citizens.

In a country of 220 million people, the bed-to-population ratio is less than one per 1,000 when the recommended average by WHO is five per 1,000. Pakistan lacks the strategy to analyse this data and implement policies that would allow the public sector to set priorities and better fund and allocate resources.

Seventy-five percent of Pakistan's population turns to private healthcare facilities that prove to be more patient-centred and are outperforming the public sector with better accessibility and quality of care. However, looking beyond this silver lining, the private sector is a privilege and squeezes people dry with its high costs for even the most basic provisions.

Pakistan ranks at 152 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Report's Gender Inequality Index (GII) 2019 which measures women's equality based on reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. The current government has made promises to elevate the plight of women across the country but little has been done in practice.

The bright side here is that there is a lot of room to grow and improve, the first step is to ensure a well-functioning healthcare administration with good governance and then focusing on revisiting the nation's primary care for further development. Applying univer-

sal health coverage in such cases will improve the well-being of the population as a whole, especially since a majority is low income.

Accessibility to healthcare will increase with a consequent increase in the percentage of population receiving satisfactory healthcare from public facilities with a mere drop in the overall expenditure per household on healthcare. The National Health Vision 2016-2025 states that Pakistan will nationally move towards universal health coverage to confront the various health challenges it is facing.

Change in Pakistan's healthcare system requires an increase in government funding and also political will. Basic provincial healthcare commissions must be addressed and the quality of healthcare facilities must be reviewed with the provision of support to meet the basic quality standards. National and provincial health policies must be addressed, developed and most importantly, implemented efficiently to mend the lacking health system and in turn contribute to human development.

An informed community with a better developed health delivery system will work symbiotically and prove to be transformational for this developing nation. It should be a priority for Pakistan to undertake further initiatives to improve the healthcare system, which is currently under the spotlight because of Covid-19.

It is not going to be easy but taking a human development approach to strengthen the country's primary health system as a top priority is a crying need of the hour.

*The writer is an author and a specialist in Public Health Delivery.*

## DC Islamabad Message

I appeal again to the people of Islamabad that they must follow the COVID-19 SOP's. In the third wave, there is an excessive load in the hospitals, even public hospitals such as PIMS and IHIDC are sometimes occupied up to 90 percent of their capacity due to which further admissions are not possible due to which the mortality rate in Pakistan is at a critical position. Therefore, I request the people of Pakistan to not visit places that are crowded. Even now, people are hosting small gatherings at their homes which is solely dangerous for them and people around them as the virus spreads. If you look at your neighboring country, you will see that they have recorded the world's biggest single-day Coronavirus cases-reaching millions and thousands are dying. If the citizens of Pakistan do not responsibly follow the SOP's such as 50 percent workforce in offices, closure of school and universities, government offices and banks not having more than 50 percent of workforce, we will suffer similarly. Take care of yourself and your children. Thank you.



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## The Politics of Alliances

*As a large coalition of opposition parties, Pakistan Democratic Front (PDM) is not a new phenomenon in Pakistani politics – nor will its fate be any different from its predecessors.*



By Khalid Wasim

**F**ormation of alliances, blocs and coalitions by political parties is a common practice in the countries having parliamentary system of government and Pakistan is no exception. There is a difference in the phenomenon, though.

In the developed democracies, mostly the parties having common ideologies or views form blocs or alliances. In Pakistan, forever in a transition phase between military and civilian rules, political parties having divergent opinions and objectives have been seen grouping together (sometimes even brought together) to achieve some short-term targets. Perhaps this is the reason that the alliances and coalitions have always proved short-lived in Pakistan.

Currently, active political alliances are present in at least 32 countries, including the UK, India, Germany, Australia, Spain and Sweden. The National Democratic Alliance led by Bharatya Janta Party (BJP) in India is not only ruling the country, it also has governments in 18 provinces and states.

A term “Third Front” is often used in Indian politics for the alliances formed by the country’s smaller parties from time to time to challenge the political hegemony of the two main parties – Indian National Congress and the BJP, and to offer a third option to the people.

In Pakistan too, the smaller parties have formed alliances many a times against the country’s two major parties – the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) – but they have never been able to make their presence felt.

On the other hand, the alliances comprising one of the two parties or both have dominated the country’s politics and been able to run somewhat populist movements. The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), however, can be seen as an exception.

The alliances formed by the religious parties or groups have also influenced the country’s political landscape largely, mainly because of having more street power than the mainstream and moderate parties have. Perhaps this is the reason that these alliances have often been used as a tool by the real power players in the country in furtherance of their plans. Most of the country’s political observers and the leaders of moderate parties characterize these alliances as “pro-establishment”.

Besides formation of the non-electoral alliances by the democratic parties during each of the three military rules, the country had under General Ayub Khan, Gen Ziaul Haq, and Gen Pervez Musharraf, the nation had been witnessing grouping of the parties during almost every civilian rule since 1972, mostly in the run up to elections.

The campaign launched by Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) against the Bhutto government changed the country’s political landscape in 1970s, the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) ran a populist movement against Gen Zia’s military regime in 1980s, and the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) confronted the PPP under Benazir Bhutto in late 80s and 90s.

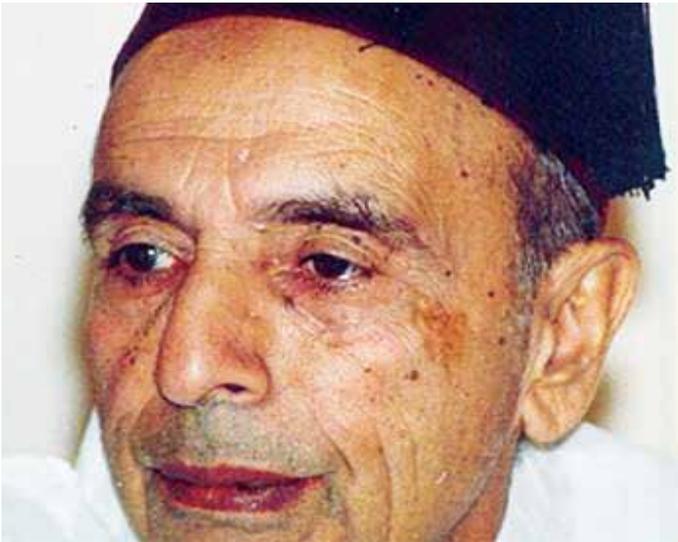
Later, during 2000s, the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) and Muttehida Majlis-i-Amal not only challenged military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf but also competed with each other inside and outside the parliament.

The PDM is the latest addition to the list of political alliances in the country. After the withdrawal of the PPP and the Awami National Party (ANP) from the PDM, it has almost become redundant. The 10-party alliance had been constituted at a multi-party conference of the opposition parties hosted by the PPP in Islamabad last September with an aim to oust the present Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government.



One of the stated objectives of the PDM was to eliminate the role of the establishment and non-democratic forces in politics and electoral process. However, the alliance crumbled recently when the PPP and the PML-N accused each other of maintaining backdoor contacts with the establishment in order to secure space in future political set-up.

These two archivals of the 80s and 90s have been involved in a love-hate relationship since the start of this century when they joined hands for the first time in the struggle against the military dictator Gen Pervez Musharraf from the platform of the ARD under the leadership of veteran Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan.



The late Khan is still remembered as the man who played a pivotal role in the formation of most of the alliances and had previously headed the MRD, the coalition that spearheaded the most populist movement for civilian rule in the country in 1980s and challenged the worst military dictator Gen Ziaul Haq.

Despite facing state oppression in the form of jails and lashes, the MRD leaders continued their non-violent campaign until its dissolution following the death of Gen Zia in a plane crash in August 1988. Begum Nusrat Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, Jam Saqi, and Rasul Bux Palejo were the prominent MRD leaders who succeeded in putting pressure on Gen Zia finally for holding general elections in 1985.

However, when Gen Zia announced the elections on non-party basis, the MRD decided to boycott them, a decision the PPP still regrets.

When Gen Pervez Musharraf ousted the elected government of Nawaz Sharif in October 1999, the PML-N leaders approached Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan requesting him to again lead an MRD-like movement. The Nawabzada, joined by the PPP, finally agreed to restore the MRD. However, it was decided that the new alliance would be called ARD since the MRD was considered to be an alliance which had struggled against Gen Zia and his remnants, and Nawaz Sharif was one of them.

The ARD comprised about a dozen political parties, but its policies and strategies were mostly decided by the PPP and the PML-N

because of their significant presence in the two houses of the parliament that came into existence after the October 2002 elections. All the decisions taken by the local leaders of the alliance required endorsement of the two exiled leaders – Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

After the death of ARD chairman Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan in September 2003, the alliance remained headless for many months as the two parties clashed over the top office. The saner elements in the ARD finally prevented it from disintegration by suggesting creation of a new office of the president. PPP's Amin Fahim became its chairman and Javed Hashmi of the PML-N assumed the office of the president.

The ARD failed to mobilise masses in the streets, but it created much trouble for Gen Musharraf and his King's Party – PML-Q – inside the parliament. The alliance members in the parliament kept on protesting for nearly a year through desk-thumping and sloganeering of “Go Musharraf Go” and “No LFO No”, adamantly refusing to provide parliamentary sanction to the Legal Framework Order (LFO) announced by Gen Musharraf before the 2002 elections.

Besides confronting Gen Musharraf, the ARD also had to compete with another opposition alliance the Muttehida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), a conglomeration of the country's six major religious parties. The alliance led by Qazi Hussain Ahmed of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), Shah Ahmed Noorani of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP), and Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) was on the opposition benches in the parliament, but had high political stakes because of its government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and for being a partner with the PML-Q in Balochistan.



It was for the first time that the religious parties had managed to get a government in a province, though there was a general perception that the MMA had done so with the covert support of the military establishment and it was facilitated to win the elections at a time when the US had launched the war on terror in the neighbouring Afghanistan.

Those who believe in the theory say that Gen Musharraf had done so because he wanted to market himself in the west as a moderate ruler by telling the US and the western powers that had he not been at the helms of affairs, Pakistan would have gone into the hands of radical and extremist elements.



When the MMA entered into an agreement with the military regime and supported it in the passage of the 17th Constitutional Amendment endorsing the LFO and providing constitutional cover to the Musharraf's unilateral acts of the past, it was dubbed as a "Mullah Military Alliance" by the ARD leaders.

Later, when Maulana Fazlur Rehman was nominated as the opposition leader in the National Assembly despite having support of less number of members than the combined members of the PPP and the PML-N, the ARD leaders publicly alleged that the Maulana had been rewarded for the MMA's support to the government.

The ARD was abandoned by both the PPP and the PML-N in 2007 ahead of the general elections which were scheduled to be held in December, but were later held in February 2008 due to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

Nearly two dozen parties, including those in the ARD and the MMA minus the PPP, formed an alliance named All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM) in an effort to stop Gen Musharraf from getting himself re-elected as president from the outgoing assemblies. Only days before completion of the five-year term of the assemblies, the members belonging to the APDM parties resigned from all the assemblies.

The alliance ended because of the differences among the parties over the issue of boycotting the general elections. Some of the parties, including the PTI of Imran Khan, boycotted the elections held in 2008 in line with the APDM decision, but most of the parties, including the PML-N, participated in the polls.

The PNA is known to be the first political alliance which ran a populist movement against the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government in 1970s. The PNA was a hodgepodge of parties of varying ideological leanings, united in their opposition to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his PPP for various reasons.

The parties in the PNA were the JI, the JUI, the JUP, National Democratic Party, Balochistan National Party, PML-Qayyum, PML-Functional, Tehreek-i-Istaqlal, and Pakistan Democratic Party. These parties had jointly contested the elections in 1977 and after performing poorly, they accused Bhutto of rigging the elections.

Refusing to accept the results of the National Assembly elections, the PNA announced boycott of the elections in the provinces and launched street agitation. After weeks of violent protests, Bhutto finally agreed to negotiate with the PNA leadership. It is said that the two sides had reached an understanding and were about to sign an agreement on 5 July 1977, when the then army chief Gen Ziaul Haq imposed martial law in the country.

In 1988, another PNA-like alliance emerged with the name of the IJI, again to confront the PPP led by Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Like the PNA, the IJI also comprised of nine parties. It was headed by Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi of the National Peoples Party (NPP), but Nawaz Sharif of the PML, who had served as the Punjab chief minister during the Zia regime, emerged as the most prominent leader of the alliance.

The IJI though failed to form the government at the centre in 1988, Nawaz Sharif managed to become the chief minister again in Punjab and following a confrontational path created lot of problems for Ms Bhutto's government at the centre.



It was from this point that Mr Sharif first managed to get the command of the PML and then became the prime minister for the first time as a result of the elections held in 1990 after dismissal of the Benazir Bhutto government by the then president Ghulam Ishaq Khan through the infamous Article 58-2b of the Constitution. The PPP had also contested the 1990 elections from the platform of Pakistan Democratic Alliance (PDA) which comprising insignificant parties.

The IJI is now widely regarded as an establishment-backed alliance. After the 1990 elections, Asghar Khan of the Tehreek-i-Istaqlal moved a petition in the Supreme Court alleging that the military establishment had not only supported the IJI, but had also provided money to the alliance leaders for running the election campaign.

The case was finally decided by the court in 2012 and in their short order, the judges directed the federal government to take necessary action against the then army chief Gen Mirza Aslam Beg and ISI head Lt-Gen Asad Durrani for their role in facilitating the IJI in the 1990 elections.

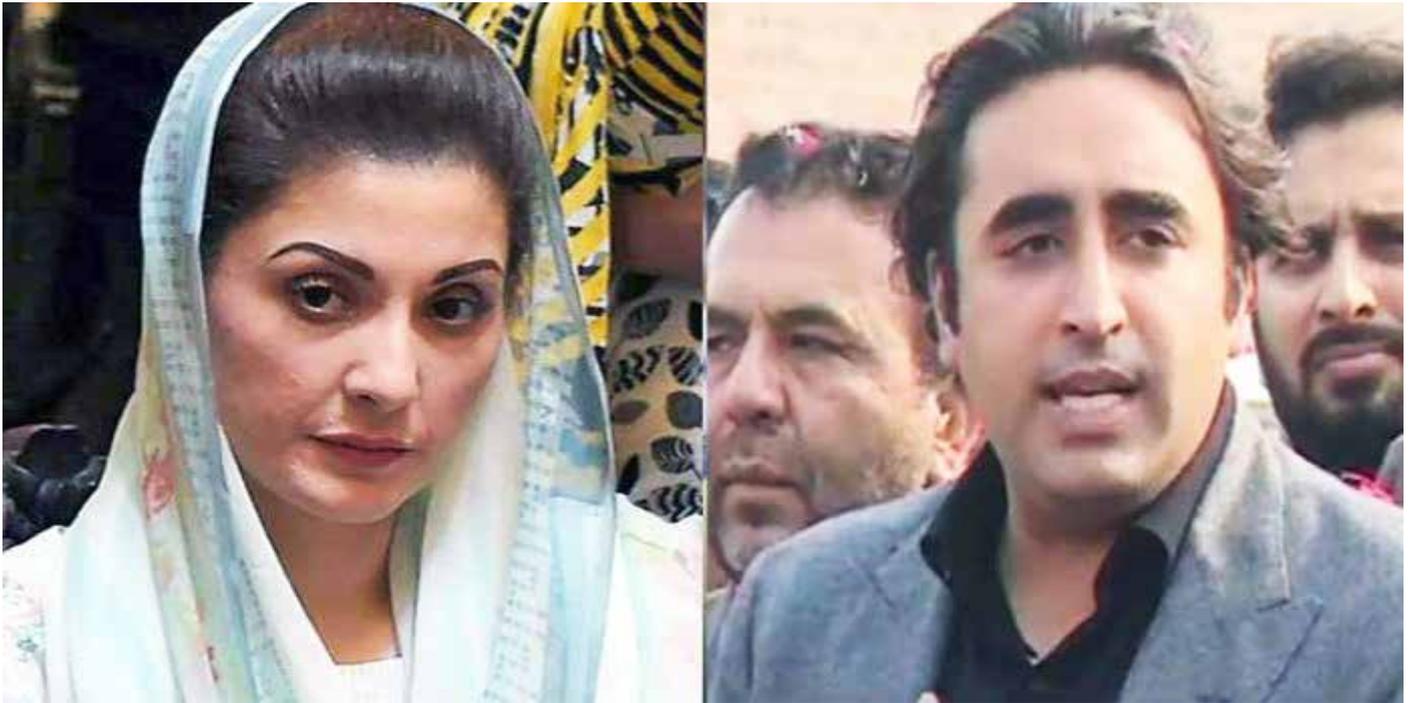
The Sindh-based Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) is presently a part of the ruling coalition under the PTI. The alliance was formed just weeks before the 2018 elections in Sindh, mostly by the PPP dissidents, including Dr Fehmida Mirza, the spouse of Dr Zulfiqar Mirza, and Dr Safdar Abbasi and Naheed Khan. The PML-F, the NPP and the PPP-Shaheed Bhutto Group are the other prominent parties in the alliance, which has two seats in the National Assembly and 13 in the Sindh Assembly.

The Pakistan Oppressed Nations Movement (PONM) is an alliance of nationalist parties, including BNP, PkMAP, Sindh Taraqqi Party, Awami Tehreek and Seraiki Movement. This is not an electoral alliance, but the component parties support each other in the elections, particularly in Balochistan, interior Sindh, and southern Punjab.



## PMLN & PPP: Fast Friends, Faster Opponents

*True to their time-honoured tradition, the two political parties will continue to alternate between rivalry and cooperation based on political expediencies over the foreseeable future.*



By Wajih Safarish Khan

The two largest traditional political parties of Pakistan's are at daggers drawn yet again – although it does not come as a surprise to political observers. Like every single occasion they warmed up to one another, their current marriage of convenience also ended within the honeymoon period. Nevertheless, it is safe to say neither the marriage nor the breakup is going to be final.

There is plenty to account for the stark PPP-PMLN divide: Pakistan's political history since 1980s, the differences between the two parties' core ideologies on religion and socioeconomic issues (whatever of that is left in today's Pakistan), and mutual mistrust between Bhutto-Zardari and Sharif families. However, their shared longing for civilian supremacy and undiluted parliamentary democracy keep pulling them together again and again. Party and personal interests too play important roles.

PMLN, one may recall, essentially consists of those of Zia ul Haq's followers who considered him a demigod. It was because

of his unquestioned loyalty towards Zia and the establishment that Nawaz Sharif's was made the head of the anti-PPP Islami Jamhoori Itehad (IJI) cobbled together by the ISI.

A barrage of dirty tricks against the PPP including personal attacks against the Bhutto ladies, use of Punjabi chauvinism and ethnic slogans, hate mongering against PPP during the 1988 general election campaign and later, the ISI-led 1990 election campaign where national and private resources were used to defeat PPP and get IJI 'win' the 'election' were all to benefit the group lead by Nawaz Sharif.

The reign of terror which was let loose against Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari after dismissal of PPP government in 1990 was all supported by Nawaz Sharif.

After becoming Prime Minister in 1990, Nawaz Sharif wanted to enjoy powers of a real prime minister which was sacrilegious to President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and the establishment. In the ensuing tussle Nawaz Sharif looked for support towards Benazir

Bhutto and made small gestures to woo her to his side. However, Benazir Bhutto thought her personal and party interests would be better served if she joined the hated baba – Ghulam Ishaq Khan. Asif Zardari was among a dozen or so PPP ministers who took oath after dismissal of Nawaz Sharif government on 18 April 1993.

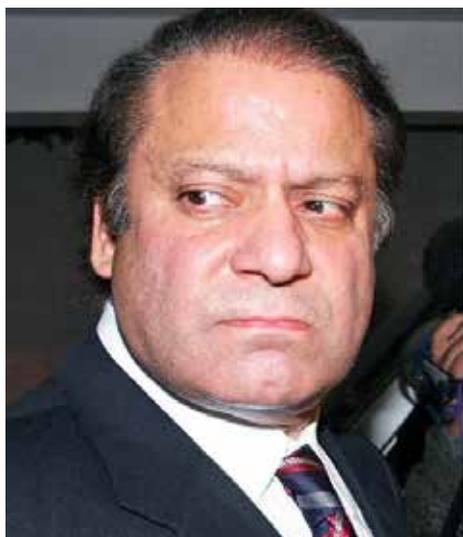
BB spoke strongly against what she called 'political orphans' when she smelled that a third party was being propped up to replace both the PPP and PMLN. She however strongly lashed out against the Supreme Court decision to restore Nawaz government in May 1993, dubbing it as influenced by power of 'chamak', a euphemism for bribery. PPP's threat to stage a Long March to Islamabad became the final nail in the coffin of the Nawaz government when both Nawaz Sharif and President Ghulam Ishaq Khan resigned under what was called the Kakar Formula.

Benazir Bhutto returned to power in November 1993 and unsuccessfully tried to pay back Nawaz Sharif what she and Asif



Zardari had went through during Nawaz'z rule. Some cases were instituted against Nawaz family and even his father was arrested briefly.

Soon Nawaz Sharif made inroads into PPP citadel luring BB's most trusted lieutenant, President Farooq Khan Leghari to his side. Leghari dismissed Benazir Bhutto's government and ensured that Nawaz Sharif returns to power with 'heavy mandate' during subsequent elections. The PPP and Benazir Bhutto were back to square one – Asif Zardari in jail and BB running from city to city and court to court to pursue numerous cases instituted against her and Asif Ali Zardari, and many other party leaders meeting a similar plight.



Nawaz Sharif, however, lost no time in deciding to remove presidential powers used four times to dismiss prime ministers in preceding eight years. He needed PPP's support to do that. BB obliged and 13th and 14th amendments in the constitution were adopted within no time.

Persecution of Benazir Bhutto, Asif Ali Zardari and other PPP leaders, however, continued. Saifur Rehman, a close friend, business partner, and party loyal of Nawaz Sharif was appointed head of the newly constituted Accountability Commission. In jail facing twenty-two different cases, Asif Zardari was physically tortured. The Lahore High Court was forced to sentence Benazir Bhutto, who had hitherto remained free. Sensing what was coming she left for Dubai with kids just before the decision where she would spend the next nine years.

When Musharraf staged his coup ousting Sharif from power in 1999, BB initially welcomed the military coupe but soon joined the PML-N and other parties in Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) to put pressure on the junta to restore democracy. Nawaz Sharif, though used the 'pressure' so built to get pardon from military regime and left with his extended family to live in Saudi Arabia for ten years.

His decision had an immense adverse impact on anti-dictatorship struggle, gave strength to Musharraf regime and put Nawaz Sharif's PMLN in tatters, its top leadership joined together to establish pro-Musharraf PMLQ. Asif Zardari



meanwhile remained in jail and Benazir Bhutto and her kids in exile. The joint front against Musharraf however continued and cooperated after 2002 elections to delay Musharraf's efforts to get parliamentary approval of his military rule.

In 2006, BB and Sharif signed the Charter of Democracy in London, under which both vowed among other things not to seek military's help to dislodge government lead by one another.

Soon there was major rift between them ostensibly on an irrelevant issue of future relations with MQM. Nawaz Sharif cobbled together a minus PPP alliance – APDM – which included PTI and Jamaat-e-Islami among others. BB called it new IJI and entered into talks with General Musharraf on issues including restoration

of democracy, and free and fair elections with participation all political parties and leaders under equal playing conditions.

On 5 October 2007, General Musharraf announced the now infamous National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO). It removed a conviction announced in absentia against Benazir Bhutto. She returned to a tumultuous welcome in Karachi on 18 October 2007 which turned into gloom hours later as multiple bomb blasts targeted her rally en route to Mazar-e-Quaid, killing more than two hundred. BB was saved miraculously but was not so lucky sixty-nine days later in Rawalpindi where she was killed in gun and bomb attack after a public rally. The PPP accused Musharraf of conspiracy for the murder.

APDM decided not to contest the general elections organized under general Musharraf. Nawaz Sharif was however convinced by PPP not to leave the field open and he decided to participate without his APDM allies.

After the elections both parties along with ANP decided to form a coalition government and restore the constitution to its original shape. Thereafter both parties joined hands to force Musharraf out of Presidency leading to election of Asif Ali Zardari to the highest office of the state. They also joined together to pass the 18th Amendment restoring the spirit of the constitution and giving more powers to provinces. The 9th NFC award was also a fruit of their mutual cooperation.

The Murree Agreement had also called for restoration of judges who were sacked by General Musharraf, a condition which caused the next rift between the PPP and PMLN. President Zardari's reluctance to restore the judges ultimately lead to PMLN starting its own Long March to Islamabad. Army Chief General Kayani's mediation resulted in restoration of judges and calling off the March. As well, it cemented the military's centrality to politics.

Once restored, Chief Justice Iftikhar Choudhry and his colleagues started going after the PPP government. The PMLN hailed and praised all such acts. The more prominent acts of so called judicial activism against PPP government including the



infamous Memogate and the disqualification of Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani were in fact on petitions and appeals by PMLN leaders including Nawaz Sharif himself.

In 2014, the PPP played a pivotal role in helping the Nawaz government beat back the PTI-PAT sit-in outside parliament. However, as soon as the problem was over, the PMLN set in motion corruption cases against Asif Zardari and carried out different acts to marginalize the PPP-led Sindh government. The PPP responded by supporting a rebellion in the PMLN in Balochistan and later helping the rebels' Senate elections in March 2018.

The PPP must have felt a sadistic pleasure when judicial processes, sponsored propaganda and invisible pressure was used against PMLN government during 2018 which including disqualification of and dismissal of Nawaz Sharif. The party however did not try to take any political mileage.

The 2018 election returned the PTI as the single largest party in the National Assembly and a close rival to the PMLN in the Punjab Assembly. A lack of agreement

between the PPP and the PMLN on forming coalition allowed the PTI to form governments both in Lahore and Islamabad. It was repeated a month later during presidential elections where despite having an edge over the PTI and allies the PMLN and PPP disagreement allowed the PTI candidate to rise to the Presidency.

Fast forward to September 2020 and the PDM is established amid great fanfare. There is a great show of bonhomie between Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Maryam Nawaz Sharif – heirs apparent on either side. Many electoral battles including for the Islamabad seat for Senate are fought and won together. Then suddenly the acrimony is back and mutual relations are back at square one.

Beyond the causes of the rift and the mutual accusations in this regard it seems that PMLN supreme Nawaz Sharif has a feeling the PTI has run its course and hard days for him, his family, and party are about to end. The establishment's experiment with PTI has failed and it will not receive as much support as it had in near past.

Nawaz Sharif realizes that PMLN will sweep Punjab in any future election and

does not want to give the present assemblies a new lease on life by forcing an in house change. The PPP on the other hand is not sure of any improvement of its fate outside Sindh in any fresh election, and thus supports the in-house change in both Punjab and centre.

In the process the PMLN also wants to strike at the PPP's democratic credentials to wean away ideological voters still left with party outside Sindh. Such swing vote can help PMLN against PTI on many marginal seats in Punjab. Realizing this, the PPP has apparently returned to hard-hitting rhetoric against the PMLN to retain whatever is left of its vote bank in the Punjab and elsewhere and hopefully to regain the support of those who disillusioned by the PTI.

This acrimony between the political heavyweights is expected to continue over the foreseeable future, although they may still cooperate here and there including the odd seat adjustment. After elections, we may yet again see cooperation between the two in the tradition of the 18th Amendment. Even a PPP-PMLN coalition somewhere along the road cannot be ruled out.

## Another Round of Musical Chairs

*Prime Minister Imran Khan has moved yet again to dispel any creeping doubts about who is the undisputed king of cabinet reshuffles.*

By Ahmad Waleed

"It is the prerogative of the prime minister to change any minister he wants," Asad Umar had to assert in a recent interview. While nobody disputes that, there has been no clear explanation for the latest cabinet reshuffle undertaken by Prime Minister Imran Khan. In other words, Khan's latest shuffling of the deck is quite like his previous attempts at the task.

It's been a game of musical chairs in the federal cabinet since Imran Khan took oath as the prime minister after the 2018 election. While Fawad Chaudhry has gone full circle from Information Minister to Minister of Science and Technology and back in thirty-two months, Shaukat Tareen has become the fourth Finance Minister after trying Asad Umar, Hafeez Sheikh, and Hammad Azhar.

While in opposition, Khan claimed to have a team of 200 strong and capable members who would bring about a big change in the country within 100 days after he takes charge of the government.





Now, after around three years in power, he acknowledges that his dream of change could not be realized and he needs more time to achieve his goal for 'Naya Pakistan'. Many experiments have been made in different sectors for improvement in the governance, especially in Punjab, but the performance continues to suffer.

Imran Khan puts the blame on his team members who fail to implement his vision. Therefore, he changes them. He takes pride in switching the course of action like he would do it on the playground when he was the captain of Pakistan's cricket team. He changes everything. He is very determined and steadfast on his policy of changing his team members. "Those who do not perform will have to go home," the PM often reiterates in his speeches.

This shuffling the federal or provincial cabinet and bureaucrats has become the hallmark of the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Isaaf (PTI) government. Dozens of ministers and advisers in the federal and provincial governments and hundreds if not thousands of bureaucrats have been transferred and posted on the pretext of improving the government performance. And it goes on and on and on....

There is a serious problem of clarity. The ministers and advisors are shuffled and reshuffled again and again. Perhaps they are incapable? But if someone is incapable in one ministry, how can they be capable in the new ministry they are assigned? The confusion is getting deeper.

When they don't understand fully the task they have been assigned, the ministers fail to make bureaucrats grasp fully the vision of their leader. The performance of the bureaucracy suffers. The bureaucrats find themselves surrounded by uncertainty. The result is, the bureaucrats are fed up with the unclear policy of the government and the frequent transfers have forced them to sit idle, do nothing, and wait for the next order of transfer. And this all adds to the miseries of the masses and causes unnecessary delays in projects.

Everybody is trying to comprehend the exact problem with the PTI leadership. One day the prime minister showers a minister huge praise and the other day he is shown the door. Fawad Chaudhry was doing an excellent job as information minister. But his portfolio was changed all of a sudden and handed to Firdous Ashiq Awan, who was in turn replaced by Shibli Faraz.

Similarly, the PM eulogised Sheikh Rashid for his 'excellent' job in Pakistan Railways. Now, he has been given the Interior Ministry which was being looked after by Ijaz Shah.

People are curious what's wrong with the government after all. Lately, a federal minister was questioned why the prime minister has changed the Inspector General of Police in Punjab. What went wrong? What was the major task he could not implement? Where did he lack? Did he commit any negligence?

The minister tried to explain that the prime minister had assigned the IG Punjab to improve the IT skills and behaviour of the police force. The minister said the prime minister was unhappy with his performance as he could not come up to the expectations of the leadership. So, he was transferred.

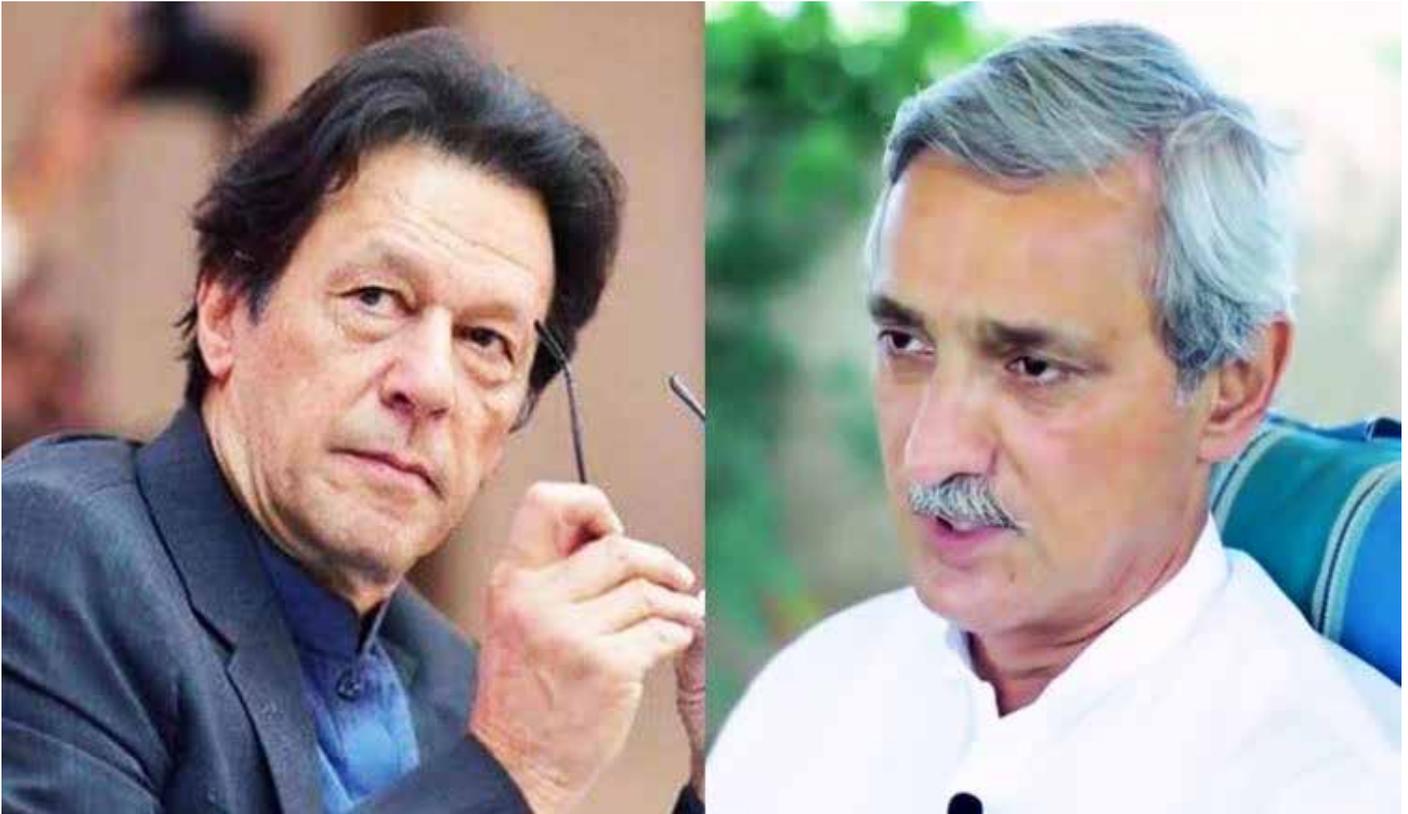
The finance ministry is the most important ministry in the federal government and it should have the clarity to pursue the economic goals of the government. However, with rapid changes at the top level a sort of uncertainty has prevailed on decision making causing a severe damage to the economic growth. The constant changes in Federal Board of Revenue have affected the decision-making process, resulting in a chaotic situation among the business community. It has become a joke.

The people of the country are paying a heavy price for the inconsistency on the part of the government. It is about time the PTI government realized that country needs a consistent approach towards decision making to achieve the desired goals of development.



# The Return of the Kingmaker

*The last threat to PM Khan's government has subsided after the anti-graft body conceded its error in charging Jahangir Khan Tareen, a business mogul and ruling party kingpin.*



By Riaz Ahmed

Never during the months of agitation did the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) succeed in creating a situation where the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan could clearly see its days numbered.

But when a stalwart of Khan's own party got around him a sizeable number of parliamentarians counting his favours and regretting that he was being pushed to the wall through a graft investigation, the government's ouster appeared to be a foregone conclusion.

Nickered JKT, Jahangir Khan Tareen, a business tycoon who joined politics just a decade ago but was instrumental in managing a stunning victory for Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in the last general election. He says the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) had framed him and his son Ali Tareen in a money-laundering case.

The number of PTI legislators standing at his side was 30 – more than enough to upset the government's appercart in the National Assembly as well as in the largest province Punjab. These were the people whom Jahangir Tareen had fielded in the last general elections and ensured that they reached the legislative assemblies.

They accompanied JKT to the FIA building where he was meant to be investigated for his alleged involvement in a money-laundering case believed to have enriched him by PKR 100 billion through fake accounts transfers.

JKT first came under a cloud when a Sugar Inquiry Commission found him and others in his trade involved in price manipulations of the commodity amounting to billions. He apparently went into self-exile for seven long months but ostensibly returned when he saw the PDM sharks circling Khan's boat a few months ago.

## Anti-government alliance falls apart

Events took a magical turn in Khan's favour when the 11-party opposition alliance that had sailed through its nationwide protest campaign got stuck on the matter of a Long March on Islamabad, the final part of the protest plan. The spanner in the works of the alliance was thrown by the PPP, the third largest party in the opposition camp over participation in the electoral process and taking part in the Senate elections of early March. The alliance almost fell apart after the PPP's outright rejection of the proposal to resign from the assemblies to provide credence to the Long March scheduled for March 26.

JKT is believed to have lured the PPP, through his brother-in-law hailing from Rahim Yar Khan, to the Senate elections



with sure gains. It's widely believed in the political circles that from the defeat of Hafeez Sheikh, the then finance minister, at the hands of PPP stalwart Yusuf Raza Gilani to PM Khan's success in securing a vote of confidence from the National Assembly, it was none other than JKT pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Hardly a week had passed when Senate elections were held and the opportunism of PDM parties left the coalition in a quandary. Awestruck by the PPP stratagem in which it was joined by the ANP, PDM head and the general secretary served explanation notices on the two parties, a move that backfired spectacularly as the two parties made clear they were ready to leave the alliance altogether.

Had the PPP endorsed the resignation proposal, it would have put in jeopardy not only the government but also its own survival, given the fact that it is the ruling party in the second largest province, Sindh – in addition of course to disrupting the democratic process for Senate polls.

The PPP certainly gained where its other coalition partners lost. It won a crucial Senate seat from Islamabad, electing Yusuf Raza Gilani who was contesting a candidate of not less than a stature of the Finance Minister, Abdul Hafeez Sheikh. This prompted Khan to seek a vote of confidence in the National Assembly to demonstrate his majority, which he was able to pull off, thanks reportedly to behind-the-scenes help from JKT.

After the Makhdoom of Multan lost the contest for chairmanship of the Upper House, the PPP claimed for him the position of the Opposition Leader, which he was able to clinch with help from a government ally party, BAP, sowing further seeds of discontent in the opposition ranks.

## JKT cries foul, seeks PM's attention

Soon after the government announced its victory and vowed to attend to its election pledges came the turn of probably the largest benefactor of the ruling party to moan and groan over his victimization at the hands of the FIA in a money-laundering

case. None, JKT believed and loudly said, but the close aids of the Prime Minister were behind the move to undermine his integrity.

In FIR 18/2021, the FIA had accused that fake accounts had been used in transactions with the JWD, which JKT owns. It had claimed that an employee of the JWD had been withdrawing PKR 2.2 billion from JWD accounts and depositing this money in accounts of the Tareens as well as associated companies for three years.

## Political stability in peril

Around 30 members of the legislative assemblies of the Centre and Punjab accompanied JKT when he, along with his son, proceeded to the FIA building in connection with the investigation.

With JKT claiming his detractors intended to hound out of his party and that he was determined to get justice done, the rumour mill went into overdrive. A member of the Central Executive Committee of the PPP said JKT was going to switch sides as his meeting with the Asif Ali Zardari had been scheduled. However, no such eventuality came to pass.

"We believe that Jahangir Tareen is being humiliated through such cowardly moves," said PTI lawmaker Raja Riaz. "Nothing can be achieved through such tactics – this matter should be brought to an end now. We are warning Prime Minister Imran Khan for the last time. If things are not wrapped up soon, they may get out of control."

## Reconciliation

Four days later, Raja Riaz revealed that the contact between Prime Minister Imran Khan and estranged party leader Jahangir Khan Tareen has been revived. "Hopefully we will get a major relief when the Prime Minister comes to know the facts".

While one of his loyal comrade from Central Punjab confirmed the premier giving audience to the Jahangir Group, the FIA also stumbled before the banking court conceding its money laundering charges against JKT were erroneous.

During the proceedings of the banking

court on the pre-arrest bail applications submitted by Tareen and son Ali, the FIA counsel had told the court that the agency "inadvertently committed a mistake" in claiming that banking transactions were made in favour of the accused using fake accounts. "The truth is that no fake accounts have been used in making transactions with the JWD sugar mills owned by Jahangir Tareen," the FIA counsel said in the open court.

## Saved but still at pains

Tareen, ironically, put on tenterhooks by threatening rebellion the party he had himself groomed to win polls and sail through months of long anti-government agitation. At a time he appeared to be badly hurt and, consequently, ensured that his threat to government for undesirable consequences looked credible. His stratagem worked. He got sufficient if not complete relief and seems to be placated for now.

But this did not mean all was hunky-dory for the government. Its detractors found yet another way to humble it, this time through a religious-political party, Tehrik-i-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), led by the son of the late Khadim Rizvi. For weeks, it choked life and movement of essentials through violent protests in cities and blocking of national highways over the matter of blasphemous caricature published in France, demanding expulsion of the French envoy and a national boycott of French products.

The government's impulsive decision to ban TLP backfired, resulting in the abduction of about a dozen of police personnel by rabid mobs, forcing it to hold dialogue with the jailed clerics. A compromise finally led to a resolution over the caricature issue being tabled in the Parliament.

Has JKT got to play any role to pull the ruling party and, consequently the country, out of this mess? If the resolution transforms into a bill and goes to the committee stage, it will all come down to numbers – and JKT has demonstrated his faction has the numbers to make or break the government in any such scenario.

It just means a yet bigger role for JKT than in the past, for it will require aligning politics along lines not known in the past.

# Promoting International Parliamentary Coordination for Global and Regional Solutions

*Working to bring lawmakers of the world together to help foster solutions for an increasingly globalised planet, the IPC is growing in leaps and bounds.*



**By Senator Muhammad Sadiq Sanjrani, Chairman Senate of Pakistan/President IPC**

The Covid-19 pandemic that has been raging around us for over a year now is a good demonstration of the interconnectedness of our world without respect to where we live. The pandemic went global in mere months, as if all the world's gulfs, walls, and borders amounted to nothing.

As well, it has demonstrated for our benefit how tightly interrelated the various facets of our lives are. Rightly perceived as a health crisis from the get go, it soon and equally became an education crisis, an employment crisis, a poverty crisis, an economic crisis, an inequality crisis – and a crisis in so many other ways.

Just like Covid-19, all the major global challenges facing our world today are transnational in nature and require

collaborative actions at parliamentary and governmental levels. In particular, this globalised nature of humanity's major and pressing challenges makes it imperative for parliamentarians around the globe to work in close coordination to achieve a prosperous and peaceful world.

Taking into account the need for a robust, transnational parliamentary platform for individual members of national parliaments to work together to help resolve global and regional issues, the International Parliamentarians Congress (IPC) was established in 2019. I was honoured to be the very first President of the IPC, especially as H.E. Mohammed Ali Houmed, President of the Djibouti National Parliament, was the first Vice President.

Headquartered at Islamabad, the Congress brings together parliamentarians from several countries not just as regional or national representatives, but also as global parliamentarians and representatives of the entire human kind, committed to strategizing and implementing solutions for peace, prosperity and progress through sharing of parliamentary experiences and coordination of parliamentary action.

Although the establishment of the IPC is quite recent, we have seen the fast changing dynamics of our global challenges add to and exacerbate the already prevalent insecurities and inequalities of opportunities and resources. These and other challenges continue to trigger threats to humanity in the shape of climate change and

ecological depletion; unemployment and economic disparity; poverty and social exclusion; and malnutrition and diseases.

The IPC has emerged as an effective forum for fostering linkages and building partnerships and cohesion amongst parliamentarians from around the world to address these challenges. In a mere two years, the IPC has been able to attract memberships from almost all regions of the world including Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Mediterranean, and the Middle East – with the number of individual parliamentarians steadily growing.

The IPC has remained instrumental in enabling member parliamentarians to think and act global by breaking geographical and political barriers to resolve common problems requiring concerted action and political coordination.



Ensuring conduct of free and fair elections across the globe is one major area where the IPC has already made a mark by sending monitors and observers to several countries and publishing the findings of these missions.

The first such mission was sent to the United Kingdom to observe and report on the general election held on 12 December 2019. A two-member IPC observer mission watched the elections day proceedings. The report of the mission was disseminated to parliaments through speakers and presiding officers in addition to election commissions the world over to share the best practices and reforms in electoral processes across the globe, and to further the debate on these matters.

Similarly, despite the lockdown and travel restrictions, the apex electioneering body in Jordan granted accreditation to an IPC mission to observe the Jordanian parliamentary elections of 2020.

More recently, an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) of IPC observed the Netherlands parliamentary election that commenced from 15 March 2021. The mission assessed the electoral process in terms of its compliance with internationally recognized obligations and standards for democratic electioneering.

I am chuffed to report that the IPC has successfully fostered partnerships with other international organizations and entities to broaden the scope of engagement between different stakeholders. We continue to work in close collaboration with the Association of World Election Bodies

(A-WEB), the world's largest international organization in the field of election management.

Recently, an IPC delegation visited Djibouti where, among other engagements, it met with the President of Arab Parliament Honourable Mr. M. Adel Bin Abdoul Rahman Al Hassoumi. It was agreed at the meeting that cooperation between the IPC and the Arab Parliament would be strengthened to work together for future endeavours to promote peace and prosperity.

The IPC is also working to build alliances to further its mission, and Memorandums of Understanding have been signed with several parliaments and international parliamentary organizations to this end.

During her visit to Pakistan, Ms. Gabriela Cuevas Barron, President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, (IPU) issued a joint communique with the President, IPC. The communique reiterated that there is a need to capitalise on the strengths of both IPU and IPC to address the multidimensional challenges of the 21st century.

In August 2020, the IPC published a research report on the Covid-19 pandemic comprising a broad overview of this global health emergency based on statistics and including a situation analysis with a special focus on themes like the pandemic's impact on the world economy, the efforts to deal with the challenges of climate change, and a way forward.

An IPC seminar this February titled "Rethinking our Collective Responsibility to the Environment" provided an opportunity to parliamentarians to discuss climate mitigation and adaptation. The IPC also intends to host an international conference of parliamentarians from African countries in the near future.

It is a matter of profound privilege for me that I have been vested with the responsibility to lay the foundations of the International Parliamentarians Congress (IPC) and I am pleased to report that IPC has emerged as a catalyst for change and forum for innovations in the parliamentary sphere in a short span of time.

The IPC has an international stature and it maintains an independent international identity which has already attracted to its fold over 56,000 national members of parliament (MPs) from across the globe. What is more, it continues to develop and grow with every passing day.

The Congress is due to hold its annual General Body Session at its headquarters in the last quarter of 2021. Also on the agenda will be the election of the IPC President and members of Executive Council to carry the torch of its hallowed mission forward.

I am confident that the IPC will continue to steer and nurture the political discourse across continents and regions based upon its cherished values of cooperation, understanding, and mutual respect.

# Battleground Afghanistan: The Impending Melee

*Nature abhors a vacuum of any kind, but a power vacuum most of all – and so do the neighbours of Afghanistan including Pakistan and India.*



By Umer Farooq

In two decades of American military presence in Afghanistan the biggest failure of world's sole superpower's political and military role in this war torn country has been its total inability to create viable political institutions for the Afghan society—a society that is deeply fractured along tribal and ethnic lines.

From a historical perspective, Afghanistan was never a modern nation-state and its political structures and institutions had always been tribal in nature. When American military set foot on Afghanistan's soil in 2001, the society was still being ruled by primitive tribal institutions badly damaged by the corrosive effects of a protracted civil war.

The Bush Administration clearly undertook the task of nation-building with assistance pledged by many western nations that they would provide viable and modern state structures and institutions to Afghan society. As part of Bonn process, the Western nations undertook to spend billions in training, equipment and finances to Afghanistan in order to build state machinery including judiciary, police,

ministerial infrastructure and a standing army to guard the nation against internal threats.

This never materialized on ground—Afghan society's primary political institutions are still essentially tribal in nature and the modern and viable political structures and institutions that the Western nation pledged to build either exist in their underdeveloped form or do not exist at all.

Political power still grows out of the barrel of the gun in Afghanistan. In every part of the country, it's the warlords who hold sway over government institutions that were meant to provide stability to the Afghanistan society at the social, political and administrative levels.

When the US military entered Afghanistan they entered into a political and military relations with the warlords as a counter force to the Taliban networks that were slowly and gradually melting away into the villages in the face of advancing US military might. It was a kind of reverting back to the pre-Taliban situation in Afghanistan when lawless and ruthless warlords ruled their respective areas.

As the Taliban network melted away into Afghan countryside, the warlords consolidated their positions in their respective areas with the help of US military. Some talented members of the Afghan Diaspora based in the West and educated in Western universities provided a modern face to the post-Taliban political setup—the political setup, which had at its base array of warlords and drug traffickers, whose ruthless governing tactics in the late 1990s Afghanistan gave rise to the Taliban movement in the first place.

When New American President, Joe Biden delivered a rather long speech to explain his decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, he actually completely ignored this reality—that America and its allies actually undertook to the task of creating viable political institutions in Afghanistan. President Biden was rather terse in pointing out that the “endless American military force could not create or sustain a durable Afghan government”.

He pinned his hope for stability in Afghanistan on the Afghan standing army which the Americans have helped train and which

they believe could provide stability to the Afghanistan society and durability to Afghanistan's modern and nascent political structures that the west has helped create.

"And along with our partners, we have trained and equipped a standing force of over 300,000 Afghan personnel today and hundreds of thousands over the past two decades", President Biden said.

"And they'll continue to fight valiantly, on behalf of the Afghans, at great cost. They'll support peace talks, as we will support peace talks between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, facilitated by the United Nations. And we'll continue to support the rights of Afghan women and girls by maintaining significant humanitarian and development assistance".

At the conclusion of his speech, the US President clearly expressed the expectations that neighboring countries, especially Pakistan, would do more to stabilize Afghanistan. "And we'll ask other countries — other countries in the region — to do more to support Afghanistan, especially Pakistan, as well as Russia, China, India, and Turkey. They all have a significant stake in the stable future for Afghanistan".

There is hardly any doubt that the American failure to create viable political and military institutions in Afghanistan will come back to haunt their peace efforts for the war torn country. Let us have a look at how Pakistani military see the US trained Afghan land forces, which the American President expects to provide stability to the Afghan society.

Pakistani military and intelligence services have remained extremely distrustful of nascent Afghan security structures in the past. In 2012, during formal talks with American officials at both Washington and Rawalpindi, Pakistani military officials dismissed Afghan National Army as a highly destabilizing force in the region.

In his talks with American military officials, Pakistan's then army chief Gen Ashfaq Pervez Kayani described the Afghan National Army as part of the problem rather than of the solution.

This aversion shown by Pakistan's military establishment towards the formative

structures of Afghan land forces — whose number reached 200,000 by the year 2014 — could be the reflection of the frustration of the Pakistani establishment over the failure to acquire the responsibility of training the Afghan forces. Most of the training of Afghan national army in the more than 10 year of its formative period was carried out by the NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Part of the problem was that Indians got the responsibility to train a small group of Afghan army cadets much before the same responsibility was delegated to Pakistan Military Academy in early 2015. More than two dozen Afghan cadets were undergoing training in Indian military academy Dehradun in 2013. Officials say that Pakistan first made the offer to train Afghan cadets back in 2010, but that offer never got beyond bureaucratic proposals.

Things, however, started to change in 2013 when first Afghan defense delegation in post-Taliban era visited Islamabad and Rawalpindi in December of that year. Clearly, the Americans had convinced the new Army chief in Pakistan that close cooperation between the security forces of the two countries was necessary in the wake of a withdrawal of NATO troops.

Certainly, there was a kind of Pak-India rivalry playing out in the background in the proposals made by two South Asian rivals to train the Afghan National Army. But there was an element of truth General Kayani's assertions as well that Afghan National Army would be a highly destabilizing force in the region. Drug pedaling, drug use and high level of desertions have been identified as major problem in the functioning of Afghan army even by the American officials themselves.

"Even after ten years of rigorous training by western military officials, the Afghan national army's performance on the ground is not very impressive," says a recently retired military official who declined to be named. Many structured attempts have been made to bring Pakistani and Afghan diplomats and military-intelligence officials across the table in the presence of western and Chinese diplomats and military officials. None of these attempts have attained a discernible success.

The security and military setup that would replace American military presence in

Afghanistan has deeply divisive politics tied to it. This politics will assume a deeply confrontational framework in the face of new American proposal for a new coalition government in Kabul to replace Dr Ashraf Ghani's government.

Adding to the confusions are voices coming from powerful regional capitals that want to see Taliban becoming part of the regional security architecture in order to ward off the threat of rise of other Sunni extremist groups in Afghanistan. These regional players see the present Afghan government and its security forces, in the absence of US and NATO forces, as too weak to effectively check the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS.

These regional players, especially Russia and Iran see the emergence of Sunni extremists groups as a major threat to their security. Russia is said to have started directly hobnobbing with Taliban and Iran's cooperation with Taliban is also on the rise. Iranian Special Forces are said to have conducted joint operations with Taliban against ISIS supporters in Central Afghanistan.

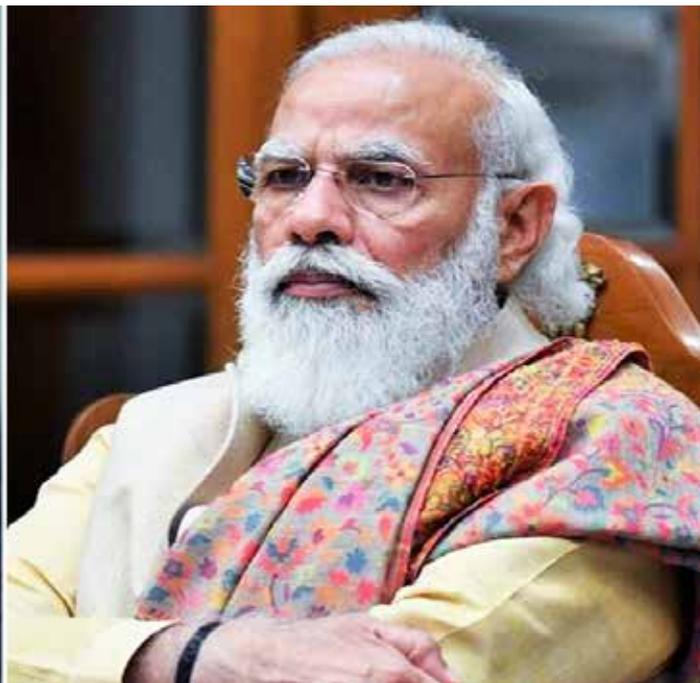
There are reports that regional countries including Iran, Russia and Turkey have developed a mechanism to exchange intelligence on the presence of ISIS groups in Afghanistan. There is a desire to make Pakistan part of this type of intelligence mechanism.

There is a long history of each of Afghanistan's neighbours to have its own axe to grind from the complex political and security scenario of Afghanistan. There is no guarantee they would not revert to the same pattern again, making Afghanistan's problems more and more complex in the process.

Far from being interested in ensuring Afghanistan's stability, each of these regional players including Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia has been involved in deep machinations to serve its own parochial security interests. Under the circumstances, in the absence of viable and modern political institutions in the war torn country, Afghanistan is likely to become a theatre of struggle between these narrow national interests once the umbrella of US-NATO military presence is lifted — and the most prominent of these power struggles will be the traditional rivalry between Pakistan and India.

## Why Track-II is the Way to Go for Pakistan and India

*The region home to almost a quarter of humanity – flailing in clutches of poverty, backwardness, and now the worst global pandemic in a century – must give peace a chance.*



By Dr Moonis Ahmar

Reports coming from India paint a grim picture. The third wave of the Covid-19 global pandemic is wreaking untold havoc on the world's second most populous nation. Hospitals have run out of beds for new patients and an acute shortage of medical oxygen is in evidence.

The situation in Pakistan is not so bad but we are not out of the woods by any stretch of imagination. In fact, with infection spiking in all urban centres across the nation, we may just be behind India's curve.

Sadly, however, the two capitals are still largely preoccupied with one another rather than the pandemic; or unemployment and poverty and backwardness before that.

The current scenario of Indo-Pak relations is as much infused with optimism as it is marred by pessimism. After the Pathankot attack of 7 January 2016 and Uri attack of 18 September 2016, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi threatened to isolate Pakistan in the region and suspended comprehensive dialogue with its western neighbour.

The Indo-Pak standoff became serious after the incidents of Pulwama and Balakot of February 2019 followed by Jammu & Kashmir Reorganization Act of 5 August 2019 which ended special status of the occupied J&K, prompting Pakistan to downgrade its diplomatic relations with New Delhi; suspending trade and travel links with India.

Following the inauguration of the Biden administration in the White House on 20 January 2021, a degree of optimism was expressed about the resumption of Track-I or official dialogue between India and Pakistan to normalize their suspended relations.

On 14 April, the Ambassador of UAE to Washington DC revealed about the resumption of Track-I or official dialogue between India and Pakistan to normalize their suspended relations. In an online discussion with Stanford University's Hoover Institution, Ambassador Yousuf Al Otaiba disclosed his country "played a role in bringing Kashmir escalation down and created a ceasefire hopefully ultimately leading to restoring diplomats and getting relationship back to a healthy level."

It is not for the first time that any foreign country has tried to broker peace between India and Pakistan. The Tashkent agreement of January 1966 following the September 1965 Indo-Pak war was mediated by the then Soviet Union. Likewise, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and some European countries also made efforts for normalizing polarized ties of India and Pakistan through back channel negotiations. President Bill Clinton mediated between India and Pakistan to deescalate the Kargil crisis in the summer of 1999.

Track-II dialogue right now seems to be a promising path to explore for the two nations. Track-II or non-official dialogue takes place when Track-I is not functioning and is participated in by non-officials having the support of officials. Track-II dialogue is an innovative mechanism to engage participants in serious brainstorming about contentious issues.

There is also the term Track-III, which is exclusively used for people-to-people dialogue with an objective to reduce the magnitude of mistrust and hostility at the popular level.

It was during cold war and superpower rivalry six decades ago which led to the emergence of Track-I and II diplomacy as a mechanism to mitigate Soviet-American tension by unleashing a process of dialogue.

Track-I diplomacy is between officials of the two countries like what was called as Indo-Pak comprehensive dialogue. Since 2016 after Pathankot and Uri attacks official Track-I talks were suspended but one can hear reports revealed by the UAE ambassador to the U.S about backchannel and secret talks between the officials of the two countries.

However, when Track-I is not functional, it is Track-II which plays a significant role in deescalating tension between the two adversaries. What is Track-II diplomacy and how does help in reducing tension and jumpstarting the stalled peace process? What role have Track-I, Track-II, and Track-III played in the Indo-Pakistan normalization process and what is the possibility of such talks bringing India and Pakistan back to the negotiating table?

It was in 1997 when composite dialogue, a Track-I mode of negotiations was launched between India and Pakistan which consisted of six items: Jammu & Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, Nuclear proliferation, economic cooperation and water issues.

A decade ago, composite dialogue was renamed as comprehensive dialogue. Unfortunately, since 1997 till 2016 no breakthrough was achieved on any of the items of Indo-Pak dialogue.

By 2000, around 42 Track-II initiatives between India and Pakistan were held under the auspices of various policy oriented think tanks and non-governmental organizations. Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) based in Colombo is known for launching several Track-II initiatives under the summer and winter school workshops. In most cases, Track-II initiatives got funding from international donors, particularly American and different European countries.

Track-III is purely non-official striving to promote people to people interaction. Indo-Pak People's Forum for Peace and Democracy in 1996 launched its program under Track-III and arranged several tours of Indian and Pakistani civil society and

other activists to build bridges at the popular level.

Having examined the dynamics of Track-I, II and III diplomacy one needs to analyse how these tracks are relevant today in the context of India and Pakistan. First, in prevailing circumstances, if it is difficult for New Delhi and Islamabad to resume comprehensive dialogue because of Pakistan's condition that unless the Modi regime reverses its August 5, 2019 act it cannot hold official talks.

In that case, Track-II diplomacy should be activated so that at least there is some activity at the non-official level to discuss issues which tend to derail Indo-Pak peace process. But for that to happen it is essential that policy oriented think tanks and NGOs which were earlier quite active in Track-II diplomacy are again activated with the support of their respective governments.

Critics however term Track-II diplomacy superficial and an attempt by sponsors to enhance their influence over the agenda and process of dialogue. Furthermore, Track-II was termed as public relations campaign and networking type of an activity and having little to do with the transformation of a mind-set of participants which promoted hostility and venom against each other.

The only meaningful contribution of Indo-Pak Track-II diplomacy particularly during 1990s was to identify and promote those participants having a moderate and pragmatic mind-set for peace in South Asia. Second, Indo-Pak Track-II diplomacy can be resumed because of the role of youths in mitigating a parochial and rigid thinking on contentious issues.

In fact, Track-II and III can be seen as an investment for peace in South Asia. The experience of Track-II during 1990s and post-2000 can also be revisited and innovative, creative ideas can be gauged to seek better results in 2021.

The need to resume Track-II dialogue in a big way is necessary in prevailing conditions to seek a jump start in Indo-Pak peace process provided the governments in New Delhi and Islamabad agree to provide necessary support in the form of informal participation by their officials.

The forum of Track-II provide an opportunity to officials get ideas in order to resume Track-I dialogue. Third, Track-II only has relevance if Track-I is not functional because the concerned circles want to keep the process of dialogue open even if it takes place at non-official level.

Presently, amid ruptured Indo-Pak official dialogue, Track-II is a useful tool with which to try and reactivate dialogue. It allows for non-officials having the support of officials to meet at a neutral venue – perhaps Kathmandu or Colombo – because for Indian and Pakistani participants it will be easier to visit Nepal and Sri Lanka because of easy Visa issuance rather than meeting in their own countries.

Since Track-II workshops and other programs are expensive because of travel, accommodation, and other costs, that are involved by definition, non-official sources of funding should help. The involvement of foreign donors to support Track-II initiatives peaked during the 1990s but suffered a setback because of 9/11.

Perhaps they can be approached again to sponsor Pakistan-India Track-II dialogue, very much needed in the prevailing circumstances? Perhaps peace activists, corporations, and philanthropists from Pakistan and India can join hands to dream up something?

On the other hand, neither Track-I nor Track-II can jumpstart the Indo-Pak peace process unless there is political will and determination on the part of the two countries to pursue a flexible and pragmatic approach on the root causes of conflict.

History of Indo-Pak relations is replete with examples of missed opportunities for peace regardless of the fact that the two countries are poor and backward. In a situation when India and Pakistan are grappling with the Covid-19 global pandemic, it is the right time to resume the process of dialogue by activating Track-II diplomacy.

Especially because neither Track-I nor Track-III diplomacy is practical at the moment because of suspension of diplomatic and travel links.

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

# Taliban in Strategic Policy Review After Delay of Foreign Troops' Withdrawal

*The hopes for an early Afghan rapprochement are waning as the insurgents moot questions like whether to resume operations against the US forces and whether to embrace the Istanbul process at all.*



By Tahir Khan

The Afghan Taliban are undertaking a wide-ranging strategic policy review following US President Joe Biden's unilateral move to push back the deadline for the withdrawal of the foreign forces from the country from 1 May to 11 September 2021.

The Taliban top negotiator Sheikh Abdul Hakeem told The Truth International (TTI) last week the ongoing deliberations covered all key questions including whether to attend the Istanbul Conference at all whenever it is held; whether to resume operations against the US forces; and whether to continue negotiations with Dr Ashraf Ghani's Afghan government team.

Also under appraisal is whether to keep the Taliban diplomatic office in Qatar or move to another country as the attitude of Qatar has changed, said Hakeem, who is leading a team of the Qatar-based political envoys in the consultations with the group's supreme leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhunnzada.

United States President Joe Biden has pushed back the May Day deadline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan agreed in last year's Doha Agreement by about four months to 11 September 2021.

The fragile Afghan peace process faced another serious blow after the Taliban decided to stay away from the Istanbul conference, urging the US to refrain from "mysterious and conspiratorial gatherings, as they are futile for the establishment of peace."

American Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in his letter to President Ashraf Ghani and Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation Dr Abdullah Abdullah in March said he was confident the Taliban and Afghan government would finalize a peace agreement at the Istanbul meeting.

The Taliban, who were keen on the May withdrawal, seem to have been piqued the

unilateral US decision to push back the deadline to September, which eventually led them to ditch the international conference on the Afghan peace process, proposed to be held in Istanbul, Turkey this month.

The US had proposed the "high level and inclusive conference" between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban to make decisions on an interim set-up and a permanent ceasefire.

The Istanbul Conference was expected to help set the direction for Afghanistan in the wake of the pull-out of the foreign forces in the tradition of the Bonn Conference of 2001 that helped settle on the political disposition for the post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Decisions were expected to be taken on matters like formation of an interim government, cessation of hostilities between the Afghan partisans, and the contours of a political system for Afghanistan. But the

Taliban seem to have dashed all those hopes up until now.

The 10-day conference was originally scheduled to start on 16 April but the Taliban said they needed more time to hold consultations ahead of the moot. They again declined to show up when Turkey, Qatar, and the United Nations, the co-conveners of the meeting, announced new dates of 24 April to May 4.

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced on 20 April the conference had been postponed until after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

The Taliban on their part have declared a policy of not taking part in any international conference concerning the future of Afghanistan until all foreign forces withdraw from the country. This condition reflects the Taliban's tough stance on the issue of foreign forces that means they may skip Istanbul and other conferences if they take place in four months.

Taliban and Pakistan official sources say that Islamabad has urged the Taliban to join the Istanbul conference but the insurgent group is not prepared to listen. This is contrary to the widespread perception that Pakistan controls the Taliban.

The peace process currently faces an uncertain fate and a Taliban official says no talks are underway in Qatar and things would be clear after the Taliban negotiators complete consultations with the top leaders and members of the leadership council.

The Taliban official, who does not want to be identified by name, told The Truth International that the Taliban will wait until May 1 and will then chalk out future strategy. Mr Biden had announced to start withdrawal of remaining troops on May 1st and complete the withdrawal on Sept. 11, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

In a series of interactions with the Taliban officials, The Truth International (TTI) has found that some Taliban leaders are averse to the Istanbul meeting, especially since President Biden's unilateral move to dispense with the deadline Washington agreed with the Taliban as part of the Doha accord.

For the Taliban, an end to foreign invasion is the top priority. They also push for the establishment of an Islamic government which they say was mentioned in the Doha Agreement.

The Taliban have also ruled out joining an interim government with President Ghani, who had proposed a set up under him with some of his team staying on and the Taliban joining in. Instead, the insurgent group that continues to style itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan want the Ghani administration replaced by a new, inclusive and Islamic government.

There is no word as to what the contours of such an administration would be.

Suspicious that the US is looking to use the Istanbul conference to put political pressure on them, the Taliban have

effectively torpedoed the process by refusing to show up.

"The weakness in this conference was that its planning came solely from the American side", a commentary posted to the Taliban's Alemarah website last week said. "America and the Kabul administration were enthusiastic for the Conference, while the Islamic Emirate showed no interest in it.

"The result was that America's one-sided attempts for the holding this conference failed and the conference could not go ahead at its appointed time. It is clear from such experiences that steps taken for the advancement of peace, be they meetings, conferences or anything else, should not be unilateral".

Like the US, President Ghani and Abdullah's reconciliation council were confident about the outcome of the conference and had prepared their plans to be presented at the conference. A widely-publicized plan of US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad that has outlined suggestions for an interim government to end the conflict was also expected to be part of the discussion.

The Taliban are also disappointed at the US failure to secure the release of about 7,000 Taliban prisoners held by Kabul. The remaining Taliban prisoners were to be freed in three months after signing of the Doha Agreement.

Another Taliban grievance is that there has been no action to match the Doha accord promise of the removal of the names of Taliban leaders from the United Nations sanctions list.





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## His Fourth Finance Minister

*Prime Minister Imran Khan finally has a Finance Minister equal to the task, but his job is a tall order and the path is fraught.*



By Mehtab Haider

**F**inance Minister Shaukat Tarin has his work cut out for him: Control inflation, rein in public borrowing, put the ailing power sector finances in order, create more jobs, reduce poverty, and coax the economy into posting a healthy growth.

Mr Tarin is a capable and clear-headed person clearly better qualified to lead the economy than any of Khan's previous choices for the job: Hamad Azhar who is a greenhorn, Asad Umar who always seemed out of his depth at the job, and Hafeez Sheikh whose heatless machinations assign zero weightage to the sufferings of the masses.

The veteran technocrat started putting his nose to the grindstone in a sequestered office within the FBR headquarters even before his appointment as Minister for Finance and Revenue was formalised – an unmistakable indication he is alive to both the magnitude and sensitivity of the challenge on hand.

A seasoned operator, Mr Tarin used his media outings in the run up to his assumption of office to let everybody know what a train wreck of an economy he was inheriting. His job demands building a more professional economic team, devising of short, medium- and long-term plans and then execute them without any delays.

The new Finance Minister will have to face major challenges on the economic front including rising inflationary pressures, increasing public debt at supersonic speed, low GDP growth, tax to GDP ratio and cash bleeding power sector. He will also need to adjust policies in response to the emerging ground realities.

Perhaps the foremost challenge facing him is low economic growth combined with high inflationary pressures. The IMF projects GDP growth rate of 4.2 percent for fiscal year 2021-22 and 4.5 percent for 2022-23. These numbers are too low to offset Pakistan's runaway population growth.

It will be challenging for the incumbent Minister for Finance for continuation of the IMF programme without facing any major interruptions. Pakistan had agreed with the IMF for jacking up electricity tariff by PKR 5 per unit till June 2021 but lately PM Khan has stopped the officials from raising power tariff. Now it will become challenging for the Minister for Finance for ensuring the continuation of IMF program on one hand while tackling the monster of circular debt that is all set to cross another psychological barrier of PKR 2.5 trillion by the end of June 2021.

The CPI based inflation is set to reach double digits on a monthly basis. This is mainly because of two factors: the low base in last few months of previous a financial year when COVID-19 pandemic had spread in Pakistan, and higher prices of different commodities in the international market.

With the latest assessment about stabilizing POL prices in the international market, it is hoped that it will provide a sigh of relief on increasing price hike in Pakistan otherwise commodities prices including palm oil, pulses, and poultry feed are posing challenges on rising food prices in our domestic market.

Another challenge for the new minister is inherent to the proposed SBP Amendment bill 2021 as highly controversial clauses have been proposed through this bill. It remains to be

seen if and how the new minister proposes changes to this to strike a balance at a time when Governor State Bank of Pakistan is using all his influence to propose changes into SBP law of his choice.

Within the short span of two years and ten-month rule, the PTI led regime removed three ministers for finance including Asad Umar, Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, and finally Hammad Azhar who was given additional charge just as a stop-gap arrangement for a couple of weeks' period and now the government brought in Shaukat Tarin with hopes that he would be able to overcome economic woes of the country.



Mr Tarin needs to analyse the mistakes made by two Finance Ministers that resulted into their unceremonious removal from this crucial slot. Mr Asad Umar was removed primarily because he took too long for taking decision to approach the IMF. His dithering eventually cost Pakistan dearly when the government had to accept a front-loaded deal to reach an agreement with the IMF for USD 6 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF).

The measures Pakistan committed to include were highly ambitious revenue collection targets and jacking up both electricity and gas tariff as well as the controversial State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) Amendment Bill 2021 to replace the existing SBP Act 1956.

Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, a well versed economist but known for lacklustre and laidback attitude, did not bother to establish close liaison with potential investors and top notch businessmen to restore their confidence in the direction of the economy. Nor did he bother to establish any regular arrangement to communicate with journalists to tell his side of the story for building narrative on the economic front.



After his defeat in the Senate election by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) candidate Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani, he had lost his footing but his sudden removal raised many eyebrows, giving rise to speculation something had happened all of sudden that resulted in his unceremonious removal.

Now the newly appointed Minister for Finance Shaukat Tarin will have to avoid all those mistakes that were committed by his predecessors as he must interact with potential investors, businessmen and journalists on frequent basis. Mr Shaukat Tarin will have to ensure meeting with the Parliamentarians especially belonging to treasury benches

Mr Tarin has yet to indicate if he intends to continue with the existing economic team. Bringing in his own core team should be an option available to him and it looks likely he will make at least some changes to the team. The exact details of any such changes will surface within the first couple of weeks of his Ministry. The role of the incumbent Special Assistant to PM on Revenues Dr Waqar Masood might be further strengthened.

Another aspect to take into account is the plainspoken manner of Mr Tarin because handling dissent is not one of the strong points of PM Khan. Before joining as Minister for Finance, Mr Tarin had publicly criticized the economic policies of PTI-led regime so he will have to reconcile himself with the narrative of the government. In any case, how long can a Finance Minister known for speaking his mind last with him remains to be seen.



The low-growth scenario projected by the IMF for the next couple of years is bound to result in increasing poverty and unemployment. Economists agree Pakistan needs a sustained GDP growth rate in the vicinity of 6 or 7 percent to tackle poverty and unemployment.

In other words, unless Mr Tarin can work his magic to considerably jack up the economic growth in short order, the hopes of an economic miracle Khan's diehard supporters still harbour will continue to be dashed.

# Completing the Retrenchment of Pak-Afghan Trade

*Come September, the Afghan war economy hits the rock bottom, allowing the two neighbours to build mutual trade from the ground up in line with their real-economy needs.*



By Javed Mahmood

The steady drawdown of foreign troops from Afghanistan over the last decade has caused a commensurately steady decline in the volume of Pak-Afghan trade.

Good days of bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan seem to be over now. This is evident from a consistent decline in mutual trade between the two countries in recent years. For example, in FY20 (from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020), bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan has further decreased, falling to around USD 1 billion.

In FY20, Pakistan's exports to this landlocked neighbour dropped to USD 888 million after nearly a decade, from USD 1.20 billion in the preceding financial year. Similarly, imports from Afghanistan have decreased to USD 121 million in FY20 from USD 170 million in FY19. Thus, in FY20 the two countries' mutual trade further shrank to USD 1.09 billion from

1.37 billion a year ago. Pakistan is the major loser of decline in trade of the two because imports from Afghanistan are less than 20 percent of exports from Pakistan.

A gradual but consistent withdrawal of the foreign troops (the US and NATO soldiers) from Afghanistan from 2011-2020 has derailed two countries bilateral trade. Meanwhile, in 2020, COVID-19 has also dampened mutual trade between the two nations. During pandemic, businessmen of both the countries could not continue trade as usual because of risks of spread of coronavirus.

According to the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) data about two countries' bilateral trade, in 2015-16, for the first time exports from Pakistan to Afghanistan surged to USD 1.43 billion, from nearly half a billion dollars about six years before. In fact, deployment of the American and NATO troops in Afghanistan in the backdrop 11

September 2001 attacks and subsequent US invasion of the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, demand of consumer items from Pakistan witnessed a steady growth in Afghanistan.

According to the World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) data portal, among major exports from Pakistan to Afghanistan were vegetable, live animals, food products including wheat and flour, and fuels, especially diesel. Meanwhile, Pakistan's leading imports from the landlocked country were vegetables, fresh and dry fruits, and carpets, etc.

After 9/11, more than 140,000 US and NATO troops ascended on Afghanistan. However, in 2011, American President Obama announced withdrawal of 10,000 troops and another 23,000 troops left Afghanistan in 2012. This was the beginning of the process of gradual withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

Additionally, in the second week of April 2021, the new President of the United States Joe Biden announced a complete withdrawal of troops from the landlocked country by 11 September 2021. This final phase of foreign troops' withdrawal will coincide with 20th anniversary of the US and NATO forces' deployment to Afghanistan.

Complete foreign troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan is being seen as a good development for Pakistan because the country is expected to witness minimum terrorist attacks directed from Afghanistan and infiltration of terrorists from the neighbouring country. Furthermore, Indian and other foreign intelligence agencies would not be able to undermine security of Pakistan and sponsor terrorist attacks from Afghanistan like past. The complete drawdown of foreign troops will deny them the space and capability to wage a proxy war on Pakistan from Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, in financial terms, this development would further dampen demand of Pakistani consumer items in Afghanistan in the years ahead. Nevertheless, to promote trade with Afghanistan, Pakistani government should minimize Afghanistan's dependence on goods being imported under the transit trade arrangement, especially those items which are available in Pakistan and those which are being smuggled back into Pakistan after their import under the transit trade.

Being a landlocked country, Afghanistan has the right to avail transit trade facility from Pakistan under the World Trade Organization (WTO) laws. The WTO rules mandate that every landlocked country must be allowed transit trade facility from any neighbouring country having seaports. Nonetheless, the options are available to minimize misuse of the transit trade with the aim to protect economic interest of Pakistan.

Similarly, Pakistan should sign the proposed preferential trade agreement (PTA) with Afghanistan as soon as possible to promote bilateral trade between the two nations. This agreement should target long-term bilateral trade development between the two countries.

Pakistan has already signed preferential trade agreements with several countries

including China. Consequently, Sino-Pakistan mutual trade expanded to reach USD 18 billion a few years after the enforcement of a preferential trade agreement. Although Afghanistan is not a major or rich country, officials of the two countries can evolve strategies to exploit potential of their mutual trade which is being anticipated around USD 4-5 billion a year.

Importantly, Pakistan hosted the two-day Eight Meeting of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Coordination Authority in Islamabad on 29 December 2020. The purpose of this bilateral meeting was to discuss issues pertaining to transit trade and evolve a strategy to negotiate and develop a preferential trade agreement (PTA).



Addressing the meeting, Abdul Razak Dawood, adviser to Prime Minister on Trade, said that in addition to discussing transit trade issues, both the sides have evolved mechanism relating to the preferential trade agreement. He was optimistic of the PTA implementation from February 2021 that would promote regional trade and economic development.

However, the enforcement of preferential trade agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan is yet to materialize. Thus, in this scenario as the US President Biden's deadline of complete withdrawal of troops is approaching fast, Pakistani government should pace up efforts to take measures that lead to the implementation of the proposed PTA and improvements in the bilateral transit trade agreements between the two countries to promote their trade in the absence of foreign troops.

## Proposed Preferential Trade Agreement and Improvement in Transit Trade

In a December 2020 meeting at Islamabad, Pakistan demanded transit trade access from Afghanistan to each of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Pakistan has also proposed that trucks carrying goods from Afghanistan to India, must not cross Wagah Border. Additionally, Pakistani officials have also demanded removal of per day penalty of AFN 5000 in case Pakistani trucks carrying transit trade goods for Central Asian Republics (CARs) do not cross Afghanistan in five days.

Afghanistan on its part has demanded inclusion of automotive parts and cigarettes in the transit trade that Pakistan has banned to protect the local industry. Also, Afghanistan has proposed activation of rail links to promote transit and bilateral trade. Afghanistan also demanded round-the-clock operations at Chaman border with increase in scanners, notifications of customs rates as per the WTO mechanism, and extortion-free culture.

Both the countries also proposed integration of their customs clearing software and systems to avoid delays in release of shipments and clearance of perishable items such as fruits and vegetable on a priority basis.

*Writer is former Resident Editor of daily The Nation, Karachi.*

# Tesla: Totalled or Not Totalled?

*Can the world's leading EV maker recover from the fallout of the car crash that resulted from one of its vehicles being tricked into driving without a human driver?*



By Mishaal Ashraf

Can Elon Musk's Tesla recover from the crash that was heard around the world? This has been a question tugging at the minds of investors and technology enthusiasts worldwide since the investigators found there was nobody in the driving seat of the Model S that crashed and caught fire, killing two.

While EV makers across the board are working on autopilot systems, the regulators require a driving vehicle to have a human driver at all times. As it surfaced after the crash, Tesla vehicles can be tricked into driving even without a human in the driving seat – a flaw that proved fatal on this occasion.

## Knowing Tesla

Tesla is a privately held American electric automobile and green energy company with Elon Musk as its Chief Executive Officer, Zachary Kirkhorn as its Chief Financial Officer, and Robyn Denholm as the company's Chairman. It is one of the

fastest growing global brands and the leading electric vehicle brand. In 2020 alone, Tesla delivered around 500,000 vehicles all over the world.

At the moment, Tesla's Model 3 is the world's best-selling electric vehicle model. The company's other major products include solar panels, solar roof tiles, battery energy storage technology, and space travel. However, it originally gained its name and reputation majorly because of the production of electric cars.

## Tesla's market valuation

Tesla was founded in 2003, with its headquarters in California, USA. In 2010, the company announced to go public. Ever since then, Tesla has been leading the mainstream. It has been a trendsetter in the passenger vehicle industry. In September 2020, Tesla's market valuation reached a new high, as it became worth 442 billion USD. Tesla's share price rose by 950% between September 2019 and September 2020.

## Investors interested in safer options

However, the New Year brought in new challenges. In February 2021, CNBC reported Tesla's biggest drop in stock prices since September 2020, when it closed down 8.55%. Ever since 2021 began, Tesla has been having a hard time. As of April 23, the stock price per share is 719.69 USD. This is more than 24% lower than the stock's peak price, and 3.28% lower than April 22nd's regular market. It seems that if the stockholders continue to sell their stocks and opt for safer choices, Tesla's stock could drop even further.

## Emerging competition

One reason for the stock prices going down is the rise of potential competitors. At the moment, Tesla enjoys the privilege of being the number one electric car manufacturer, but with time, more and more players are entering the arena. In September 2020,

Tesla had 18% of the global market share in electric cars, followed by Volkswagen at 6%. Chinese companies are now emerging as key actors. For example, firms like NIO and XPeng are being replaced by Tesla in China, which is the biggest market for electric cars. Similarly, other companies like BYD, and Ford are threatening Tesla's position as the market leader, hence affecting its stock prices negatively.

## Has Tesla been “tricked”?

Recently, a disastrous car accident took place where the police reported that no one was found behind the steering wheel. Two men lost their lives in the car accident, when their Tesla drove itself into a tree in Austin, Texas. Word has been going around that engineers have “easily tricked” a Tesla car into driving via its autopilot feature, without actually having anyone in the driver's seat.

Many trips on a closed half-mile track took place in the Tesla Model Y sport vehicle. During these trips, engineers made the

discovery that the car was able to steer itself along painted lines. However, it did not issue any warning that the driver's seat was empty.

Jake Fisher, senior director of auto testing at Consumer Reports, issued a statement saying, “In our evaluation, the system not only failed to make sure the driver was paying attention, but it also could not tell if there was a driver at all”. “Tesla is falling behind other automakers like GM and Ford that, on models with advanced driver assist systems, use technology to make sure the driver is looking at the road”, Fisher further added.

Like GM uses cameras inside their vehicles to monitor the driver and ensure the driver is paying attention to the road, some Tesla cars also have cameras inside. However, their function is not to monitor the driver while the car is on autopilot. Rather, the cameras are used to record footage that can be analysed later on.

## Is it wise to invest in Tesla?

The question remains: should one invest in Tesla right now? Even though the company is going through a rough patch, it is still leading the electric vehicles industry. Elon Musk, the company's CEO is known for his innovative ideas. Tesla is also working closely with Apple in order to complete and implement a clean and green battery storage projects.

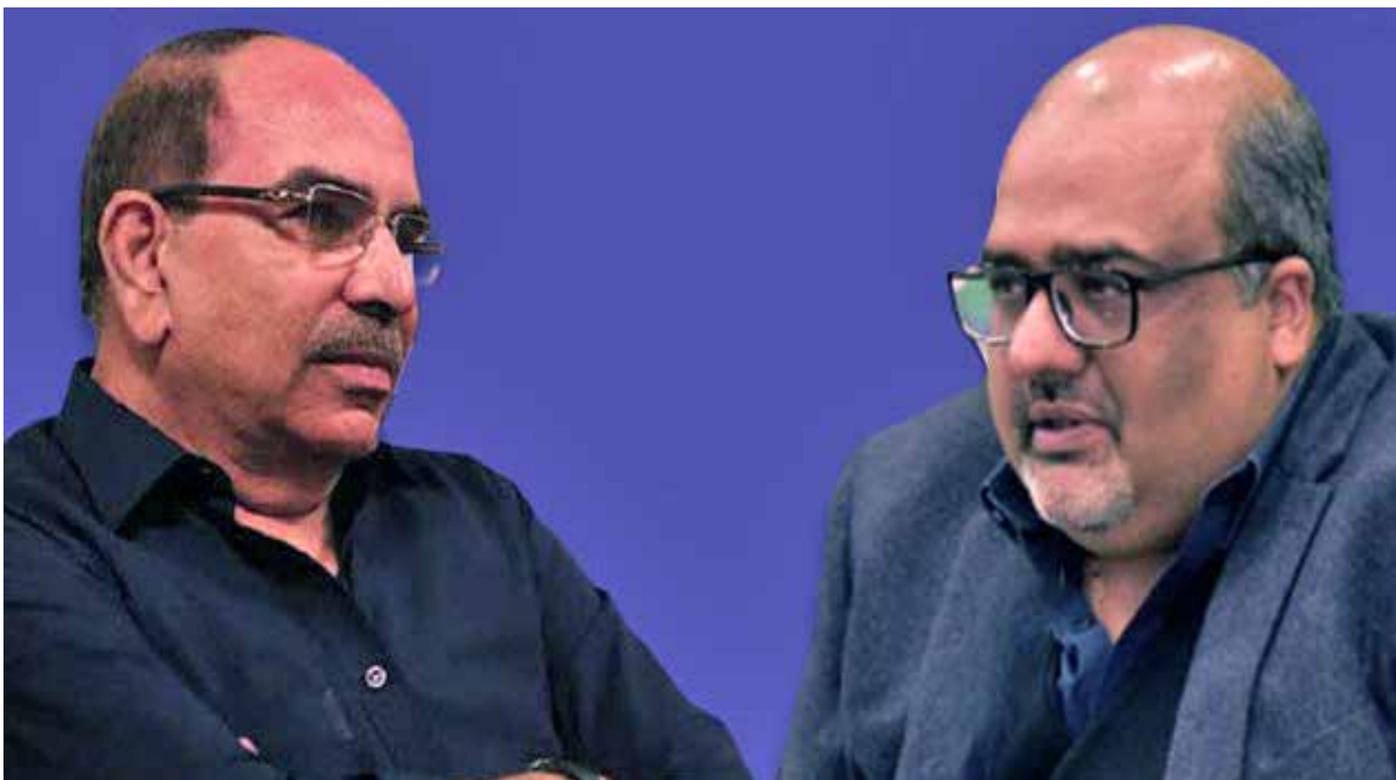
If we look in the long run, these projects will give an upper hand to Tesla. However, it must be noted that Tesla has already used these positives and valued their stocks at a sky-high price. This means that the company is left behind with very less wiggle room and it cannot afford to make any errors at this point.

Having said that, the higher the risk there is, higher the profit will be!



## Shahzad Akbar and the Art of the Steal

*Pakistan's top government officials hushed the matter in the name of national security when it first surfaced back in December 2019 – but the GBP 190 million steal may be too big to keep under wraps.*



The word came from the federal cabinet and the man in the hot seat: The matter was to be kept strictly under the wraps because it concerned national security.

Some oddball spoilers in the media tried to pry open the thick shell of secrecy surrounding the matter in vain. Top government aides who have raised corruption-bashing over the media to the level of a fine art were tight-lipped under withering scrutiny.

A fresh investigation into the matter by the prestigious Dawn daily has now reconfirmed it was an open and shut case: The British authorities traced the tainted money, painstakingly made a case to confiscate it, and repatriated it to Pakistan. The highest executive authorities in Pakistan practically stole the money from the nation again and returned it to Malik Riaz.

The news, then, is not that Malik Riaz has been suspected of wrongdoing in the United Kingdom. The news is that power-

ful elements within the Pakistani state firmly have his back – and that they have zero scruples about it.

The matter pertains to a GBP 190 million settlement between the British NCA and Malik Riaz that came at the tail end of an investigation into the assets held in the UK by Malik Riaz and his family members.

On the course of the investigation, the NCA secured eight account forfeiture orders (AFOs) from London's Westminster Magistrates Court in August 2019. In pursuance of the AFOs, the assets – worth more than GBP 100 million – were frozen on 12 August 2019. These were in addition to the approximately GBP 20 million worth of assets frozen earlier in December 2018.

The Dawn investigation has published documentary evidence tying the assets to Malik Riaz, his family members, and companies associated with them.

Akbar announced the settlement at an Islamabad media conference on 5 Decem-

ber 2019, saying GBP 140 million had been repatriated to Pakistan. Akbar said the remaining GBP 50million was to be transferred later after the sale of 1 Hyde Park Place – a prize property acquired by a company associated with Malik Riaz in March 2016 from Hasan Nawaz, the son of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Interestingly, the property, bought by the Sharif scion in 2007, seems to have been offloaded from the family's UK portfolio in a hurry ahead of the publication of the Panama Papers. Ali says the sale "illustrated the mutually beneficial relationships that exist among Pakistan's rarefied elite".

Malik Riaz later confirmed the money repatriated as part of the settlement had gone to a Supreme Court of Pakistan account set up by the court to receive Bahria Town's liabilities.

Asked at the presser how the money could be deposited to an SC account on behalf of Malik Riaz when it already belonged to the national exchequer, Akbar was evasive,

saying the government, the NCA, and Malik Riaz had signed a “deed of confidentiality” which prevented him from elaborating on the matter.

The Dawn reporter, Naziha Syed Ali frames her report, published on 18 April 2018, in terms of the legendary deal-making skills of Malik Riaz, the well-known real estate mogul who reputedly sits atop Pakistan’s most powerful patronage network. But the story can as easily be framed in terms of the terrible vacuum of integrity in the top echelons of the Pakistani state.

Did the UK authorities feel betrayed by how the money had practically been returned to Malik Riaz? Very likely. The British National Crime Agency (NCA) has since “made some significant changes to the way it conducts and publicises its civil financial investigations”, says Ali, a veteran of real estate corruption investigations who was the subject of a 30-minute BBC World Service profile by Owen Bennett-Jones in 2020.

And she quotes Susan Hawley, executive director of the UK based anti-corruption charity Spotlight on Corruption, as saying, “The NCA has clearly done some thinking since the Malik Riaz settlement, and the controversy it has generated in Pakistan”.

“It is very welcome that it has committed to greater transparency, and to ensuring that any settlement does not damage public confidence. It has also committed to providing greater detail to journalists and NGOs about upcoming hearings in open court which is a major step forward....”

“We cannot have another situation where it is widely perceived that money confiscated in the UK has essentially benefitted the perpetrator when it is returned to a country, or that the perpetrator is seen as having got away with it”.

Getting away with it is the key here – and come to think of it, manoeuvring two national governments continents apart to steal a fortune’s worth of money all over again is indeed a remarkable feat of underhanded enterprise.

Going by the Dawn investigation, the kingpin of this enterprise is, of all people, Mirza Shahzad Akbar, Prime Minister Imran Khan’s accountability czar.

For starters, it was Akbar who, as Special

Assistant to the Prime Minister on Accountability, drafted Federal Cabinet support to utterly hush the matter. He presented for approval at a Cabinet meeting a sealed envelope ostensibly containing a non-disclosure agreement concerning the GBP 190 million settlement the NCA had signed with Malik Riaz.

But his involvement with the affair apparently goes back to at least September 2019, before the NCA and Malik Riaz reached the settlement. During that month, “Mr Akbar is believed to have met Mr Riaz multiple times, at the Dorchester hotel and at the latter’s daughter’s residence”, says Ali.

The report suggest the NCA weighed the option of criminal proceedings against Malik Riaz but was dissuaded by Akbar, a Barrister from Lincoln’s Inn who also holds an LLM degree from the University of Newcastle.

Ali quotes a well-placed source as saying Akbar advised the NCA to settle with Malik Riaz or else he would burn through their prosecution budget by initiating expensive litigation.

What is more, says the reporter, “Mr Akbar clearly took up the matter at the very highest levels of the British government. How else can one explain its Home Office’s refusal to share information about the case despite a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)?

“Whatever the approach Mr Akbar adopted, it seems to have worked and the NCA in early December 2019 agreed to a civil settlement with Malik Riaz. While noting this, the NCA’s annual report does not name Riaz but describes him as “a Pakistani national, whose business is one of largest private sector employers in Pakistan.”

The NCA is the UK’s apex national agency that fights, among several other crimes, money laundering and illicit finance, using civil as well as criminal court proceedings.

Says Andy Lewis, Head of Asset Denial at the NCA, “Recovering criminal assets when you’re dealing with serious organised crime is rarely straightforward. Whenever we use our civil recovery powers we’ve got to be sure we can provide evidence to

persuade the Court, to the civil standard, that the assets, which the respondents claim are legitimately theirs, are derived from criminality”.

According to Andy Devine, Head of International Corruption Unit at the NCA, the Agency’s primary focus will always be on criminal justice outcomes, but investigators often find themselves in situations where a criminal disposal is not possible.

“Yet we can’t ignore the way in which many corrupt elites seek to launder their illicit wealth in or through the UK; especially given the UK’s commitments under the UN Convention Against Corruption to trace and return stolen assets to the countries from which they have been stolen. ...

“In the most extreme scenarios our targets are still in positions of power in the countries they are exploiting, or have used their leverage to avoid serious sanction in their home jurisdiction”.

“It is often very difficult to prove some of our cases to the criminal standard of ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ for all the reasons set out by my colleagues”, says Paul Cypher, Deputy Director NCA Legal.

The NCA recognises that “there will be circumstances in which a conviction is feasible but use of the non-conviction based powers might better serve the overall public interest, for example through representing a better deployment of resources to target someone with significant property which cannot be explained by legitimate income.

“The key is that civil recovery powers allow us to freeze and then, where appropriate, forfeit funds where the Courts agree that there are reasonable grounds to suspect that they represent the proceeds of crime or may be used in crime”, says Paul Cypher, Deputy Director NCA Legal. “It is well documented that many criminals are willing to serve time in prison. What really hurts them is the denial and removal of their assets.”

At least Malik Riaz seems to have been saved that hurt thanks chiefly to the exertions of Shahzad Akbar.

*Courtesy Dawn Newspaper*

# The Fine Art of Fighting Corruption through Stern Rhetoric and Scant Action

*The official investigation into the June 2020 fuel shortage has become yet another high-profile probe into corruption getting nowhere amid great fanfare.*



By Khalique Ahmad

Prime Minister Imran Khan's government seems to have retired the old tactic of announcing inquiry commissions to carpet over corruption.

The new approach does not stop at appointing commissions. It involves publishing inquiry reports amid great fanfare to exact political mileage for his squeaky clean government waging a relentless war on corruption, perhaps announcing strict action against those found guilty – and then letting the matter languish through inaction.

The most recent case in point would be the progress of probe into the countrywide shortage of petroleum-based fuels of June 2020.

On March 26, Prime Minister Imran Khan ordered a forensic investigation into the crisis, asked his special assistant on petroleum Nadeem Babar to step down, and issued directives that petroleum secretary Mian Asad Hayaud Din be replaced to ensure transparent investigation. Mr Babar immediately stepped down.

This was announced by Planning Minister Asad Umar at a high profile joint news conference with members of a ministerial committee comprising Shireen Mazari, Shafqat Mahmood and Azam Swati.

The committee was earlier constituted by the Prime Minister give recommendations on the basis of a 605-page report of the Inquiry Commission on Shortage of Petroleum Products in Pakistan led by an FIA additional director general Abubakar Khudabakhsh.

In June last year, the country's petrol stations went dry as international prices went down and oil companies resorted to lowering import volumes to avoid inventory losses amid alleged collusion between some government officials and market players.

"The time has now come for punishments", Mr Umar had said adding the prime minister had made it clear that this "mafia" and other cartels that had been operating for decades under the "leadership of previous rulers" would not be spared. "The institu-

tions have failed to fulfil their responsibility and we have to fix responsibility now, whether they were incapable, had personal interests or colluded".

Almost a month down the road, Mr Hayaud Din continues to hold the post of secretary petroleum. Thanks to the prime minister's principal secretary, neither official orders have so far been issued to ask him report to the establishment division, nor any replacement notified, as announced by the planning minister last month.

Interestingly, his requests for premature retirement and long leave too are yet to elicit a response – leaving him in a limbo.

In fact, Secretary Hayaud Din last week imposed the major penalty of 'dismissal from service' and 'removal from service' on two grade 17 and 18 officers of Department of Explosives of the Petroleum Division. The decisions came after proceedings against the two officials over acts of Commission and omissions in illegally issuing Form-L and other safety certificates

to major oil companies that were highlighted by the Inquiry Commission.

But this all appear to be smokescreen. After more than six months of submission to the prime minister, the federal cabinet is understood to have authorized the other week to make public the Inquiry Commission report that concluded a revenue loss estimated at over PKR 265 billion a year on account of smuggling of oil products.

Neither the Inquiry Commission nor the Ministerial Committee discussed the fact that petroleum division had proposed not to pass on an abrupt price cut of about PKR 28-29 per litre and let the oil companies recoup a part of their inventory losses and avoid run on the petrol pumps in a gradual manner.

The ministers and members of the economic coordination committee had, however, political mileage to achieve by delivery a big price cut that led to sudden increase in sales as consumers and unscrupulous elements topped up their vehicles' tanks and created private stashes.

Also, the report did not highlight the fact that at the peak of wheat harvesting season, when the supply chain of major petroleum products, particularly high speed diesel (HSD), had been seriously affected in many parts of the country, the oil marketing companies (OMCs) had allegedly been playing tricks for monetary gains on the basis of increase in tax rates on petroleum products as approved by the government on 30 April.

The problem was compounded by low stocks kept by the OMCs at retail outlets in view of the imminent price reduction for May and leak of information from official channels that the government planned to increase petroleum levy.

Common sense says it is illogical to place a bowl of milk in front of a cat and expect it to remain aloof. The buck should thus have stopped at the ECC, the cabinet, and the prime minister for letting prices fluctuate so wildly and destabilize supplies.

Some oil companies offloaded their vessels on the last few days of April and paid petroleum levy at the applicable rate of PKR 15.49 and PKR 17.26 per litre on HSD and petrol, respectively, at the customs clearance point. However, they did

not shift their products to their retail outlet and kept them stored in the white oil pipeline or their depots.

As a consequence, they were able to sell their products in May when the government increased petroleum levy to PKR 30 and PKR 24 per litre on HSD and petrol, thus earning a windfall of PKR 14.5 and PKR 7 per litre respectively on the two products. This way they were able to make close to a couple of billion rupees in a matter of days. However, that was not all.

Some companies purchased the products abroad in the last few days, when global prices had crashed to USD 15 per barrel, but they were entitled to much higher sales price calculated on the basis of the relatively higher price of PSO on imports in earlier weeks at around USD 19-20 per barrel. Another windfall of PKR 2 billion is estimated to have resulted on this account.

The report of the Commission noted that quantification of data retrieved from OMCs with factors of petroleum levy, general sales tax, customs duty, etc., worked out to a loss of PKR 265 billion only because of smuggling of petroleum products. However, this was not relied upon given suspicious OMCs data that may have been fudged and exaggerated. "The FBR figures, however, are authentic and accurate...Hence, the figure of smuggled goods and consequent losses to the Government Exchequer of PKR 240 billion is more authentic", the Commission said.

The Commission said the situation of loss of revenue due to petroleum smuggling in Pakistan is staggering and it was almost an open secret that petroleum products (especially petrol and diesel) are being smuggled into Pakistan from western border of Taftan, Iran. However, the Commission did not proceed on hearsay and corroborated tangible evidence to reasonably quantify the extent of smuggling.

On top of the secret probe, figures of seized quantity of petrol and diesel were collected from the FBR and worked out the total petroleum levy plus general sales tax in addition to the varying customs duty over the full fiscal year 2019-20. It noted average customs duty on petrol and diesel at PKR 3.50 and PKR 9.70 per litre respectively.

The GST and Petroleum Levy on petrol and diesel averaged PKR 33.27 per litre and PKR 37.52 per litre respectively.

This was also cross verified from the unusual rise in consumption of petroleum products (120,000 tonnes of petrol and 290,000 tonnes of HSD) in June 2020 when compared to same period last year, and the revenue loss was worked out at PKR 265 billion for the year. This was done by taking other variables as constant and given the fact that Iran border was tightly shut due to Covid-19 pandemic. The increased amount in consumption was attributed to the quantity of smuggled HSD and Petrol.

This being so in view of the fact that nothing extraordinary happened this year that was not happening during the year 2019, although the economic activity was subdued due to Covid-19, there was no other reason but the stoppage of smuggling as the same quantity was now being consumed legitimately and hence reflected in official data.

Another fact that has come to light is the smuggling of petroleum products by sea. The Inquiry Commission noted that "BYCO is reportedly involved in this nefarious business". Since BYCO has its own refinery in Hub, a far off and secluded place, there is hardly any check on its imports and what it gets smuggled in given an 18 km pipeline from its single point mooring in the open sea.

The conclusion of the report is the real eye-opener to say the least. PKR 240 billion is not an amount to be overlooked. The question arises as to how such a huge amount gets across the Taftan Border and further across the country with multiple agencies working to curb the menace.

"Interestingly, the inquiry by the Commission has revealed that this huge quantity is brought in 50,000 litres tankers by road from Iran. The border check-posts are primarily manned by Frontier Corps (South), assisted by Pakistan Customs. It is not possible that these huge tankers can cross Iran border on any other route or on the bare-backs of mules or humans....smuggling is carried out in connivance with the government agencies" and reaches Sindh, Punjab and KPK, concluded the inquiry Commission.

# The Witch-Hunt Against IPPs Will Hurt Future Investment, Warns Pakistan's Top IPP Exec

*The head of Pakistan's largest independent power producer says the allegations of wrongdoing against the sector are unfounded.*

By Azeem Waqas

With the common man struggling under the burden of an economy laid waste by the pandemic and power tariffs inexorably soaring through the sky, Pakistan's independent power producers (IPPs) are in the eye of the storm these days.

Self-righteous officials and unnamed experts have alike found time and media space to hang all kinds of blame on a sector that would normally be expected to fuel growth and underwrite prosperity.

Among other things, the IPPs have been accused of exacting unreasonably high rates of return and reporting inflated equity figures to enhance their profitability at the expense of the consumer. The sector as a whole has been faulted for adding to Pakistan's already high sovereign debt burden; adding coal-fired generation at the expense of greener alternatives; and being somehow responsible for the nagging problem of circular debt.

The Truth International (TTI) sat down with Mr. Khalid Mansoor, the Chief Executive Officer of HUBCO, the first and largest of Pakistan's IPPs, to sift fact from fiction. HUBCO generates approximately 10 percent of the country's electricity, making it the market leader.

Mansoor's side of the story paints a starkly different picture, maintaining all allegations against the IPPs are unfounded. He asserts no wrongdoing has ever been established on the part of the IPPs, and warns a NAB probe into the sector would be counterproductive, hurting investor confidence.

He also speaks of broken promises over CPEC power projects, and the heartburn this has caused in the Chinese government and investor circles.

Given below is an abridged transcript of the conversation, edited slightly for reasons of clarity and readability.

**TTI: There is a perception that the CPEC power projects will add to Pakistan's already unsustainable sovereign debt burden. Is that how things are?**

**KM:** This is not correct as all CPEC Power Projects are commercial enterprises which are repaying their debts from power generation sale revenues earned under private power agreements (PPAs) as per tariff determined by the Regulator [The National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA)].

**TTI: Has the government provided high rates of return on equity and sovereign guarantees, to all foreign investors?**

**KM:** The return on equity and sovereign guarantees on coal-based power plant provided to local and foreign investors are uniform.



**TTI: Has the government of Pakistan fulfilled its commitment to establish revolving funds to ensure uninterrupted payments to power producers?**

**KM:** No, the government has not established the revolving account as committed. This is against CPEC policy framework where government committed to establish a revolving account to ensure uninterrupted payments to project lenders. This non-compliance has caused serious disappointment and reservation among Government of China and Chinese financial institutions. The fallout of this would be difficulty in securing further financing for coal-based investments, e.g., for scaling up of Thar coal mining.

**TTI: It has been said that the ROE for power projects based on Thar coal “is the highest ever return on any Investment in Pakistan’s history” How do you comment on that?**

**KM:** The ROE is commensurate with country and project risks. Thar’s indigenous coal reserves had remained unexploited for decades due to lack of incentives to invest in this highly risky and unproven concept. Therefore, initially high returns had to be offered to incentivize investors and the results have been very positive. Subsequently, the rate of return has been reduced as now the risks have reduced. The rate of return will be further reduced for future investments.

**TTI: Is it true that the internal rate of return on investment (IRR) for CPEC projects is very high compared to the 12 to 14 percent IRR for similar projects elsewhere?**

**KM:** The difference in rate of return between countries is due to difference in technological and country risk.

**TTI: How do the CPEC power projects contribute to the crippling circular debt of Pakistan’s power sector?**

**KM:** CPEC projects – and for that matter, all IPP – do not cause an increase in circular debt. Circular debt is caused by the massive Aggregate Technical & Commercial (AT&C) losses and theft which stand at around 30 percent; the difference between actual cost of power purchase and the tariff determined by NEPRA; delay in the payment or non-payment of tariff differential subsidies by the government; and delayed determination and notification of tariff by NEPRA.

**TTI: What is the dispute resolution mechanism in case the government of Pakistan delays payments to the CPEC projects?**

**KM:** There is no special treatment for CPEC projects in terms of delayed payment. A project has the right to suspend operations if its overdue balance reaches a non-sustainable level. Further, delay in payment represents a default on the part of power purchaser for which the projects have right to terminate and/or call sovereign guarantee.

**TTI: Some analysts maintain China’s lending for infrastructure projects will lead to problematic increases in debt. What is your take?**

**KM:** Currently, China under the banner of CPEC has been investing heavily in infrastructure projects and this is causing increase in debt. However the resultant impact on economic growth is far higher. Prior to this investment, Pakistan was facing a severe supply shortfall of 5,000 to 7,000 MW resulting in 12- to 18-hour a day power outages as part of load shedding, which caused significant slowdown of the economy and annual GDP loss of about 2 percent. Pakistan should utilize this opportunity to the fullest and set the economy on the track of growth.

**TTI: Coal is seen as an environmentally expensive source of energy. How does the share of coal in Pakistan’s energy mix compare regional and global numbers?**

**KM:** With the completion of projects under execution, the coal-fired power generation would increase to about 20 percent

which is quite low as compared to world average of 40 percent and about 59 percent and 73 percent for India and China respectively.

**TTI: Electricity prices have risen to such levels it has become unaffordable for the common man. How do you comment on that?**

**KM:** There is no denying electricity prices are high but it is important to understand that the prices are high because in the past almost 30-40 percent of the generation mix was based on costly imported furnace oil. With recent generation capacity additions on coal, renewables, and highly efficient RLNG-based gas turbines, the average cost of generation will come down gradually.



**TTI: An official inquiry committee has alleged that most of the IPPs have fudged data to inflate equity so they can pocket more profit. What is your point of view?**

**KM:** NEPRA’s tariff determination process is very transparent, robust and detailed. The tariffs of IPPs have been determined and approved by NEPRA after thorough scrutiny of project costs, equity contributions, and so forth. As such, there is no question of showing high equity by IPPs. Furthermore, in the operations phase all invoices are verified and audited by NEPRA and CPPA(G) before being accepted and paid.

**TTI: To your knowledge what is the contribution of the CPEC projects to Pakistan’s annual debt increase?**

**KM:** The annual debt servicing of existing CPEC power generation projects is around USD 745 million.

**TTI: Do you think that NAB should be allowed to investigate the new IPPs agreements with the government?**

**KM:** IPPs have always acted transparently and voluntarily provided any information requested by NAB or other investigation agencies in the past. However, no wrongdoing has been proven against IPPs so far. Whatever IPPs earn is strictly in compliance with the PPAs and NEPRA’s tariff determinations.

As far as the new agreements are concerned, at GOP’s request, IPPs have voluntarily agreed to give unprecedented and substantial concessions in lieu of payment of their legitimate and long overdue receivables. The entire negotiations have been conducted in a very transparent manner with full disclosure and approval of the cabinet. Any investigation will only deteriorate investor confidence.

**TTI: What do you say to the allegations by the IPPs inquiry committee the IPPs have earned excess profit of trillions of rupees during the last two decade?**

**KM:** As I said earlier, IPPs' earnings are based on tariffs determined and approved by NEPRA. Also, the invoices of IPPs are verified and audited by NEPRA and CPPA(G) before being accepted or paid. Any profits made by IPPs are strictly in compliance with the PPAs and the tariff approved by NEPRA and therefore there is no question of excess profits. The allegations in the report of inquiry committee are unfounded and baseless.

**TTI: What do you think electricity prices should be increased or decreased in the near future?**

**KM:** The industrial consumer tariff is comparatively high which is negatively impacting the economy and has led to our exports becoming uncompetitive on international markets. While some increase in tariff may be required to recover costs, our focus should be on resolving the issues that are increasing the cost. The first of these is high capacity payments. We need to increase demand and thus capacity utilization. In particular, we need to increase industrial consumption which is very low due to lack of industrial activity and captive power. Another factor contributing to high power tariffs is the high T&D losses which are passed on to consumers.

**TTI: How do you think Pakistan can tackle the seemingly intractable circular debt problem?**

**KM:** The circular debt can be curtailed by addressing its root causes, one of the major issues being high AT&C losses. This means we need to put our distribution sector in order. We need to improve governance in the Discos by instituting competent, empowered, and independent Boards of Directors. Privatisation may be just the thing to infuse efficiency in the Discos.

Two more options to improve Disco operations could be including provincial governments in ownership and management, and adjusting losses against provincial shares in the NFC award.

Finally, there are the technological interventions we have held off for too long: Smart meters, smart grids, prepaid meters, aerial bundled cables, and so forth.

**TTI: What is the cost of Electricity in Pakistan? How do you compare it with regional countries?**

**KM:** In 2018, the industrial tariff in Pakistan was 11.8 US¢/kWh as compared to 10.4 in India and 9.6 in Bangladesh.

**TTI: Pakistan has for some time mooted the Competitive Trading Bilateral Contract Market (CTBCM). What is it and how is it expected to help better our situation?**

**KM:** The CTBCM mainly proposes the concept of multi-buyer model instead of the current single buyer model where CPPA(G) is solely responsible for all the power generation offtake. Under the CTBCM, generation companies sell directly to Discos and Bulk Power Consumers (BCP).

The proposed model has several inherent benefits over the existing arrangement including improved efficiency through a competitive marketplace; fair allocation of risk and benefit sharing between investors or sellers on the one hand and buyers or consumers on the other; and enhanced supply, generation and sustainability in the short, medium, and long terms

If implemented successfully, the model can help attract investments based on credit cover provided by market participants, without sovereign guarantees; remove conflict of interest to facilitate entry of new investors and participation of private players, including BCOs; and infuse payment discipline, transparency and open access to information.

However, the model is still at a conceptual stage and its implementation will require a number of prerequisites to be completed, the most important being the financial security for payments and credit-worthiness of individual Discos.



## Fiddling with the Levers of Social Media Control

*As the government struggles to come with an approach to social media regulation that would satisfy all stakeholders, there are those who see a nefarious agenda.*



By Asif Malik

The social media is widely seen as a resource with wide ranging applications from entertainment to communication to socialisation to wealth creation. But then there are those who insist it is nothing but a tool in the hands of the dark forces of deviance and degeneracy. And then there are many shades of opinion occupying the space between these two extreme positions.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's government is ceased with the impossible task of satisfying all these pockets of opinion as it frames the rules mandated by the statute to regulate social media. To make matters worse, there are some very vocal interests that maintain the government has an axe to grind from the exercise.

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was promulgated in 2016, however, it has been five years since PECA was enacted, the Rules to enforce the statute could not be finalized for one reason or

another. The Prime Minister Imran Khan has recently constituted a four-member high level committee to review the social media rules for the second time in one year.

The social media rules "Implementation of Removal, and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight, and Safeguards), Rules 2020" were framed twice last year, failing judicial scrutiny on each occasion. The first time, the Islamabad High Court (IHC) has struck down the Rules. The government reframed the Rules, only to be challenged again.

These Rules were challenged is because certain segments of the society including journalists, social media activists, civil society, and think tanks assailed the Rules for not being in conformity with the constitutional provisions, and the statute.

The Rules were framed "for safeguards, process, and mechanism for exercise of

powers by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) under the Act for removal of or blocking access to unlawful Online Content through any information system". However provisions related to restricting the freedom of speech, and expression drew fire for empowering the authority to take action for even criticizing a government official.

The government tried to paper over the matter by amending the sub clause 2 of the clause 4 of the Rules. However, much more needs to be done before the Rules can be acceptable.

Also problematic was the fact that the Rules empowered any government official to file the complaint, and allowed to keep complainant's identity secret. Another criticism on Rules is the power to shut down the entire networking/online system from where a single user violates the PECA's provisions.

The petitioners in this matter are Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists secretary general Nasir Zaidi, Awami Workers Party, Dawn Employees Union, Amber Rahim Shamsi, and a citizen Mohammad Ashfaq Jatt. The petitioners argue the Rules are contrary to the freedom of expression as guaranteed in the Constitution.

According to the petitions, the implementation of Removal, and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight, and Safeguards), Rules 2020, will inevitably lead to violation of rights to livelihood, and freedom of trade, and profession, guaranteed to the citizens under Articles 9, and 18 of the Constitution.

The PM's committee headed by Federal Minister for Human Rights Dr Shiree Mazari, and comprising Parliamentary Secretary on Law Malaika Bukhari, Senator Syed Ali Zafar, Chairman Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, and Secretary Ministry of IT, and Telecom has recently invited the stakeholders for a consultation meeting.

The stakeholders pointed out that there was no proper forum to examine the complaints or the uploaded contents. Moreover, they criticized the empowerment of intelligence agencies, and officials of provincial, and federal governments to file complaints against social media users.

According to them, in case of print media, Press Council of Pakistan (PCP), and for Electronic Media Council of Complaints of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory

Authority (PEMRA) comprising government officials, and stakeholders proceed against the complaints related to unwanted contents, and news items.

They suggested that for social media related complaints a council comprising of representatives of journalists, civil society, and digital rights activists should be formed.

However, while there was an ongoing discussion on the civil rights, freedom of expression, and minimum control of the government over the social media content, the hardliners in the government wants more powers for officials to counter so called online vulgarity.

Peshawar High Court on last month directed to block the popular social media app TikTok which is owned by Chinese tech giant Byte Dance. The decision was made in light of complaints against "immoral, and indecent" content on the video-sharing platform. Justice Qaiser Rasheed Khan of Peshawar High Court temporarily banned the app in March for 'indecent videos.'

The court however lifted the ban after a few days but with the direction to remove the indecent content. In line with the PHC judgement, and provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, the PTA also directed the TikTok's management to ensure that vulgar, and objectionable content is not made available to users in Pakistan.

For its part, the social media platform

expressed happiness at being given another chance to continue providing entertainment to Pakistani users, and said the court's order was a "testament to TikTok's continued commitment to enforcing our Community Guidelines to promote a safe and positive community online".

In a statement, the company's spokesperson said: "The creativity and passion of this community has brought joy to households across Pakistan, and provided a home for incredibly talented creators. TikTok is excited to be able to continue enabling Pakistani voices and creativity as we work to support the success story of Pakistan."

It is estimated that TikTok has been installed 43 million times in Pakistan, with 14.7 million of those coming in the year 2020 alone.

The complainant in the TikTok case recently approached the federal government, requesting to ban this app along with other social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, SnackVideo, and Bigo. The hardliners are of the view that these sites and apps should be banned unless they ensure elimination of what they call indecent and vulgar content.

The government is on the prongs of dilemma: On the one hand it has to please the liberal minded people by ensuring freedom of expression, and on the other to placate the hardliners who expect strict censorship of online contents to making sure these apps are used for reforms only.



# Green Shirts Continue Their Run of Glory in Zimbabwe

*Babar Azam became the world's fastest batsman to 2000 T20i runs as Shaheens took the series 2-1 after allowing Zimbabwe their first win against Pakistan in the format in the second game.*

By Ali Abdullah

After proving they can be as good as good in South Africa as they were in home conditions, the Shaheens have now imposed their supremacy over Zimbabwe by winning the T20i series 2-1. Their win in the series decider became special as it saw Babar Azam race to 2,000 in 52 innings, beating India's superstar batsman Virat Kohli's record of reaching the milestone in 56th.

Felicitations poured from all sides – with everybody from the PCB to the ICC to Foreign Office to cricket fans over social media congratulating the Pakistan skipper on their feat. The Pakistani skipper, who became the world's No. 1 ODI batsman during the South Africa tour, also dethroning Kohli, is now the eleventh cricketer to score 2,000 T20i.

Pakistan were able to put 165 runs on the board, batting first, thanks largely to a 126-run second-wicket partnership between Mohammad Rizwan and Babar Azam. While the Pakistani skipper lost his wicket only in the last over after scoring his 18th T20i half-century, the wicket-keeper batsman stayed on to the end, scoring an unbeaten 91.

Zimbabwe were off to a good start in response and looked rock solid after posting the first 100 runs with only one wicket down. However, player of the match Hasan Ali soon destroyed their batting line up helping Pakistan power ahead. His career-best 4 for 18, and Mohammad Hasnain, Hasnain's got 1 for 26, starred put Pakistan ahead of opposition in the series decider.

Earlier, the Green Shirts started the second leg of their two-nation African Safari tour by downing hosts Zimbabwe in the opening T20i by 11 runs. They suffered a hiccup in the next game when their batting line up collapsed spectacularly in the second game, allowing the home side to level the series by dismissing the tourists for only 99 runs with a ball to spare and 19 runs to victory.

This was Zimbabwe's first win in T20is against Pakistan, coming after sixteen attempts, and their first win in a home T20i game since they beat India in June 2016.

The Green Shirts are also due to play two Tests matches in Zimbabwe. All the matches of Pakistan's Zimbabwe outing are being played in Harare, and like the games in South Africa, behind closed doors.

Earlier, Pakistan sealed a 3-1 T20i series win against South Africa with a nail-biting victory in the final game.

Cruising at 92-1 in the 10th over while chasing an achievable target of 145, Pakistan's middle order problems continued to fail as usual and lost five wickets in no time and slipped to 115-6 in the 15th over. That ensured a tense finish in the tour finale at SuperSport Park.



Coming in at number 8, Mohammad Nawaz saw the tourists home, hitting 25 not out from 21 balls, including two crucial sixes in the last two overs.

Shaheens needed 16 from the last 12 balls and, with the pressure building, Nawaz whipped a six over square leg off the fifth ball of the 19th over, then pulled another six over square leg off the fifth ball of the 20th over.

Pakistan finished on 149-7 in response to South Africa's 144 all out in 19.3 overs. Fakhar Zaman who came one down after the dismissal of Rizwan on the first ball continued his red hot form with 60 from 34 balls to put Pakistan on course.

There was a huge difference between the performances in the third and fourth T20i. In the third T20i, Pakistan's batting performance was on its peak. The openers chased a huge target of 204 runs with such ease that their first wicket fell on 194 runs.

The skipper played a lightning fast innings of 122 runs. This century is Babar Azam's first T20 international ton. Rizwan scored 73 not out as well and Fakhar finished the game with a boundary straight down the ground.

In the fourth T20i, the bowlers did very well but the batsmen could not stay at the crease for much and kept trickling back to the pavilion in quick succession. In-form Fakhar scored another half century although the rest of the batsmen could not score much.

Pakistan also won the one-day international series (2-1) for a highly successful tour for Pakistan team and Babar Azam individually.

Babar's promotion has come in light of his magnificent performance versus South Africa as the two teams battled out a three-match ODI series. He has scored 228 runs at an average of 78 and now holds 865 points on the list of ICC ODI rankings for batsmen.

Babar is only the fourth Pakistani to appear on the first position of the ICC ODI ranking for the batsmen. Before him, Zaheer Abbas, Javed Miandad, and Mohammad Yousuf have held the spot.

The test leg of Pakistan's Zimbabwe tour begins with the first test on 29 April. The second match of the series is slated for 7-11 May 2021.

# Real Go Top of La Liga after Downing Barca in Thrilling Finish

*A week after their defeat with Real Madrid, Barcelona score a 4-0 victory against Athletic Bilbao to lift Copa Del Rey.*



Real Madrid jumped to season best ranking on the points table of the La Liga to take pole position in an intense title race after defeating FC Barcelona 2-1 in the El Clasico 2021 at home earlier this month. Goals from the forward Karim Benzema and star midfielder Toni Kroos gave Zinedine Zidane's men the 2nd El Clasico win of the season.

Real Madrid moved to the top spot after they picked up 3 crucial points against their arch-rivals at the Santiago Bernabeu. Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid have the same points on the table (66). Barcelona are at the 3rd spot but have just 1 point less than the two Madrid clubs.

Real Madrid managed to keep Lionel Messi quiet once again as the Barcelona superstar has gone seven straight Clasicos without scoring a single goal. Oscar Mingueza scored for Barcelona at the hour mark but the Catalan club ended up on the losing side despite several close opportunities in the final few minutes.

Lionel Messi hit the post from a corner in the first half while a shot from Barca substitute Ilaix Moriba came off the bar in the last minute of added time.

## Being in the lead “changes nothing” for Zidane

Looking at the stats, Barcelona have never been successful in winning the title after losing both Clasicos to Real Madrid but coach Zinedine Zidane played down talks of the win on Saturday being decisive in the title race. The result came just 4 days after the defending Spanish league champions defeated Liverpool in their Champions League first-leg quarterfinal match.

“We have to enjoy what we've been doing. We got two very good

results and it wasn't easy,” Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane said. “Being in the lead won't change anything for us. We have to keep working hard.”

## Koeman fumes over denied penalties

On the other hand, Barcelona coach Ronaldo Koeman was not happy with the refereeing, expressing his disappointment over being denied two penalties in the final minutes. According to the coach the Catalans had two late penalty claims as they chased the game, with Martin Braithwaite going to ground both times after challenges from Ferland Mendy.

After having been knocked out early from the Champions League competition, Barcelona are desperate to win the league title as quite a few things, including Messi's future at the club, are at stake. Messi has his contract with Barcelona ending this season. The Argentina star expressed his desire to leave the Catalan club last year but had the request denied.

Barcelona did win the 2021 Copa Del Rey with a 4-0 victory against Athletic Bilbao, a week after losing against Real Madrid.

Barca earned the Spanish King's Cup trophy, scoring all their goals in the second half of the final at La Cartuja Stadium, Seville.

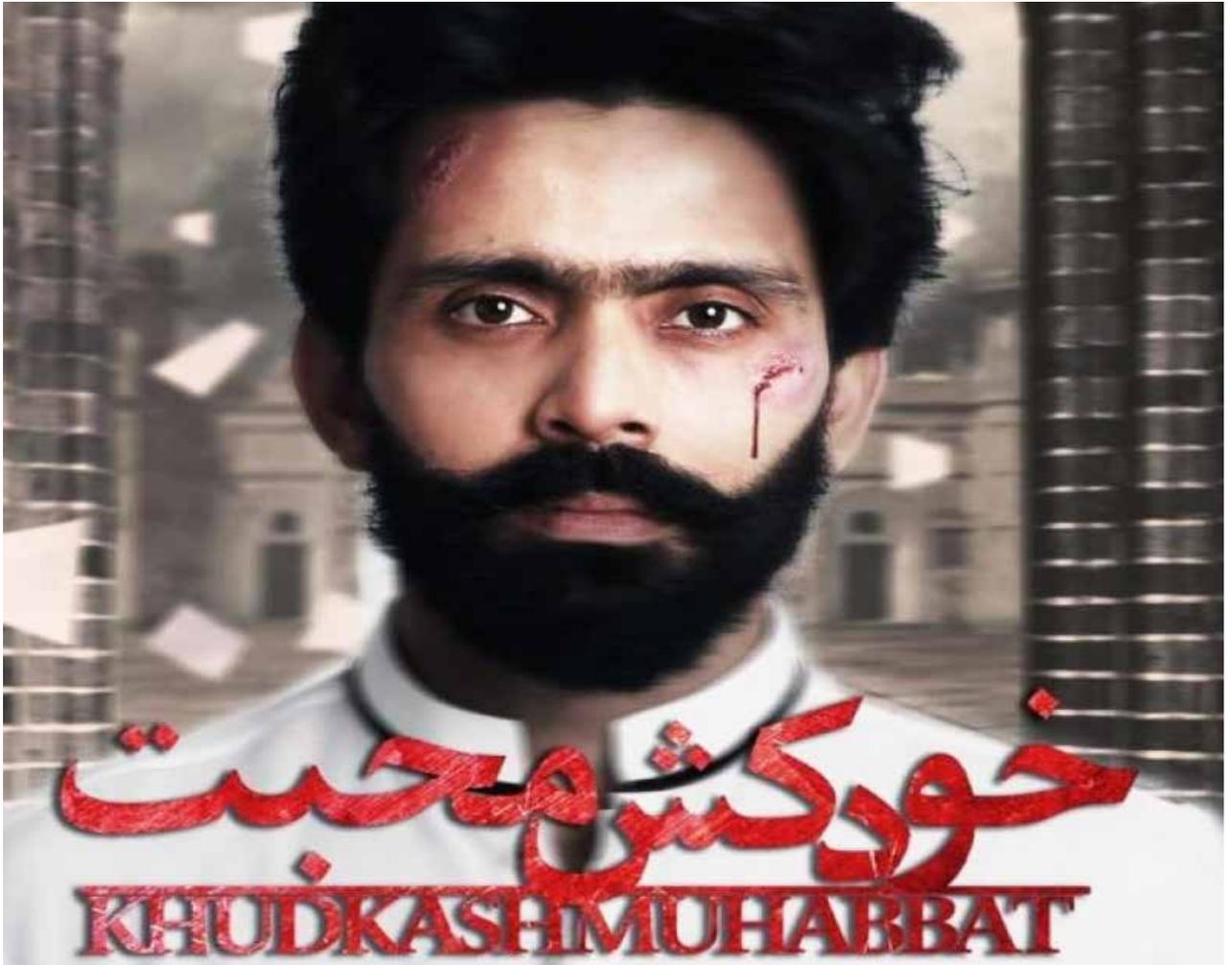
French star Antoine Griezmann scored the opener with a left-footed shot in the near post in the 59th minute to give Barcelona the lead. Dutch midfielder Frenkie de Jong doubled the gap with a diving header in the 63rd minute. Argentine superstar Lionel Messi netted two goals in the 68 and 72 minutes to seal the win.

Barcelona won the Spanish Cup for the 31st time to be the most successful club in the domestic tournament.

*By Ali Abdullah*

## Fawad Alam Has Another Flame: Acting

*The dashing test star whose debut film 'Khudkash Muhabbat' is due for release soon had a chit-chat with TTI about his second passion.*



By Kokub Jehan

**F**awad Alam is among those talented test players of Pakistan who not only play well in the field but are popular outside the ground as well because of their witty nature and humorous jokes. Because of this extra talent, Alam has also tried his luck in acting and calls it his next passion besides cricket.

He has acted in a few sitcoms for television and recently appeared in a film named 'Khudkash Muhabbat' for Pakistani digital OTT urduflix. Khudkash Muhabbat is a romantic love story in which Alam is in the lead role opposite Faria Hasan.

Born in Karachi to a cricketing family, Fawad also chose the game as his profession. His father Tariq Alam and two of his uncles has played the first class cricket for Pakistan. He is the son in law of former test cricketer of Pakistan Mansoor Akhter.

The Truth International (TTI) got an opportunity to meet and talk to Fawad Alam about his acting career and recent official tour to Zimbabwe. The conversation is excerpted below.

**TTI: How it came to be in acting?**

**FA:** It was because of my passion. I know Farhan Gauher from urduflix. He asked me to act in his production some three years back but it could not materialise due to time constraints and some other issues. He contacted me again and this time offered me the lead role in Khudkash Muhabbat. I just could not refuse. I was a bit nervous in the beginning but as I love to explore new things and accept challenges, it ended up like a wonderful experience. I hope people like it.

**TTI: What is your role in the film?**

**FA:** It is a romantic love story. The rest people would find after watching the film.

**TTI: Which you have found difficult: Cricket or acting?**

**FA:** You can't compare them – they're totally different professions. Both demand hard work. I think nothing is easy when it comes to doing something with perfection. Yes, cricket and acting needs different kinds of efforts to get the job done.

**TTI: What was the reaction of your fellow cricketers when you told them about acting in a film?**

**FA:** I didn't tell them about it exclusively. Before the release of the poster they didn't have a clear idea what I was actually doing. Now as the film is out, I am waiting for comments and reactions from the public and my colleagues.

**TTI: Will you carry on acting after Khudkash Muhabbat?**

**FA:** Yes – why not? I'm passionate about acting and passion has no limits. So I've decided to do more acting projects in future as well. I have been acting in sitcoms for the last few years. This is my first film. So whenever I get the time from cricket, I would love to do an acting project.

**TTI: How do you manage to switch between cricket and acting?**

**FA:** It is not that difficult. It is just like a man performing different roles at his home like a husband, a son, a father and a brother. So when I am in the field, I become a cricketer and when on sets, I love to be an actor.

**TTI: How often do you watch Pakistani films and dramas?**

**FA:** Too often! Whenever I get the chance to be away from work, I must watch films and dramas. Everybody needs a diversion from the routine. So I watch films and dramas and listen to music for relaxation.

**TTI: Who is your favourite actor in Pakistan?**

**FA:** It is tough to name any one as I know almost all personally. They are like friends and I think are doing their best.

**TTI: With which actress do you wish to be in the lead in your next projects?**

**FA:** This one is also very difficult to answer. All are doing good work. So it would be an honour for me if anyone from the top line actresses becomes my lead in any next project.

**TTI: You have done comedy roles in sitcoms and a romantic one in your recent film. Which genre do you prefer more?**

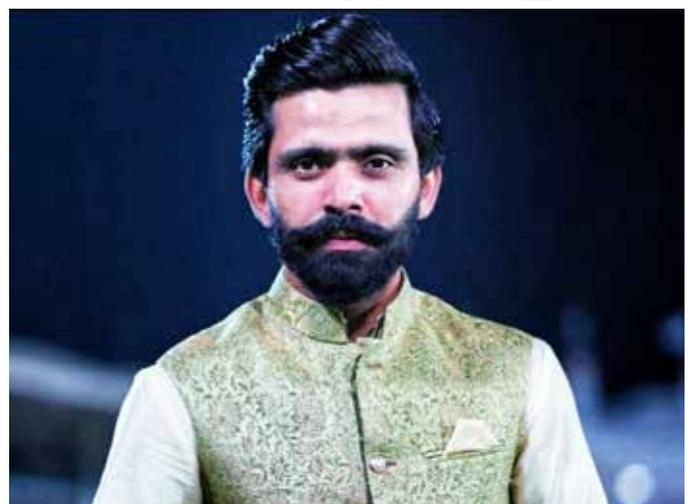
**FA:** Both are different things. Sitcoms are like fun and go with the go. Romance especially in films, is a totally different ball game. Your character generally has three phases in a film. Some actors deliver their best in all three while some perform well in two or only one phase. I think this is tougher. Personally I enjoy the genre of film more.

**TTI: You are back on the cricket field after a long time. What is the enthusiasm?**

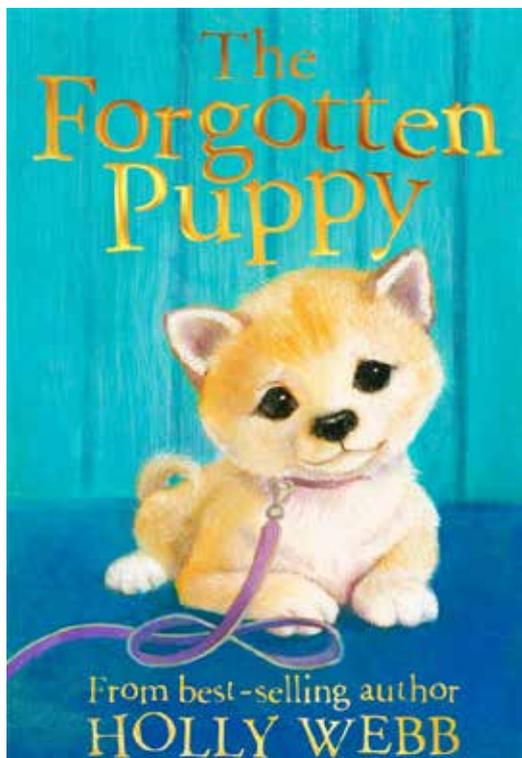
**FA:** I have big ambitions there as well. One should keep on trying and working hard. For me, it is an opportunity and I would utilize it to my full effort by performing my best.

**TTI: Please leave a message for your fans?**

**FA:** My fans have always poured love on me. They have supported me in cricket and I hope they will also appreciate my acting endeavour.



## The Forgotten Puppy



**Author:** Holly Webb  
**Reviewed by:** Alizay Ashraf  
**ISBN:** 978-1-94715-508-5  
**Publisher:** Stripes Publishing

Emi enjoys visiting her dad at weekends but finds it hard to leave behind her beautiful puppy, Rina. Rina does not understand why she cannot catch the train. When Emi visits her dad for four days, Rina is frightened - what if Emi does not come back? Determined to find her owner, Rina heads to the last place she saw Emi: the railway station.

The Forgotten Puppy is a wonderful book, in my opinion. I think it is a good book because it's about a puppy that really loves her owner, Emi. I find this relationship between Rina and Emi very sweet. The story showed how the bond between a dog and an owner can be so significant and meaningful.

The book was a really fun read. It had some stuff that every pet owner can relate to. The story fully engaged me, and I also understood the content. I thoroughly enjoyed the storyline.

I am glad that I read this book and it is definitely something that I would read again. I would recommend this book to everyone, but especially dog owners. This would be great for reader between the ages of 6 and 9.

## Dog Magic

Lottie is enjoying life at the magical pet shop where she attends magic lessons with Sofie and Ariadne. With her new best friend, Ruby, even school is becoming fun, but Lottie is having trouble trusting her.

This was truly an enjoyable read. However, it did not spark up as many emotions as the author's other pet related books did. A magical pet shop is a great place to form a series of stories and I look forward to reading more of them.

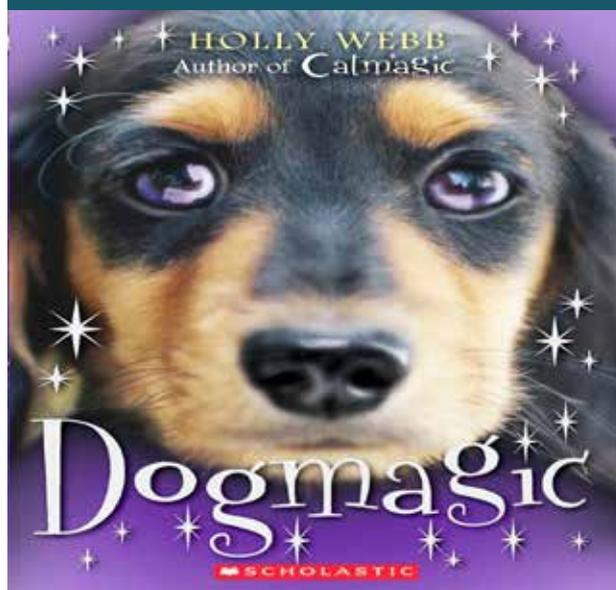
Dog Magic talks about some interesting conflicts. This book aims to cover elements of a longstanding history between dogs and magical practices, connections to various deities from around the world, and their meaningful presence in the lives and spiritual workings of those in the 21st century.

The author, who clearly adores and respects dogs immensely, discusses her own cherished dog (who sadly passed away at the age of 17, before the writing of this book was complete) on many occasions. I found this deeply heart-warming.

The historical and spiritually centred information the book houses is fascinating. The plentiful spells are sure to appeal to many, and the general premise of the book is apt to speak to a lot of dog lovers.

I would recommend this book for pet lovers or those who have lost a beloved pet. This book has a great setting as well. Therefore, I would recommend this story for children above the age of 10.

**Author:** Holly Webb  
**Reviewed by:** Alizay Ashraf  
**ISBN:** 978-1-407105-97-09  
**Pages:** 131  
**Publisher:** Scholastic



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