

The Truth International

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FATF's Moving Goalpost

Another round of review, another raft of actions

Budget 21-22: Wooing Fortune, Tempting Fate

Govt presents pro-poor, growth-oriented budget

US pullout diminished Pakistan leverage

PM Khan seeks new bond with the US

'All-Opposition' Parliament



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CELEBRATING A DECADE OF SECURE AND RELIABLE CLOUD SERVICES



CONTENTS

On the Cover

Ever since the incumbent National Assembly came into existence after the controversial general elections held in July 2018, political observers and parliamentary reporters have noted a change of tone and tenor of the parliamentary proceedings. Traditionally expected to have a calming role amid high-tension proceedings, the treasury benches of this parliament try to outdo opposition in making a ruckus.

Parliamentary Pandemonium by By Amir Waseem – **Page 06**

Editorial

It is just not cricket! by M. Ziauddin – **Page 04**

CITY NOTES: The emperor has no clothes? by M.A. Niazi – **Page 05**

Politics

Nawaz vs Establishment: Checkmate or Stalemate? By Ahmad Waleed – **Page 09**

All Quiet on the Political Front? By Zain Rihat – **Page 11**

Economy

Pakistan and the FATF's Moving Goalpost by Ahmed Mukhtar Naqshbandi – **Page 14**

Budget 21-22: Wooing Fortune, Tempting Fate by Javed Mahmood – **Page 16**

It's the Oil Squeeze or the Revenue Squeeze by Khaleeq Ahmed – **Page 18**

Putting Our Money Where Our Mouth Is by Amer Mahmood – **Page 20**

The Necessary Evil of Inflation by Meer Diam – **Page 22**

CGT Rationalisation Key to Reaping Revenue from Realty Sector by Gohar Imdad – **Page 24**

Foreign Affairs

Big Showdown in Little Geneva by Umer Farooq – **Page 26**

US pullout deadline diminished Islamabad's leverage, says PM Khan – **Page 28**

The Return of the Taliban By Haq Nawaz Khan – **Page 30**

Post-Divorce Acrimony Haunts UK-EU Ties by Dr Khalid Bajwa – **Page 32**

Investigation

Justice on Vacation by Asadullah – **Page 34**

What Will it take to Get the Retail Sector to Pay Taxes? By Azeem Waqas – **Page 36**

Criminals Off the Hook, Victims Suffer the Consequences by Hamza Qureshi – **Page 38**

Murder Most Foul? By Shahzada Zulfiqar – **Page 40**

COVID-19

Covid-19 Situation Improving Despite Bungled Response by Noor Aftab – **Page 42**

Islamophobia

The Raging Fire of Islamophobia by Mishaal Ashraf – **Page 44**

Environment

The Terrible Plight of the Wretched of the Earth by Eric Shahzar – **Page 46**

Sports

Sergio Ramos, a Spaniard Entertainer & Gladiator on the Arena of Football – **Page 47**

PLS6: Multan Sultans Own the Summer of 2021 – **Page 48**

By Ali Abdullah

Entertainment

Pakistani Filmmakers Have Designs on the International Market by Hasan Kazmi – **Page 50**

Maya Ali Is Always Determined About Her Next Move by Kaukab Jahan – **Page 52**

Book Review

Oliver Twist, Kim by Alizay Ashraf – **Page 55**

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It is just not cricket!

By M. Ziauddin

What had happened in the National Assembly on three consecutive days mid-June (June 15-17) was, to say the least, an un-parliamentary episode. Such in-House uproars do occur not infrequently in Parliaments the world over. In a parliamentary system of governance, it is routine for the Opposition to kick up the ruckus at the slightest provocation. At times, the Opposition dangles a phony bait to lure the treasury benches into a shouting match---a filibustering trap. On such occasions the government benches routinely do bend backwards to restore normality in the House so as to wrap up the business at hand as smoothly and as quickly as possible.

But to everyone's surprise on that fateful Monday it was the treasury benches who had provoked the Opposition with an unabashed onslaught. The Opposition reacted equally abrasively, thus began a shouting match which the next day degenerated into scuffles and abuses with the budget books seen flying like missiles both ways and the NA security staff trying, in vain, to keep the two factions physically apart.

On Wednesday the Speaker quickly adjourned the session while Shahbaz was making his third abortive attempt to speak amidst the noisy rumpus. While adjourning, the Speaker said, rather ominously: "I will not conduct this House (NA) until both the government and the opposition [settle their matters]."

In a way, the battle lines had already been drawn when the government side made it very clear earlier on Tuesday that if the Opposition wanted to speak without disruption, they would have to give in writing that they would not disrupt Prime Minister Imran Khan whenever he spoke in the House.

Shehbaz responded saying if the Opposition's speeches were listened to without any disruption then "we would reciprocate and listen to the speeches of the leader of the House."

Of course, no one would disagree with Speaker Qaiser that keeping the House in order is the joint responsibility of the government and the opposition. But, he would also not disagree with the notion that it is the sole responsibility of the government to have the budget passed in time after having it properly debated. And he is also perhaps aware that the Opposition, no matter of which political color or hue would do everything within its political powers to make it impossible for the government to get the budget passed without any let or hindrance.

For the next 48 hours or so it had appeared as if a political logjam had seized the National Assembly. The Speaker and his deputy were on no-confidence notices. And the members sitting on the two sides of the aisle in the National Assembly seemed in no mood to seek a peaceful settlement.

The Speaker, however, seems to have somehow succeeded in persuading the treasury benches to let Shahbaz speak in relative peace. Perhaps his warning that he would not conduct the House unless the two, government and opposition settled their dispute had worked despite Mr. Khan's loathing for 'giving in' to the Opposition's conditions. At least no written assurance seems to have been proffered by the Opposition.

Bilawal's speech was also listened to without any disruptions.

But the speeches since from the treasury benches sounded more like 'opposition's

rants' as most of them rather than talk about Tarin's budget kept passing the blame for the current economic crises in the country to the economic mismanagement and massive embezzlement of public money allegedly indulged in by the PPP and PMLN in their respective tenures.

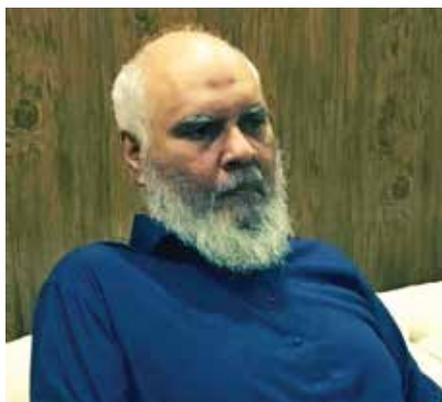
The trouble is, Mr. Khan since coming to power has been refusing to recognize the Opposition as legitimate political adversaries who, nevertheless, having bagged enough votes in the general elections have been giving the ruling coalition a run for its money. The PM has been denouncing the Opposition as looters and robbers, not worthy of even sharing a table with them what to talk of sitting across the aisle in the same House. No one would disagree with the PM's corruption agenda. But condoning NAB's sloppy style of persecuting the opposition leadership with flimsy evidence does little credit to his mission.

And, by the way, how do you run a Parliament without an Opposition? You can't play the role of both the treasury and the opposition all at the same time, which Mr. Khan has been trying to pull off as if by a conjuring act, all these past three years but, in the process, he seems to have only failed to do justice to even the role he was elected for.

Kaptan sahib, it is just not cricket. But cricket had stopped being a gentleman's game long ago when Kerry Packer's pack of five had sold their respective national teams for a few Australian dollars. Packer had set up the World Series Cricket (1976-79) by secretly signing agreements in return for big bucks with the then England captain Tony Greig, West Indies captain Clive Lloyd, Australian captain Greg Chappell, future Pakistani captain Imran Khan and former Australian Captain Ian Chappell.

CITY NOTES: The emperor has no clothes?

By M.A. Niazi



One of the debates that Imran Khan managed to set alight in his recent interview to a foreign channel was women's clothing. He said that too skimpy clothing played a part in the rapes that were taking place. The immediate riposte was that little boys in madrassahs didn't wear skimpy clothes.

That's a valid criticism, and might get us closer to what Imran was trying to say: that the woman who wears the skimpy clothes might not get assaulted. But someone would get assaulted. An indication might come from Kasur, where we had an attempt to earn foreign exchange by assaulting little boys and then selling the videos to perverts abroad, which was followed by the Zainab scandal. That was bad enough, but he had assaulted and killed at least eight other little girls.

Imran's remarks were followed by a social-media sentimental journey through Imran's days as a player in the UK. There were enough photos of Imran next to women in skimpy clothes to show that he knew what he was talking about. Did he rape these women? Or even one of them?

Well, he did say that there were no night-clubs or discos, but that's the first I've heard of them being proposed as a solution. Does he propose that we have nightclubs or discos?

I suspect that even Imran might not see it as a holistic solution. For example, if Hafiz Saeed had been in a nightclub instead of jail, would there have been a blast as the one there was outside his Johar Town house? Was the blast meant to spread terror

or tell the world that Hafiz Saeed was not actually in prison, as he's supposed to be.

Of course, Imran's interview made me remember Umar Shaikh, who had blamed the victim of the Sialkot rape for travelling late. He must be kicking himself for not thinking of skimpy clothes. Skimpy clothes. Smoking in public, listening to rock music, anything that will let off the male. And Imran actively looks for outs. Not for himself of course. We know how monastic a life he has led.

In that interview, he also made two important points. First, that the Uighurs in China were not being treated badly. Second, Pakistan would never, ever give the US the post-withdrawal bases it wanted. Now, that would mean two issues on which to contradict the US. That would mean that there has to be a U-turn on one of them, purely in the national interest, of course. We must not forget that we do not understand the intricacies of international politics the way that Imran does. We do not understand the West as he does, and whether the Americans are going to be more anxious for bases, or support for the Uighurs, and where our national interest lies.



I suppose the only thing that can be said in response is that New Zealand do not know the importance of losing to India. I know Imran is probably taking the credit for the defeat India suffered at the inaugural final of the World Test Championship. Does New Zealand national interest dictate that Indian mustn't lose?

Another country which has no reason to fear India is Zambia, which might not have a reason to lose to India, but which has lost its founder, Kenneth Kaunda, who was president from 1964 to 1991. That means he was president for 27 years, and died 30 years after leaving office. He left office at the age Imran assumed it. However, Imran hopes to be in office for as long as Kaunda was, which means he will hand over the prime ministership in 2045, when he will be 92, and still getting the youth vote. Young people firmly believing he brought eternal glory to Pakistan by winning the hockey World Cup. After which he built a liver-transplant centre.

However, a more intricate problem has arrived. Outer Mongolia, the Seychelles and Bahrain all bought Chinese vaccines, like Pakistan. But people have still been catching covid-19, and dying of it. And another million doses landed on our doorstep. Obviously, a conspiracy by the vaccine mafia.

An even more intricate problem is posed by the black actress who plays Ann Boleyn, one of Henry VIII's six wives, on TV. And

there's a Latina actress playing Snow White. What next? Nelson Mandela being played by a white woman? Modi by a Native American? Sitting Bull by a South Asian? Imran by a no-human like a donkey? He should like that for in Arab countries, donkeys are a by-word for endurance and hard work.

Parliamentary Pandemonium

When the nation's highest legislative forum descends into unmitigated chaos over an ego trip, the joke is on democracy.



By Amir Waseem

Ever since the incumbent National Assembly came into existence after the controversial general elections held in July 2018, political observers and parliamentary reporters have noted a change of tone and tenor of the parliamentary proceedings. Traditionally expected to have a calming role amid high-tension proceedings, the treasury benches of this parliament try to outdo opposition in making a ruckus.

An astute joke often shared among parliamentary reporters was that our parliament is now has two sets of opposition lawmakers and no treasury. The joke, however, seemed to have turned into reality on during last's month budget session.

For three consecutive days, the National Assembly presented the look of a playground where street children could be seen abusing, fighting and throwing at each other whatever they found nearby over a controversial decision of a partisan umpire.

In total disregard to the decorum and the sanctity of the parliament, the charged lawmakers from both sides of the aisle lobbed heavy budgetary books and documents at each other which even caused injuries to some MNAs, including Parliamentary Secretary for Law and Justice Maleeka Bokhari.

Most shocking and disgusting for the nation was to see their representatives, including the cabinet members, using filthy language, making obscene gestures and uttering gendered curse words on the floor of the house.

Those having a strong belief in the parliamentary form of democracy are of the opinion that verbal clashes and even

fist-fighting and scuffling in legislatures should not be seen in the negative context. In support of their arguments, they often quote examples of similar happenings in the parliaments of the countries with established democracies.

The argument is that a parliament reflects an independent and vibrant society whose members cannot be controlled or put into discipline through an executive order; and that such discipline can only be seen in military institutions where subordinates are supposed to be "yes men" having no right of making arguments or even expressing their feelings.

These arguments carry some weight if we look for examples around the world. By simply googling "fights in parliament" or "legislative violence", one can find a list of nearly 50 countries, including those which are considered as the civilised nations. The list contains names of the countries like the UK, India, the US, Australia, Canada, Greece, Italy, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Ukraine.

In February 2014, chaos broke out in the Indian Lok Sabha witnessed after a ruling party MP used pepper spray to disrupt proceedings. The MP from the governing Congress party, Rajagopal, was protesting against a plan to create a new state of Telangana in southern India.

Rajagopal smashed a glass and used pepper spray on his colleagues when the home minister tried to table the bill. BBC quoted some unconfirmed reports saying that another MP pulled out a knife. The Press Trust of India reported that four ambulances were called in and an unspecified number of MPs were taken to hospital.



The Indian television showed members of parliament leaving the parliament building coughing, sneezing and spluttering, some wiping their eyes. The move was seen as an embarrassment for the federal government and the incident was widely covered by the international media.

According to Wikipedia, “legislative violence broadly refers to any violent clashes between members of a legislature, often physically, inside the legislature and triggered by divisive issues and tight votes. Such clashes have occurred in many countries across time, and notable incidents still regularly occur.”

It further explains: “Although the sight of brawling politicians is incongruous with a legislature’s stately image, its occupants, like in any other workplace, are still prone to stress and anger. The confrontational nature of politics, regardless of their location, and the high stakes involved often add to the simmering tensions.”

Now the question arises: “Do the scenes from the parliament which the whole nation witnessed last month on their television screens and which are still viral on social media fall in the definition of legislative violence?”

The answer is a big no as the members did not clash in the National Assembly over any controversial legislation or any other provocative incident outside the parliament. They came to blows when the government made an unprecedented decision of not letting Opposition Leader Shahbaz Sharif open up the general debate on the Federal Budget 2021-22 that was presented on 11 June by Shaukat Tarin, the fourth finance minister of the three-year-old PTI-led coalition government.

And the strange reason which the government people kept on mentioning to the media was that the opposition members had not allowed Imran Khan to make a speech in the Parliament soon after his election as the prime minister in August 2018. Maintaining decorum in the house is the responsibility of both the treasury and the opposition, but the government is thought to shoulder a higher burden of the responsibility.

Mr Sharif, who is also the president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), attempted to deliver his opening budget speech in the assembly on 14 June, but he could not do so because of the ruckus created by the treasury members, including the senior ministers, through desk-thumping, whistling and chanting slogans like Chor, Chor (thief, thief), daku, daku(robber, robber) and “TT, TT”, a reference to the term “telegraphic transfer” often used for money laundering in the country.

The opposition back benchers also responded with slogans like Lathi Goli Ki Sarkar, Nahi Chalegi; go Niazi go; Aata Chor, Cheeni Chor; and Gali Gali Main Shor Hai, Aleema Baji Chor Hai. Aleema Khan is the sister of Prime Minister Imran Khan and the opposition alleges that she has not declared her assets and their money trail.

The opposition too had come to the house with planning and full preparations as they had already got information through media that the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) members had been told by their captain to block the opposition leader’s speech. Under the

strategy, Mr Sharif continued to deliver his speech despite noises and hooliganism on both the days, but he could not complete his speech as helpless speaker Asad Qaiser adjourned the proceedings.

On 15 June 2021, the National Assembly literally turned into a battleground as the opposition and treasury members scuffled with each other and used budget documents and books as rockets when the latter continued their noisy protest to disrupt Mr Sharif’s budget speech for the second consecutive day. The will definitely go down as one of the worst days in the parliamentary history of Pakistan.

Daily Dawn next day wrote an editorial titled “Shameful behavior” stating that the brawl in the NA “is an unfortunate yet fitting metaphor for the state of political debate in our country.”

The speaker had to suspend the proceedings three times when the treasury members led by some senior ministers refused to follow his directives to maintain order.



When the proceedings resumed for the third time and Mr Sharif, who had been surrounded by his colleagues, started lashing out at the government’s policies, the situation suddenly went out of control for everyone, including the sergeants-at-arms who were standing making a human wall at the narrow passage separating the treasury and the opposition benches literally dividing the house into two blocks.

Both sides claimed that they had acted in the self-defence after being targeted by the other side, but some of the reporters sitting in the Press Gallery at that time claimed that it actually started when Special Assistant to the Prime Minister Ali Nawaz Awan threw a book towards the opposition benches and it came back flying to him.

Ali Nawaz Awan was also later seen and heard using abusive and filthy language and a video clip showing him abusing the opposition members in an aggressive manner went viral on social and main media.

The speaker had to suspend the proceedings for the third and last time when he saw the sergeants-at-arms failing to prevent the members from the two sides getting physical. Seeing the situation getting worse, a number of PML-N members had already escorted Shahbaz Sharif out of the hall even before the suspension announcement by the speaker.



At this stage, the other treasury members also started throwing books and documents at the opposition members, who also responded in the same coin. Besides Ali Nawaz Awan, the other treasury members who were in the forefront in creating disturbance in the house were the PTI MNAs from Karachi, including Faheem Khan, Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan Ali Amin Gandapur, Human Rights Minister Dr Shireen Mazari, and Communications Minister Murad Saeed.

The members continued throwing the documents and other articles at each other for nearly 10 minutes even after the suspension of the proceedings. They stopped only when lights of the hall were switched off.

Interestingly, all the hooliganism by the treasury members continued for three days in the presence of a number of senior cabinet members like Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Asad Umer, Shafqat Mahmood, Fawad Chaudhry, and Ali Muhammad Khan. The fact that these ministers had come to the house directly after attending the weekly meeting of the federal cabinet on 15 June was sufficient to prove that it was an official policy of the government to prevent the opposition leader from delivering the speech.

And it was later confirmed by Federal Minister for Information Fawad Chaudhry who reportedly declared that they would not allow Shahbaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari to deliver speeches without first having a 'written guarantee' that they would hear speeches of Prime Minister Imran Khan and ministers silently.

It was after two days of rowdiness and after facing criticism in the media over his failure to run the proceedings smoothly and amid opposition's allegations that he was also a part of the government scheme that the speaker finally came into action. He held an unscheduled meeting with the prime minister and made telephone calls to Mr Sharif as well as Bilawal Bhutto Zardari seeking their cooperation.

The speaker also banned the entry of seven unruly members, including three from the ruling PTI. The members whose entry had been banned till further orders were Ali Gohar, Chaudhary Hamid Hameed, and Sheikh Rohale Asghar of the PML-N and Agha Rafiullah of the PPP, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister Ali Nawaz Awan, Faheem Khan, and Abdul Majeed Khan of the PTI.

The opposition, however, refused to accept the speaker's ruling and alleged that he had not taken action against the real troublemakers, including the two ministers Ali Amin Gandapur and Murad Saeed. The hot-headed Murad Saeed was in the forefront from the treasury side and was seen throwing books and other articles towards the opposition benches while standing on a desk.

On 17 June, the situation was totally changed. The opposition, which had declared that it would not hold any negotiations with the government, all of a sudden reached an agreement to ensure smooth proceedings during the budget session.

The two sides agreed that they would listen to the speeches from both the sides with patience and would not pass personal remarks against each other's leadership. Fawad Chaudhry, who had categorically stated only two days ago that they would not let the

opposition members speak in the house, during a news conference made the announcement regarding the government-opposition patch-up.

He announced that a committee would be formed to review the 21 laws, including the Elections (Amendment) Bill and the one specific to provide relief to Indian spy Kalbhushan Jadev, which were passed in haste on 10 June. The information minister admitted that the last three incidents had damaged the parliament's sanctity and brought bad name for the politicians.

The speaker also lifted the ban imposed on the seven members. And the opposition immediately withdrew a no trust motion which they had submitted hours after the bulldozing of the legislations by the government in the assembly on 10 June.



"It is miraculous how, just days after the ruling party and the opposition were at each other's throats and would not stop at anything to tear the other down, the two have agreed to a peaceful coexistence," wrote Daily Dawn in another editorial on 19 June.

"How did this U-turn come about? Was public criticism of the shamefully aggressive behaviour during the [15 June] session really what pushed both warring sides to the negotiating table? Though this explanation would be welcome, it appears unlikely, as ruling party MNAs and ministers were uncompromising in the aftermath of that mayhem.

"Who 'empowered' Speaker Asad Qaiser to engage both sides and broker a truce, when for months he had watched helplessly as madness descended on each session? What was it that finally brought about maturity and agreement between the two sides? Could it be the intervention of a third party? Though this new vow of civility is welcome, it remains to be seen how long it will last," concludes Dawn's editorial.



Nawaz vs Establishment: Checkmate or Stalemate?

Nawaz Sharif seems down and out, but has been there before. Will things turn out differently for him this time around?



By Ahmad Waleed

Nawaz Sharif's blistering offensive against the military establishment seems to have subsided – or has it been repulsed? From all appearances, both the heavyweight opposition parties – PPP and PML-N – have drifted from the warpath charted by PDM for a brief while at the nudging of the power brokers of Pakistani politics.

The PPP helped itself to the position of the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate after supporting the ruling party's candidate for the Senate chairmanship, while the PML-N secured the release from jail of Shahbaz Sharif and Hamza Shahbaz.

The 11-party opposition alliance starting to unravel after PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari expressed his shock over the PML-N patron Nawaz Sharif's scathing criticism at the military leadership for dislodging him from power. Bilawal accused Nawaz Sharif of using PDM platform for running personal vendetta

while PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz hit back at Bilawal and levelled allegations of striking a secret deal with the establishment.

Above all, after the abortive attempts to bring down the PTI government, both the parties have arrived at the conclusion that the time is ripe for politics of reconciliation.

Looking back into the tumultuous political history of the late 90s, once a blue-eyed boy of the establishment PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif turned hostile and decided to challenge the powers-that-be after he became prime minister through a landslide victory in the 1997 general elections. In a meeting with a group of influential personalities and select journalists of Lahore, Nawaz Sharif hinted at taking the 'bull' by the horn.

And he did precisely that one year later when he forced the then Army Chief General Jahangir Karamat to step down or

face sacking after his controversial statement suggesting Army's direct role in the government policies through a military-dominated national security council. General Jahangir Karamat resigned after two days of his statement.

The military circles took it as a 'surprise' and the opposition warned of serious challenges to a fragile democracy of Pakistan. It had never happened in the history of the country. The following year all the fears proved to be true when Nawaz Sharif government was sent packing through a coup d'état staged by Gen Musharraf.

Earlier in 1993, Nawaz Sharif faced a similar challenge posed by the then President Ghulam Ishaq Khan who dissolved the assemblies on the allegations of 'rampant corruption' against the Nawaz government. Although the Supreme Court restored the assemblies, the power struggle between the PM and the President led to



the resignations of both Nawaz and Ghulam Ishaq calling for fresh elections.

Again, while Nawaz Sharif was in Saudi Arabia after reaching a deal with Gen Musharraf to remain out of country for 10 years without indulging himself in politics, a close aide of Nawaz Sharif confided the ousted leader had vowed to settle the score with Gen Musharraf if he manages to return to Pakistan – and to power.

Nawaz lashed out at the military’s senior command for their alleged role in his ouster from power while addressing a public gathering in Gujranwala last year, sending shock waves across the political spectrum.

His speech galvanised the Pakistan Democratic Movement for a while until ruptures appeared in the 11-party alliance.

Recently, the release of his brother Shahbaz Sharif and nephew Hamza Shahbaz from

to regain power is to maintain good relations with the establishment.

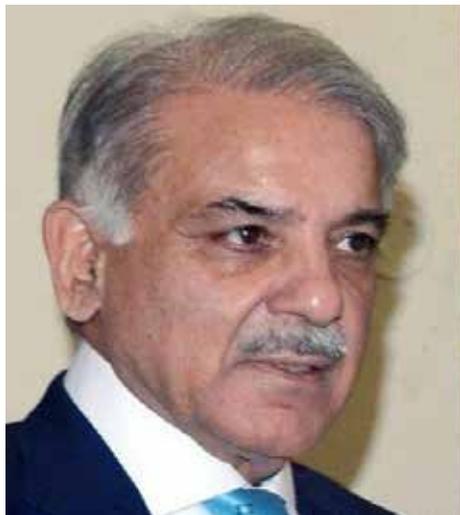
“Even if we win majority seats of provincial and national assembly in the upcoming election, we may be denied to form government at both national and provincial levels if the powers-that-be are not with us. And we cannot afford to remain out of power for so long,” commented one of the PML-N local leaders.

It seems that the party has realised that it has exerted enough pressure on the establishment and now the ‘appeasement group’ must be heard to pave way for coming to power again adopting a well-thought strategy and leaving behind the anti-establishment approach.

The results of recent by-elections in the country have boosted the morale of the party. Moreover, the release of Shahbaz Sharif and Hamza Shahbaz shows that the appeasement group has been successful in wooing the top leadership to cease the scathing attacks on the establishment and give dialogue a chance as suggested by the younger brother Shahbaz Sharif who has vowed to go extra mile for the sake of what he calls grand dialogue.

The politics of Pakistan has revolved around Nawaz Sharif for the last 35 years. Even though he is based abroad at the moment, his every move creates a ferment in Pakistani politics.

Paradoxically, his silence perturbs his political rivals even more, and silence is exactly what he seems to be practicing these days.



He struck a deal again and returned home from a seven-year exile. And yet again, his target was Gen Musharraf and the establishment which resulted in his ouster from power again after disqualification.

Sharif had been sentenced to seven years in jail in Al-Azizia Steel Mills case. However, he was allowed to go to England for medical treatment through yet another undeclared deal. From London, an irate

jail damped down the enthusiasm and zeal of Maryam Nawaz, who now speaks only at court hearings. There is a buzz again about a possible deal with Nawaz Sharif which has probably led the Pakistan Muslim League to soften its stance against the establishment till the next elections.

The majority of the local leadership of PML-N has somehow managed to convince the top leaders that the only way

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All Quiet on the Political Front?

Given the deep-seated differences among key opposition parties, Imran Khan's government is unlikely to face any successful political challenge.



By Zain Rihath

Discord in the ranks of the opposition has become the strength of Prime Minister Imran Khan's government, as coming from different ideologies and having distinctive traits, the opposition parties find it difficult to jointly move forward with their anti-government agenda.

The three major opposition parties; Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) come from opposing ideologies, have different traits, and most importantly, their priorities at this critical juncture of the history are different. Something that is fine for the PML-N may not benefit PPP politically, and what suits PPP may hurt the sentiments of JUI-F supporters.

PML-N leadership has nothing to lose at the moment. They have no stakes in the current political system and they are going all out against the government, establishment and the state institutions. However,

the PPP is still against dragging the state institutions in what it sees as a political fight.

Pakistan Peoples' Party is a stakeholder in this system as it heads the provincial government in Sindh. At the moment, it seems in no mood to be a part of any anti-government move. PPP leadership is not willing to resign from the assemblies and wants the current disposition to complete its five-year term.

While the PPP is satisfied with what it has at the moment, the PML-N is fidgety. The Nawaz-led party is determined to give a tough time to the government. It was willing to go to any length to oust the Imran-led government until Maryam Nawaz was in the driving seat.

However, with Shehbaz Sharif taking the key role, things have changed a little bit for the PML-N. The party President is talking about reconciliation and is willing to talk to

the establishment and take along other opposition parties. Still, the priorities of the two main opposition parties are different.

The leadership of the opposition parties seems in disagreement when it comes to the objectives of the anti-government alliance. The possible objectives of the anti-government movement may include calling for fresh elections, creating wedge between the PTI and the establishment, and immediate relief in the cases against top leadership of PPP, PML-N.

On the other hand, mid-term elections inevitably mean the PPP will have to leave the Sindh government. Although party co-chair Zardari has claimed that PPP will surprise everyone in the next general elections, the PPP is unlikely to resign from the assemblies given that it has no hope of sweeping the next elections.

On his part, Nawaz Sharif has gone for the extreme position to make a case for his own



return to power at some point in the future though his chances of returning to power are dim. Nawaz Sharif has also made it difficult for the PPP to support the PDM as he, in his speeches from London, attacked the military's current leadership.

Sharif accused the military leadership of rigging the 2018 elections to bring the PTI government to power.

After differences between PPP and ANP on one side and rest of the PDM constituent parties on the other on the issue of Senate Deputy Chairman vote emerged, and subsequent show-cause notices, PPP and the ANP have been sitting on the sidelines of the PDM though efforts are underway from Shehbaz Sharif for their re-entry into the alliance.

To PTI's Fawad Chaudhry, the PDM is a collection of political orphans. He is of the view that people who have no stake in the current political system are clamouring for resignations. The only thing the opposition parties fully agree upon is the rejection of the accountability process.

It goes without saying that mutual distrust between the two main opposition parties, PML-N and PPP, has rendered a possibly stronger anti-government front in disarray.

There are clear indications that the PPP is not yet ready to participate in any anti-government move and resign from the provincial assembly to express its resolve against the government. The party's political survival rests with its presence in power even if that is at the provincial level.

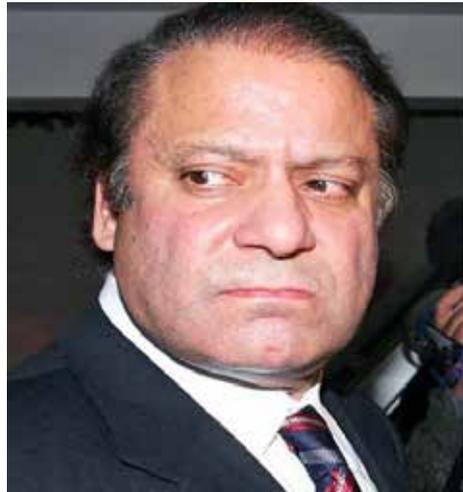
If the PPP decides to leave the Sindh government, PTI and other smaller parties will do their best to keep PPP out of power and the PPP knows it very well. Due to the same reasons, the PPP leadership has decided to consider the option of resignation from assemblies only if Sharif returns from abroad to oversee PDM's long march plans.

Making and breaking of alliances has been a prominent feature of party politics in Pakistan for the past seven decades. Pakistan's political history has seen many alliances. For example, Combined Opposition Parties in 1964, the Democratic Action Committee (DAC) in 1968, the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) in 1977,

the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in 1983, and the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) in 2002. The PDM is the latest of the anti-government alliances.

The formation of the PDM brought bitter rivals PML-N and PPP together. It was political expediency that forced the opposing ideologies to join hands. The opposition parties' alliance was cobbled together with the objective of giving a tough time to the government. But the most important observation is that PPP and PML-N have a long history of distrust and it continues to grow.

In 2018, Asif Ali Zardari participated in a rally against the PML-N government in Punjab and threatened to topple the party's government in Balochistan. The show-cause notice served to the PPP and ANP sought an explanation for why the two parties had got BAP's support for



the party candidate. The issuance of the notice suggested that the PML-N especially desired to push the PPP out of PDM because of the mutual distrust.

Still, the PML-N is not willing to welcome PPP in the PDM. Statements by the leadership of both the parties against each other reflect the bitterness in relations between the two political rivals. It was the circumstances that brought the two closer yet they are away from each other.

Convincingly, distrust between PPP and PML-N has put PDM on the verge of disintegration. Despite Fazal's hectic efforts, the two parties could not come together. Leaders' egos and past bitterness have emerged as major reasons for its ultimate division.

In view the past relations between the two parties, it can be safely said that the PPP and PML-N will be contesting the upcoming general elections separately and against each other, until an electoral alliance is brokered.

If we discuss the possible push to the government that could oust it from the power corridors, we know that any anti-government move involves mobilizing thousands of workers across the country. The workers are to be motivated and most importantly unity in the ranks of all the opposition parties. The opposition alliance doesn't meet all these challenges and the road for the opposition is getting messier and bumpier.

The PTI government is the beneficiary of the distrust between the two parties. The Imran-led government has survived the opposition onslaught multiple times,



thanks to a lack of trust among the opposition parties.

The no-confidence motion against the Deputy Speaker and its withdrawal also reflects the weaker position of the opposition alliance. They knew their weaknesses and thought it better to withdraw the motion.

Given the distrust and difference of priorities, the opposition is not in a position to present a major threat to the system. A major challenge for the opposition parties is maintaining unity among its ranks and it seems that the PDM may not be able to bring down the government.



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Pakistan and the FATF's Moving Goalpost

Authorities in Pakistan must be wondering if the whole exercise is a wild goose chase after all.

By Ahmed Mukhtar Naqshbandi

The pattern is becoming familiar: Another round of review, another raft of action items to deliver on. This time, the venerable Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has deemed it fit to hand Pakistan a list of six new action items to accomplish in addition to one item outstanding from the original action plan.

Addressing a virtual media conference at the conclusion of its five-day plenary, FATF President Dr Marcus Pleyer said Pakistan would remain on the watchdog's grey list until it has addressed all action items on both plans.

The announcement came on the quick heels of a public assertion by Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi to the effect that there was no longer any justification to keep the country on FATF's increased monitoring list, commonly known as the grey list.

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi on Saturday (next day of the FATF decision) questioned the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) decision to continue to keep Pakistan on the watchdog's "increased monitoring list", despite implementation on 26 out of 27 points included in the original action plan.

The foreign minister said it needed to be looked into whether FATF was "being used for political purposes", adding "some powers desire to keep the sword of FATF hanging over Pakistan." It was yet to be determined whether the FATF was a technical forum or a political one, the statement quoted him as saying.

Qureshi said whatever steps Pakistan took were in its own interests, emphasising that it was in Pakistan's interest to stop money laundering and terror financing.

Previously, in a statement aired by Radio Pakistan two days into FATF's Paris plenary, Qureshi asserted Pakistan had taken concrete steps to curb money-laundering and terrorist financing. He accused India of attempting to misuse the forum for political purposes, saying New Delhi has indulged in continuous anti-Pakistan propaganda.

Steps taken by Pakistan include the promulgation of strict laws against money laundering, freezing of assets, and filing of cases against banned organisations.

Resultantly, the Asia Pacific Group on Money Laundering improved Pakistan's rating against money laundering and terror financing. Moreover, the Pakistan-EU Joint Commission had also welcomed the country's progress in the implementation of FATF points.

But FATF left no doubt last week Pakistan was stuck in the grey list until at least the next review, due in June 2022. The announcement to this effect came from FATF President Dr Marcus Pleyer at a media conference at the conclusion of the five-day virtual plenary.

In February, the FATF had said Pakistan would remain on the grey list till June, saying the country remains under



“increased monitoring” when it comes to terror financing. The watchdog had reviewed steps taken by Pakistan against terror financing during a three-day virtual meeting.

Pleyer had said that while the FATF recognises Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, there were still some serious deficiencies that the country needs to address.

Until the last assessment, Pakistan was found deficient in acting against organisations allegedly linked to the terror groups listed by the UN Security Council, prosecuting and convicting banned individuals and tackling smuggling of narcotics and precious stones.

In its last observation in Feb 2021, the FATF president had reiterated that Pakistan had made progress, but added: “We strongly urge completion of the plan by Pakistan.”

He had insisted that Pakistan “must improve their investigations and prosecutions of all groups and entities financing terrorists and their associates and show that penalties by courts are effective.

The virtual meeting of the FATF Plenary took place under the presidency of Dr Marcus Pleyer, while delegates representing 205 members of the Global Network and observer organizations including the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations and the Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units were also in attendance

The Paris plenary kicked off on 21 June and concluded on June 25. The Task Force reviewed the Asia Pacific Group's report on Pakistan's compliance with the watchdog's prescribed action items. The FATF had held a session on 23 June to consider whether to take Pakistan off the grey list. The decision was announced by Pleyer after the conclusion of the plenary.

In response to additional deficiencies later identified in Pakistan's 2019 APG (Asia Pacific Group) Mutual Evaluation Report (MER), Pakistan has made progress to address a number of the recommended actions in the MER and provided further high-level commitment in June 2021 to address these strategic deficiencies pursuant to a new action plan that primarily focuses on combating money laundering.

Action items

FATF statement says Pakistan should continue to work to address its strategically important AML/CFT deficiencies. It

then outlines a six-point agenda for action, including:

1. Enhancing international cooperation by amending the MLA law;
2. Demonstrating that assistance is being sought from foreign countries in implementing UNSCR (United Nation's Security Council Resolution) 1373 designations;
3. Demonstrating that supervisors are conducting both on-site and off-site supervision commensurate with specific risks associated with DNFBPs (Designated Non-Financial Businesses and Professions), including applying appropriate sanctions where necessary;
4. Demonstrating that proportionate and dissuasive sanctions are applied consistently to all legal persons and legal arrangements for non-compliance with beneficial ownership requirements;
5. Demonstrating an increase in ML (Money Laundering) investigations and prosecutions and that proceeds of crime continue to be restrained and confiscated in line with Pakistan's risk profile, including working with foreign counterparts to trace, freeze, and confiscate assets; and
6. Demonstrating that DNFBPs are being monitored for compliance with proliferation financing requirements and that sanctions are being imposed for non-compliance.

Since June 2018, when Pakistan made a high-level political commitment to work with the FATF and APG to strengthen its AML/CFT regime and to address its strategic counter-terrorist financing-related deficiencies, Pakistan's continued political commitment has led to significant progress across a comprehensive CFT action plan.

The FATF recognizes Pakistan's progress and efforts to address these CFT action plan items and notes that since February 2021, Pakistan has made progress to complete two of the three remaining action items.

The items in question are concerned with demonstrating that effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions are imposed for TF convictions and that Pakistan's targeted financial sanctions regime was being used effectively to targeted terrorist assets.

Pakistan has now completed 26 of the 27 action items in its 2018 action plan.

Background

The Asia Pacific Group (APG) on Money Laundering had previously improved Pakistan's rating on 21 of the 40 technical recommendations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) against money laundering and terror financing, but retained it on 'Enhanced Follow-up' for sufficient outstanding requirements.

The second Follow-Up Report (FUR) on Mutual Evaluation of Pakistan released by the APG — a regional affiliate of the Paris-based FATF — also downgraded the country on one criteria. The report said that Pakistan was re-rated to 'compliant' status on five counts and on 15 others to 'largely compliant' and on yet another count to 'partially compliant'.

Overall, Pakistan was then made fully 'compliant' with seven recommendations and 'largely compliant' with 24 others. The country was 'partially compliant' with seven recommendations and 'non-compliant' with two out of total 40 recommendations. All in all, Pakistan was then compliant or largely compliant with 31 out of 40 FATF recommendations.

The reporting date for this evaluation was 1st October 2020, which meant Islamabad may have made further progress since then that would be evaluated at a later stage.

"Pakistan would move from enhanced (expedited) to enhanced follow-up, and would continue to report back to the APG on progress to strengthen its implementation of anti-money laundering and combating financing terror (AML/CFT) measures," the APG said in a previous statement.

Pakistan submitted its third progress report in February 2021 and it was evaluated and was suggested to make more progress.

"Overall, Pakistan has made notable progress in addressing the technical compliance deficiencies identified in its Mutual Evaluation Report (MER) and has been re-rated on 22 recommendations," the APG added.

Also, re-rating was done on DNFBPs in terms of due diligence and other measures, transparency in beneficial ownership of legal persons and related legal arrangements, responsibilities of law enforcement and investigation authorities, cash couriers, sanctions and other forms of international cooperation.

In the first FUR of February last year, Pakistan's progress was largely found unchanged — non-compliant on four counts, partially compliant on 25 counts, and largely compliant on nine recommendations. Since then, the government has worked aggressively and improved its effectiveness on AML/CFT system.

In February, Pakistan submitted its third progress report requesting re-rating for recommendations 10, 18, 26 and 34. A review team has been formed to assess compliance with these recommendations. Pakistan has not reported on its progress rectifying deficiencies identified in R-15 or 33, the APG said.

FATF's Mutual Evaluation Report (MER) of jurisdictions is assessed in two domains — technical compliance or legal instruments (40 FATF recommendations) and demonstration of effectiveness (11 immediate outcomes). Pakistan's MER was adopted in October 2019 in which the country was rated compliant and largely compliant in 10 out of 40 recommendations.

After adoption of MER, Pakistan was placed under post-observation period by the FATF, which expired in February this year. During the said period, Pakistan carried out major legal reforms with the enactment of 14 federal laws and three provincial laws along with relevant rules and regulations.

The weaknesses in MLA with other countries resulted in non-compliance on two recommendations — 37 and 38. This pertained to the restrictive new condition imposed on MLA through the new requirement to inform the subject of the request.

"Having considered the nature and scope of the remaining gaps, and Pakistan's risk and context, these gaps have been given major weight in determining the final rating on non-compliance," the APG said.

The FATF announcement at the conclusion of the Paris plenary leaves observers in Pakistan feeling the watchdog is moving the goalpost. Some are even wondering if this is the same old mantra of "do more" coming from a different mouthpiece.

Budget 21-22: Wooing Fortune, Tempting Fate

The course charted by Finance Minister Tarin commits the government to a delicate balancing act throughout the fiscal year to stimulate growth and employment.



By Javed Mahmood

Prime Minister Imran Khan's government has bitten the bullet to come with a big-spending budget designed to stimulate growth and create jobs at the cost of some inflationary pressure, making the job of economic managers akin to walking a tightrope.

Increase in the rate of Petroleum Development Levy, Sales Tax on sugar and other similar measures can set off a new wave of price hike, which will inevitably inflict some pain on the consumer and erode good perception of new budget for 2021-22.

Setting aside blame-game, despite the coronavirus pandemic, the federal government has presented a pro-business, growth-oriented, and common man-friendly budget for the year 2021-22, starting from 1 July 2021.

That's why the new budget of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) for the year 2021-22 seems to be an ambitious strategy to meet multiple challenges such as elimination of the negative impact of the COVID-19 on the economy by bolstering further growth to 4.8 percent of the GDP, creation of thousands of jobs, and launching of multiple development projects which support

national economic growth, create employment opportunities, and alleviate poverty in the country.

Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin announced 2021-22 budget on June 11, 2021, with an outlay of 8.487 trillion rupees annual expenditures. In comparison with the 2020-21 expenditures of 7.136 trillion rupees expenditures, the federal government has incorporated a 19 percent increase in the budgetary expenditures in 2021-22 with the aim to achieve development-oriented goals.

In the new budget, the federal government has substantially enhanced the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) expenditures and also increased provinces share in the federal divisible pool because of one trillion rupees anticipated increase in federal revenues in 2021-22. In the new financial year, the federal government has estimated 7.9 trillion rupees tax and non-tax revenues.

Tax revenues are estimated to be around 5.829 trillion rupees tax revenues while 2.08 trillion rupees non-tax revenues will be generated in 2021-22. In percentage, tax receipts are expected to be higher by 24

percent in 2021-22 over the fiscal year 2020-21 while in monetary term, the target of tax collection for 2021-22 is higher by 1.1 trillion rupees in comparison with expected tax collection of about 4.7 trillion for fiscal year 2020-21, ending in June.

Meanwhile, to augment development in the country in 2021-22, the government has evolved a dual strategy. On the one hand, the PTI government has increased the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) budget to PKR 900 billion, up 36 percent over 2020-21PSDP, while on the other hand, the government has decided to launch PKR 2,000 billion development projects with the Public-Private Partnership programme in the country. The Public-Private Partnership programme has been evolved under the PSDP Plus plan of the government.

Under the PSDP Plus, the government had already initiated 233 billion rupees uplift programmes while in 2021-22 another 710 billion rupees projects will be launched. For this purpose, the government has identified 50 projects that will be initiated in the new financial year in collaboration with the private sector.

Additionally, the federal government will provide 1.2 trillion rupees to provinces from the divisible pool for provincial development programmes. Thus, the total national development budget, including PSDP, will be 2.13 trillion rupees in 2021-22. Notably, for 2021-22, the federal government has approved 33 percent increase in the national development budget, to PKR2.13 trillion. This strategy will, indeed, support social and economic development in the country.

In the new budget, the federal government has highlighted the role of some key China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. In 2021-22, development work on 21 CPEC-related projects including Karachi-Lahore Motorway, Havelian-Thakot 120-km Phase-1 construction, Zhob-Kuchlak Road construction, and improvement of mainline of Pakistan Railways will be launched.

Meanwhile, ML-1 North-South infrastructure development project will also be completed in three phases with of 9.3 billion dollars investment. First phase of the project has already been launched from March 2020 while work on Package-2 of this mega project will be launched on 2 July 2021. Third package of this project will be initiated from 3 July 2022. These projects will create thousands of job opportunities, trigger industrial and economic development, and help improve the transportation sector in Pakistan.

Another area which will see major improvement in the new financial year is the energy sector which is not able to carry more than 22,000 MWs to 23,000 MWs in peak summer days. Whenever power generation and consumption exceeds 20,000 MWs in sultry weather, many parts of the country experience frequent power outages.

In June 2021, for the first time the power generation in the country exceeded 23,000 MWs, but the national transmission system could not sustain this load. Nonetheless, to improve the transmission system, the government has allocated 118 billion rupees for 1000-KV North Lahore and West Islamabad electricity systems.

About 12 billion rupees have been allocated for improvement in Hyderabad-Sukkur power transmission system. Furthermore, 8.5 billion rupees will be spent to generate 2,160 MWs of electricity from Dasu Dam

and 5.5 billion rupees will be utilized to generate hydro power from Sukki Kinari, Kohala and Mahal hydropower projects.

In Jamshoro, 1,200 MWs of electricity will be generated from coal by spending 22 billion rupees in 2021-22 while 16.5 billion rupees have been allocated for K2 and Tarbela Hydropower Project Extension Phase-5.

Incentives for Common People

In 2021-22, to further augment construction activities in the country, the government has earmarked PKR 33 billion to provide subsidized loans to low-income groups in the country. Each borrower will be able to avail PKR 3 lakh subsidy on borrowing of home loans in the new financial year, starting from July 2021.

Importantly, banks have received applications for 100 billion rupees home-loans out of which 70 billion rupees loans have already been approved. With low-cost bank loans, people can buy plots, build or renovate homes. This trend will not only accelerate banking financing, it will create thousands of jobs in the construction sector and pace up manufacturing sectors output associated with this business in the country.

Additionally, in the new financial year, the government has allocated 260 billion rupees for Ehsaas Programmes to provide cash assistance and employment opportunities to deserving countrymen. Under the Ehsaas Programmes, thousands of Food Cards will be provided to needy people in 2021-22.

In his budget speech, Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin said that in 2021-22, up to six million households will be given up to Rs5 lac interest-free loans. Every agriculture-based household will get interest-free loans worth PKR 150,000 while low-interest loans up to PKR 2 million will be given for low-cost housing.

The government also announced federal excise duty exemption for locally manufactured 850cc cars along with reduction in sales tax, from 17 to 12.5 percent in 2021-22. This strategy was aimed at providing relief to people to buy small cars at affordable prices and encourage the automobile sector to develop more capacity to produce cars.

In the new budget, the import of CKD kits will be duty-free for the electric cars to be produced in Pakistan.

Petroleum Development Levy and Hike in Tax on Sugar

In the new budget, the government plans to increase rate of petroleum development levy and threshold of sales tax on sugar. A few days ago, Finance Minister said that the government would have to increase the petroleum development levy by 25-30 rupees/litre because of growing crude oil prices in the international market.

He also said that at present the government was charging 17 percent sales tax on sugar at a fixed value of PKR 60/kg, instead of open market price of the commodity. In the other market, the ex-mill price of sugar per kg is around 82 rupees and if the government increased sales tax according market-based price, it will certainly further give a spike in retail prices of sugar across the country.

Furthermore, any increase in the rate of petroleum development levy will generate a new wave of price hike in the country, causing extra financial burden on the consumers. So far, everyone is happy with the new budget except opposition, but increase in PDL and tax on sugar will indeed affect the consumers and change their opinion about the budget and the government who avoided these tax measures at the time of announcement of budget on 11 June and now planning to do it.

Meanwhile, a few days ago, the State Bank of Pakistan has allowed banks to impose fees on inter-bank cash transactions. If the government resorts to heavy taxation in 2021-22, it will create extra financial burden on the consumers which will eliminate good perception of the new budget.

Thus, in the new financial year, the PTI government should make well-calculated moves which curb price hike, give relief to consumers and pave the way for accomplishing important goals mentioned in the new budget.

It's the Oil Squeeze or the Revenue Squeeze

The budget pins revenue hopes on falling international oil prices, but a plethora of factors could conspire against that, leaving the consumer to bridge the revenue gap.



By Khaleeq Ahmed

Oil and Gas imports consume Pakistan's largest part of the import bill and range between USD 12-14 billion depending on international oil prices and local consumption. Any uptick in the oil prices sends chilling signals to policymakers and consumers at the same time.

On the one hand, it becomes a major drain on foreign exchange reserves and constrains policymakers' choice to mop up taxes. On the other hand, it puts pressure directly on consumers' pockets and indirectly affects them negatively through the resultant snowball effect of inflation.

As is the dilemma with other oil importing countries, Pakistan is also affected by higher international oil prices as it results in higher inflation as our transportation and production means are mostly road based and costs go up. On the other hand, Pakistan's budget deficit also increases with higher oil prices and exchange rate and reserves are negatively impacted and cause an additional cost to imports at a time the

country's nascent economic recovery needs breathing space to take root.

From the common perspective, increase in petroleum prices seriously hampers the average daily household consumption in a society where a large part of the population lives on income support programmes and an even larger population is on the margins and can plunge into poverty with a minor shock.

People tend to cut down on essential protein and micronutrients intake as their shrinking income curtails their ability to purchase meats and fruits and restrict themselves to subsistence meals.

In Pakistan, the increase in the prices of oil and the pace of rise in inflation are generally directly proportional. The irony, however, is that transportation costs that go up with rise in oil price never come down when the international prices ease.

It also has to be noted that as petrol prices go up, a large part of the majority popula-

tion's household budget is negatively affected who use motorbikes and cars for personal use and for passengers as well. But an even bigger shock comes from higher diesel prices since an even larger part of the population's transportation of goods is directly and indirectly linked to trucks and buses. Thus, the rise in oil prices would also have an impact on the cost of both goods and services and affect businesses.

In the first eleven months of the current fiscal year, the petroleum import bill has touched USD 10 billion but has been rising in recent months because of an upward trend in the international oil prices. During this period, Pakistan spent about USD 2.5 billion each on LNG and crude oil imports and another USD 4.5 billion on refined petroleum products.

This rising trend has compelled the government to scale down its revenue take as inflation has moved into double digits and political pressure mounts amid rising public unease and resultant criticism.

The government has been charging up to PKR 30 per liter petroleum levy and 17 percent general sales tax on major petroleum products in the early months of the outgoing fiscal year. It was thus able to collect about PKR 275 billion as petroleum levy alone in the first six months at an average rate of PKR 46 billion per month.

As the prices started to go up, the government had to gradually reduce petroleum levy to PKR 10-12 per liter and collection started to slow down. In the first nine months the petroleum levy collection came in at PKR 370 billion.

This meant the third quarter collection stood at just PKR 95 billion at an average collection rate of less than PKR 32 billion per month. The 9-month average also came down to PKR 41 billion per month. The levy has since been further reduced and stands at PKR 2-3 per liter at present. It is yet to be seen if the budgeted target of PKR 450 billion for current fiscal year can be achieved.

Over the last two years, the government has been tweaking petroleum levy rates instead of GST as levy remains in the federal kitty while GST goes to the divisible pool taxes, about 57 percent of which goes to the provinces.

Petrol and HSD are two major products that generate most of the revenue for the government because of their massive and growing consumption in the country. Average petrol sales are touching 700,000 tonnes per month against the monthly consumption of around 600,000 tonnes of HSD. The sales of kerosene oil and LDO are generally less than 11,000 and 2000 tonnes per month.

Globally, crude prices have also somewhat recovered from the crash they suffered because of the Covid-19 global pandemic as vaccination spreads across the major economies and revive demand while on the other hand, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) maintains status quo on their production quotas. The economies are gradually opening up, the existing stockpiles are going down, leading to higher prices after almost 10 percent fall in 2020.

If the trend continues, Pakistan's oil import bill will go up on the one hand and on the other, the government target of collecting PKR 610 billion as petroleum levy on oil products would remain uncertain as it will limit the government's ability to jack up the levy back to PKR 30 per litre level.

Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin, however, pins hope on lower international oil prices going forward on the basis of a possible lifting of international sanctions against Iran and resultant end to ban on Iran's oil production.

This is in line with United States Energy Information Administration (USEIA) projections. In its latest report, it noted that Brent crude oil spot prices averaged USD 68 per barrel in May, up USD 4 per barrel from April. Brent prices were higher in May as global oil inventories continued to decline, albeit at a slower pace than in the first four months of the year.



In the coming months, the USEIA projected that global oil production will increase to match rising levels of global oil consumption. The rising oil production in the forecast is largely a result of OPEC and its allies' decision to raise production, the EIA said, adding it expected rising production to end the persistent global oil inventory draws that have occurred for much of the past year and lead to relatively balanced global oil markets in the second half of 2021. It expects Brent prices will remain near current levels in the third quarter of 2021, averaging USD 68 per barrel.

That would be a major challenge because the fiscal year would start and perhaps go well into second quarter with higher prices that Pakistan would need to cope with both in terms of revenue mop up amid higher rate of inflation. This would be the time the government would again be sitting with the International Monetary Fund to negotiate its programme that currently is neither here nor there.

However, the USEIA expects that in 2022 continuing growth in production from OPEC and its allies and accelerating growth in US tight oil production – along with other supply growth – will outpace decelerating growth in global oil consumption and contribute to declining oil prices. Based on these factors, it expects Brent to average USD 60 per barrel in 2022.

There are so many ifs and buts through. What if EU-Iran-US engagements do not move the way these are projected? What if

there is another wave of Covid-19 pandemic and so on. After all, who expected Covid-19 in January 2020 and who could forecast the third and even deadlier wave of this pandemic early this year?

For so many such uncertainties on the international horizon, for Pakistani consumers what is quite certain though is the fact that prices of petroleum products would not go down during most of fiscal year 2021-22. How much these prices rise down the road is anybody's guess.

The write is an Islamabad based journalist.

Putting Our Money Where Our Mouth Is

In-charge of our farm sector since the 18th Amendment, provinces have found little time or motivation to attend to its development. Now the nation's food security is in jeopardy.

By Amer Mahmood

Although the government vehemently denies it, poverty is on the rise in Pakistan as evidenced by surveys of international humanitarian organizations which point out an alarming stunted birth rate of over 40 percent in the country.

With one of the highest stunting rates in the world, the country is fast headed towards a crisis. Surprisingly, the situation is particularly worse in its agriculture dominated rural areas.

Instead of taking emergency steps to enhance food security, the successive military and civilian government have paid lip service to the issue and have silently watched the situation worsen. Food insecurity is officially described, as limited economic access of the most vulnerable to the food.

However, this is not correct, as even urban middle class has limited access to essential

food items due to higher prices. According to official surveys most of the poor and middle-class families spend a substantial part of their income on food.

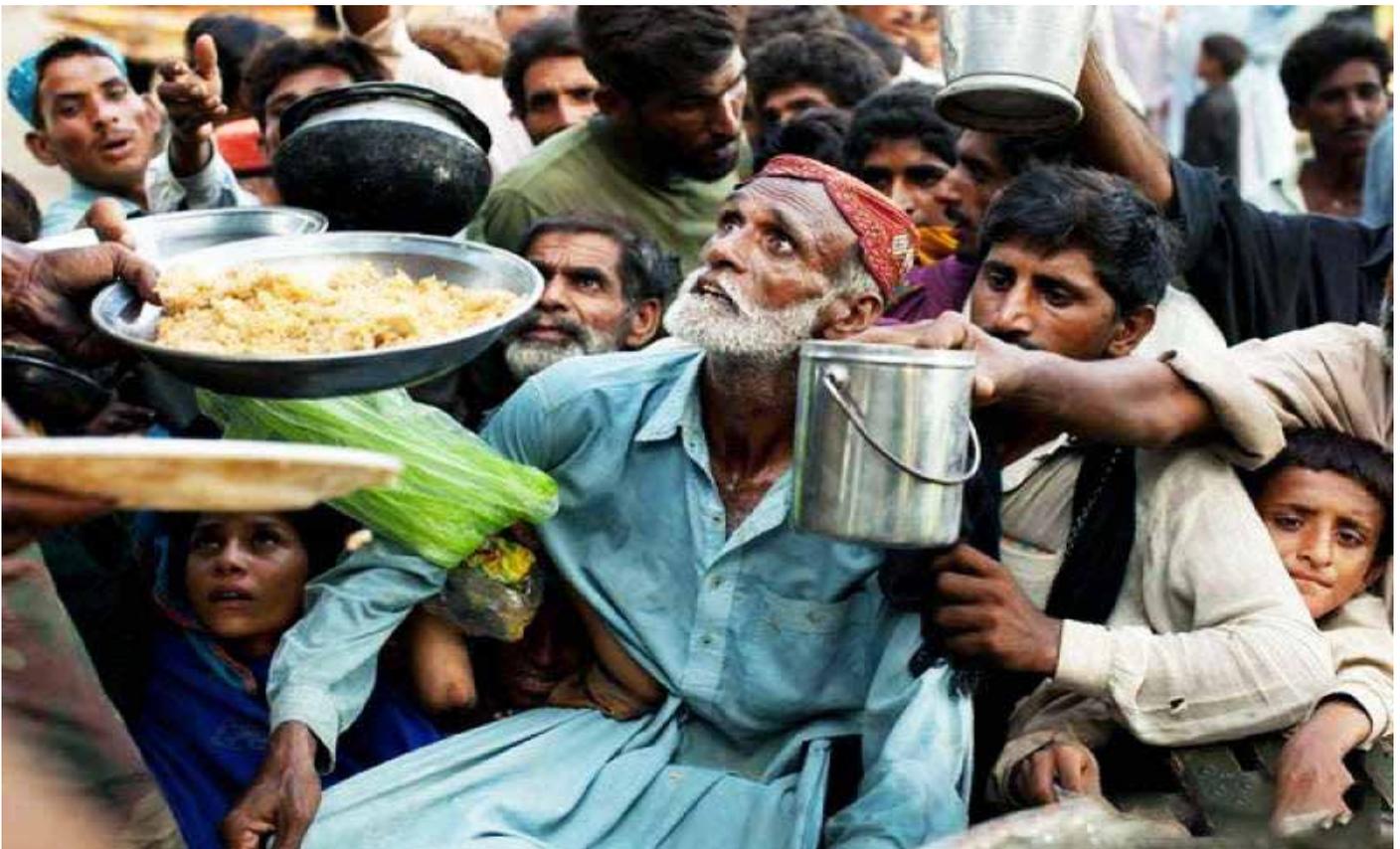
The newly appointed Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin has rightly pointed out that the high food inflation was resulting from food imports, as the local agriculture production has declined. Without policy intervention from the government, the agriculture production will continue to dwindle over the coming years.

Amid this dismal situation, it is no surprise that during the first 11 months of the current financial year, the food import bill ballooned to a massive USD 7.55 billion. It is important to mention that Pakistan has nearly tiptoed to IMF's tune to gain a bailout package of USD 6.2 billion in 2019.

During the July-May period of this financial year, Pakistan has imported a

record 3.6 million tonnes of wheat by spending USD 984 million. The country also imported palm oil worth USD 2.4 billion, pulses of USD 623.4 million, tea of USD 537 million, sugar of USD 128 million and USD 3 billion of other products, like milk and spices during this period. The decline of cotton yield from 14 million bales in 2014 to 6 million bales in 2020 alone caused a loss of USD 6 billion per annum to the economy.

These figures are alarming as Pakistan was a food self-sufficient country a decade back. What went wrong in a single decade? Agriculture experts point to the 18th amendment that devolved the agriculture subject to provinces in 2010. They say, provinces never had agriculture, education and health as their top priorities, they focused more on mega infrastructure projects.



No new agriculture policies were pursued, the development spending diminished, resulting in drying of funds to agriculture research institutions, leading to an overall decline in agricultural productivity.

Agriculture experts say prioritizing and investment in agriculture can be a game changer. The constraints and gaps in productivity can be removed through policy intervention in the short term to make agriculture competitive again. There is ample scope to enhance farm productivity, reduce post-harvest losses, by introducing processing and value chain management.

Pakistan can easily enhance per hectare yield of its major crops by 50 percent within a year through two simple interventions.

agricultural commodities; high pesticide residue and lack of traceability and certification are emerging issues which reduces the country's chance to compete in national and international markets.

Sadly, all these facts have never inspired a mega development project at the federal or provincial level. There is low export-production ratio in the agriculture sector. There is poor value chain development of the commodities, inefficient commercial policies and strategies and weak knowledge and link with international markets.

Improving links with international markets and improving the value chain of agriculture can greatly enhance the export-production ratio of these

reduce post-harvest losses and improve produce quality but also reduce seasonal price fluctuation. Small scale pulp making in mango, sugarcane and many other fruits are viable business ventures in rural areas, provided processing and hygienic standards are maintained.

The Ministry of Industries and Ministry of Commerce may have many grandiose plans to boost large scale manufacturing, but these small and doable projects have never gained attention of the mandarins.

The incumbent PTI government's slogan of reform can cause a major change if it makes mandatory modern management practices, Good Agriculture Practices at the



Firstly, timely announcing the minimum support price and secondly, implementing it when the market fails. Agriculture experts say the farmer has no access to credit or insurance and when there is no fair market available why would he toil for a bumper yield.

The cause of low per hectare and per animal yields are attributed to lack of producer's access to advance and high-yielding technologies, varieties and planting material and their ability to adopt these technologies.

Pakistan's harvest and post-harvest losses ranging between 20 to 50 percent are highest in the world. About 5-15 percent of these losses occur at the harvesting time. Aflatoxin infestation is common in many

commodities. Pakistani exporters fail to meet the quality standards of the importing countries.

Lack of investment on value chain development is the main cause of Pakistan's failure to get the world average export price. Sadly, no project has been conceived for the last seventy years to address this basic issue.

Despite a great potential of small-scale processing of agriculture commodities, very little of agriculture produce go into such processing in rural areas. Most of the tomato puree is imported from China which can be processed through small-scale puree plants in rural areas.

Mechanical sun drying of several fruits and vegetables, basmati rice, can not only

farm-level and International Food Standards at the processing level.

This will lead to major improvement in production of agricultural and livestock products as well as their exports. This will greatly transform the agriculture sector which has the potential make a giant leap to next millennia.

After a decade, the federal government, has made an allocation of PKR 12 billion for agriculture development projects, in the upcoming budget for the next financial year. But there is no clear strategy to enhance investment, infuse technology, promote innovation, implement international standards, establish international linkages, and ensure food security.

The Necessary Evil of Inflation

Will the benefits of inflation outweigh its toll on the ballot box showing of the ruling parties?

By Meer Diam

When the Prime Minister reshuffled the cabinet last time, he termed curbing inflation as his top priority. This is what he expects from Shaukat Tarin as well. Right before the presentation of budget, the Prime Minister seemed to concede the price of essential food items, the major source of inflation, was quite difficult to bring down.

Under a democratic dispensation, inflation matters to a government because the inability to contain it takes a toll on its vote bank. The budget is therefore important not only for the PTI government in the Centre and three provinces but also for the PPP, the ruling party in Sindh, the second largest province of the country.

Both these parties cannot remain aloof to the fact that next general elections are in sight and the inflation hovers around 10 percent in the backdrop of uneven growth, rural poverty and fast decaying infrastructure to cater to the basic needs of growing population. Lawmakers who spoke in the budget session were more concerned with the problems of their constituencies than the contents of budget proposals – a testament of the politicians' sensitivity to the ballot.

How inflation went out of control

The single digit Inflation has been a regular feature as the country has maintained a fiscal deficit ranging on average between 7-8 percent and it had been kept in desired limits through contractionary monetary policy whereby money supplies were suppressed by decreasing bond prices and increasing interest rates. Inflation was not considered a problem but, rather, a normal phenomenon, a necessary evil attached with economic growth.

Things turned upside down, however, when the PTI government, pressed hard on balance of payment, decided to meet upfront conditions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) raising the interest rate to 13 percent and devaluing the



currency. These measures triggered inflation to the highest ever mark as food inflation spiraled out of control.

Earlier, the government had allowed export of wheat and sugar, two important food basket items, to shore up foreign exchange reserves in the hope of having bumper crops. However, expectations failed, thanks to untimely and erratic rains destroying wheat crop and price manipulation of sugar barons. International market fluctuations also raised the price of other food items like cooking oil and pulses while wheat flour prices have shot up to new highs.

The government also raised the support price of wheat to encourage farmers to grow the staple food more. The country had bumper price this year but prices of wheat remain sky high amid fast falling purchasing power of the consumers.

Restrictions on businesses due to coronavirus pandemic dealt another huge blow to purchasing power of the people. The policy rates were reversed and administrative measures were announced but the price of essentials have not returned to previous levels mostly due to the fact that the provincial governments did not show corresponding will to stem profiteering and hoarding of food items.

On the other hand, the Finance Minister has given no indication so far to tinker with the dollar-rupee exchange rates as a measure to curtail inflation, either.

Will the budget solve the problem?

The central government has claimed that the Budget 2021-22 is a growth budget and that it is based on a well-thought-out strategy to boost the economic growth with a clear roadmap of the strategic priorities, revenue and spending policies duly approved by the Federal Cabinet in April 2021.

The priorities of the budget include sustainable growth, social protections, and optimal utilization of the funds. On the one hand, it seeks to narrow down the fiscal deficit and on the other, seeks to spur economic growth through undertaking development projects.

Prior to convening budget session, the Prime Minister, however, conceded that it was unrealistic to bring down prices of essentials and the only way left to the government was to turn to wealth generation and shoring up the purchasing power of the people.

The budget duly reflects this thinking whereby Public Sector Development (PSDP) allocations have been restored to 2017-18 level (around PKR 1 trillion), social protections have received more funds, and consumers have been given relief by lowering duties and levies on telecom and automobile sectors.

The outlay of PKR 8.5 trillion is double the projected net revenue and the measures to fill the yawning gaps are not only ambitious but also unrealistic. The provinces have been given PKR 3.4 trillion from federal divisible pool, interest payments, defense and pensions constitute major expenditure heads.

While foreign remittance, large-scale manufacturing, and service sector have shown phenomenal growth, the government is expecting positive trend in agricultural sector by pumping PKR12 billion in terms of subsidies to enhance production of wheat and dairy products other than reserving around PKR 100 billion for the construction of dams. The government has raised wheat prices to help farmers despite the fact that it is quite an inflationary measure.

Growth rate target of 4.9 percent flies in the face of the projections by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). The revenue target appears to be unrealistic from the outset given the lower-than-expected performance of the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) so far.

Quite interestingly, the revenue target has been lowered this year. The FBR inability to achieve revenue collection targets not only forces the government to bridge the fiscal deficit through inflationary measures like borrowing from internal and external sources but also squeezes the share of provinces that are meant to bear the burden of socio-economic growth but have to cut down the ADPs (Annual development plans).

Socio-economic development

Provinces are central in efforts to control inflation given the fact that agriculture falls in their domain and they have administrative means to curb hoarding and

profiteering. Similarly, shoring up the household incomes and, thereby, increasing the purchasing power of consumers, also depends largely on the growth of business and industry.

The subsidies to agriculture sector have been granted by the Centre in terms of provision of seed and fertilizer and only Balochistan with a small economy, battered by locust infestation last year, remains obsessed with the uplift of agriculture.

The major problem with the provinces is that they have failed to evolve a mechanism to ensure fair and equitable distribution of resources down to the grassroots level by having constitutionally mandated local governments (Article 140-a). Under the circumstances, even if the provinces undertake an economic development process, it will yield uneven and non-sustainable growth.

Punjab has put its southern parts on priority list this time but due to non-existence of a provincial finance commission, allocations for various districts will not be equitable. In the case of the Punjab budget, the proposal is to raise the minimum wage to PKR 20,000 and increased salaries of government employees by 10 percent following the example of the Centre.

A significant tax relief and several new projects have also been announced. Punjab Finance Minister Hashim Jawan Bakht said the budget focuses on regional equalization to bring up the southern Punjab region at par with the rest of the province in terms of infrastructure, education, and health.

The Punjab budget projects a surplus of PKR 125 billion against a total outlay of PKR 2.1 trillion — representing almost 6 percent of spending.

Sindh's tax-free budget with PKR 1.478 trillion contains little in the way of new projects, which, as Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah admitted, could face cuts due to uncertainties surrounding federal transfers. Sindh received 31 percent lesser funds from the federal divisible pool last year.

The total receivables from the federal government for the current fiscal year stand at PKR 760.3 billion, including PKR 679.7

billion from the divisible pool and PKR 62.3 billion in straight transfers and PKR 18.3 billion in respect of grants to offset the losses on account of abolition of Octroi.

At the same time, PKR 7.64 billion has also been dedicated to hybrid electric buses for the public transport system, which benefits the constituencies of members of most parties. Minimum wage has been increased by 20 percent to PKR 25,000, and the health and education budgets have both seen sizeable increases. Besides, Sindh also expects a massive injection of development spending from the Centre although there are enough uncertainties to this end.

The KP accounts for 10 percent of the country's GDP. The tax-free provincial budget remains majorly focused on health sector while PKR 24 billion has been earmarked for the emergency corona fund. Out of the total amount, PKR 15 billion would go for settled districts and PKR 9 billion for the merged areas.

Maximum relief has been offered in taxes in budget FY2020-21, and the reforms in the KP Revenue Authority (KPRA) are projected to enhance provincial revenue from PKR 10 billion to PKR 17 billion. The total income was estimated as PKR 36 billion for this year which is 20 percent more than the last year.

Balochistan has unveiled its budget with a total outlay of PKR 465.528 billion, out of which PKR 309 billion have been allocated for non-developmental expenditures while PKR 156 billion have been allocated for developmental expenditures. The budget shows a deficit of PKR 87 billion.

The province has allocated PKR 38 billion for health sector while PKR 1 billion has been allocated for COVID-19 emergency in the province. Agriculture has drawn PKR 4.121 billion out of which PKR 11.071 billion for non-development sector, while PKR 640.775 million has been set for the revamping of the agriculture department in Balochistan.

Last year, the government had distributed 31,445 kilograms of agricultural seeds, 5,229 agricultural tools and 7,387 cotton bags among the landowners and farmers in the whole province for the improvement of agricultural production.

CGT Rationalisation Key to Reaping Revenue from Realty Sector

Enforced all over Pakistan, a law like the RERA Act, 2020 can potentially resolve 70-80 percent of the challenges facing the realty sector, says realtor leader Muhammad Ahsan Malik.

By Gohar Imdad

Real estate is the driver of growth for the economy of Pakistan, says Muhammad Ahsan Malik Vice President (Punjab) Federation of Realtors (FOR) Pakistan.

Harsh policies of successive governments greatly harmed the real estate sector, robbing the national exchequer of precious revenue, says Ahsan, who is also General Secretary of Real Estate Consultants Association (RECA) and Convener of FPCCI Pakistan for Real Estate Sector-Punjab Region.

On the contrary, positive policy changes in the FY-2020-21 regarding the real estate and construction sector boosted business activity and economy while increasing revenues for the government.

Pakistani economy's recent robust performance that led to around 4 percent growth rate is mostly due to the construction boom in the real estate sector. This becomes abundantly clear when one looks at the increase in sales of cement, steel, bricks, and construction material – and the expatriate remittances that are mostly going into the real estate sector.

The Truth International (TTI) interviewed Mr. Ahsan to find out his take on the nation's real estate sector and the government plans to eliminate illegal dispossession. Given below is an abridged transcript of the conversation.

TTI: Real Estate plays a vital role in Pakistan's GDP. How do you think this sector is being handled by authorities, and how can real estate trading activity be enhanced?

MA: We are demanding for a long time that Pakistan's realty sector should have a regulator - Real Estate Council or the Real Estate Management Board. Recently the National Assembly and Senate have passed Real Estate Regulatory Authority Bill, 2020, but its scope is limited to the capital



territory. Also, the law remains to be implemented.

If it is implemented in letter and spirit, at least 70 to 80 percent of issues of the real estate sector will be settled. There is a dire need for the formulation of RERA rules and its proper implementation just on the lines of other developed countries. Such a step by the government will facilitate in removing different hurdles in the real estate sector.

As far real estate trading is concerned, I believe the imposition of Capital Gain Tax under section 37 has come as a great disincentive, discouraging sale-purchase activity. If the government wishes the sector to operate at anywhere near its potential, they have to rethink Capital Gain Tax.

The term to attract CGT should be restricted to three years at the most, and the rate should be no more than a flat 5 percent. This should help increase the sale-purchase activity and boost of the economy.

TI: You say amendments to section 37 and 203 of the Income Tax Ordinance are a conspiracy by FBR. Why do you think so?

MA: If approved in the budget these amendments will ensure that "Capital

Gains" will add up and become part of regular annual income subjecting these gains to the highest income tax slabs (30-35 percent) instead of the 5-15 percent range currently in practice.

This apparent FBR conspiracy against the construction sector will multiply the tax burden of the investors by six or seven times. Some overzealous babu inside FBR may think that with such measures tax targets can be achieved. Shaukat Tarin had also hinted while talking of IMF negotiations, that "there are non-tariff means" of raising revenues. So is this the strategy? But this is a dumb move and will destroy the market's nascent confidence.

TTI: Qabza Mafia is deeply rooted in Pakistan even though there are several laws to curb this heinous practice. What is your stance on it?

MA: Its root cause is administrative ineffective performance. Have we heard any land grabbing cases in societies like DHA? Then why plenty of cases in private societies' acreages? The streamlined system of DHA and Bahria does not allow grabbers to forcefully occupy lands – at least not under the nose of concerned authorities.

We are suffering from the rule of might is right – the one who has power has possession, where people are restricted to filing a case, which will be a civil suit lingering on for years and years. I believe 70-80 percent of challenges of the real estate sector could be resolved via RERA Bill 2020.

TTI: Why are prices of land in Pakistan overheated? Why has the private sector made our lifestyle luxurious instead of government sector despite having limitless resources?

MA: Overheated prices of land in Pakistan are due to overpopulation and saturation over a limited area of land. Due to rapid development, the price of land in Pakistan is increasing day by day. The housing sector has both potential and shortage side by side. Even Millions of houses are in need, but the government's negligence and policymaking bodies' ineffectiveness leads to such complications.

Pakistan has huge land, but if private housing associations can provide us lavish housing style, then why can't the government bring societies and housing scheme with a huge number of resources? With appropriate legislation and a regulatory body in-charge, the government can build better societies for the people of Pakistan in a modernized way.

It is the responsibility of the government to enact proper laws and make proper departments for this sector to watch the interest of seller, buyer, tenant, realtor, contractor, and manager.

TTI: How can someone buying a property in Pakistan avoid scammers? What's your take on FBR SRO-924 for DNFBP'S?

MA: A suitable licensing system in real estate should be introduced. In DHA, where a list of licensed agents; merely permitted based on Tax registration, house retention, and official registration, property dealers are serving the public interest and reliability upon the land investment.

Presently DNFBP who are filer are being harassed by FBR, and are being served with notices whereas no effort for registration of non-filer for registration as DNFBP is being made by FBR. Real estate agents, builders, developers, moneychangers, and jewellers are treated under the same FBR SRO-924.

These businesses have no homogeneity in their way of working. It is suggested that separate laws should be made for each

category keeping in view their mode of business. The legal requirements of DNFBP should be fulfilled by CDA, LDA, KDA, DHA, and Bahria town and not by the individual real estate agents.

TTI: What contributes to deforestation and climate changes? Why there are insufficient public resorts for recreation?

MA: Real estate issues must be catered to by the government and they should also be highlighted by media agencies. Also, the deforestation and sudden climate change in Pakistan is due to the overcutting of greenery and public parks for amenities, and converting them into residential and commercial property is due to overpopulation.



The government needs to take some serious steps for population control as we have plenty of lands but due to population growth, real estate is facing land shortage and so there's no other option other than to expand urbanization.

TTI: What modifications should be made in advance income tax (236 k) for the immovable property?

MA: Presently filer is paying 1 percent and the non-filer is paying 2 percent advance income tax on the purchase of a property. I would suggest that this tax should be reduced to 0.25percent for filer while for the non-filer it should remain 2percent. Because the advance tax can be reclaimed in a tax return by a filer, this should help increase the economic activity in the country.

TTI: What reforms have been made for the real estate sector by the PTI government? Are they effective or not?

MA: When the PTI government came into

power, the very first step it took was to overburden the real-estate department by expanding the duration of Capital Gain Tax from 3 years to 4 years straightaway. There were two major setbacks in this proceeding. Firstly, the ratio of land trade will decline. Secondly, the public will take their investment out of the property and will likely invest in stocks, industries, and trade to incline the growth rate of the economy.

TTI: How can the development of real estate sector be boosted?

MA: I suggest in this regard, membership fee, transfer fee, possession, and site plan

charges must be reduced by at least 50 percent. The construction package which is ending on 30 June2021 should be extended for at least 1 year, as a lot of activity due to this package has started gaining momentum, thus resulting in benefits to the general public likely in next financial year.

TTI: In the end, I would like to ask about the alleged ring road project scam. What is your take on it?

MA: This deception is shameful and legislation needs drastic improvement to nab the corrupt and disloyal functionary officers involved in this scam. Moreover, this remarkable project will create a huge employment pool for jobless citizens. It is my appeal to PM Imran Khan, not to stop the Ring Road Project. Instead, after proper investigation, carry on the project and complete it. This will go down the history as a milestone project and a great achievement of the PTI government.

Big Showdown in Little Geneva

Biden-Putin summit leaves no doubt the former superpower rivals are still at daggers drawn – except for a rare convergence of views over Afghanistan.

By Umer Farooq

The United States of America is in relative decline—most of the experts of international politics and economics agree on this point. This is the century of rise of the rest—and rest means all kinds of states including China, Brazil, India, many countries of South East Asia and of course Russia.

Russia is a typical case of a booming economy, but its economic rise is dependent on its commodity trade—commodity trade as far as Russia is concerned is reflected in its status as a supplier of energy resources including Oil and Gas to China and Western European countries. Its industrial base, however, is meager as compared to other industrialized nations in Western Europe and Southeast Asia.

Although the Russian Federation is no longer a superpower, it still comes second to the United States of America, in terms of military capabilities. So the Geneva meeting between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin was still in the tradition of the superpower summit meeting in terms of the world attention it attracted. All the world media was focused on the summit, turning out story after story to explain, analyze and feature the background and foreground of the meeting.

The Western media did stories that took the readers and viewers back to the Cold War days when Washington, as the champion of democracy and human rights, would lecture its communist rivals on human dignity and human values. However, this time, when President Biden lectured President Putin about the inhuman treatment of a jailed Russian dissident, he was reminded of human rights violations of black Americans are suffering in the American society.

The need for Washington to have a summit meeting with Russian President cannot be explained without understanding the peculiar relations between China and Russia. Although China and Russian have many problems of their own, they have many concrete bases for coming closer in the face of Washington's continued treatment of both countries as authoritarian regimes that treat their populations in an inhuman manner. Washington's continued assertion of its rights and authority to treat every problem in the world as its own problem brings Russian and Chinese leadership together.

Secondly, China's industrial growth is heavily dependent on energy resources from Russia. Thirdly, China and Russia have an increasingly convergent view of several issues in the Middle East. For instance, both China and Russia dislike Washington's interference in Middle Eastern political and military conflicts. All this buttresses the status of Russia and its President, strengthening Putin's hand as he sits down for a summit meeting with the US President.

Another major quality that qualifies the Russian President to be treated by the US President as an equal is its military capability and its nuclear muscle. Russia is still the largest



and the strongest military power after the United States and it is still in possession of the largest nuclear weapons stockpile after the United States. This is a major reason for Russian President's right to sit in a summit meeting.

The two Presidents, though, agreed “to hold talks on arms control and to return their respective ambassadors to their posts, after the summit that highlighted their deep discord on human rights, cyberattacks, election interference and Ukraine”.

The meeting was the first between the two leaders since Biden took office in January, and lasted for more than three hours. The two sides reached an important agreement to return their chief diplomats to Moscow and Washington after they were brought home as the relationship deteriorated recently.

Russia recalled its envoy after Biden said in March that he thought Putin was a “killer”. The United States recalled its ambassador soon after.

But there was no sidestepping their differences on issues such as human rights, where Biden said the consequences for Russia would be “devastating” if jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny died. Putin dismissed US concerns about Navalny, Russia's increased military presence near Ukraine's eastern border and US suggestions that Russians were responsible for the cyberattacks on the United States.

US-Russia relations have been deteriorating for years, notably with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, its 2015 intervention in Syria and US charges – denied by Moscow – of meddling in the 2016 election won by Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump.

Putin said Moscow and Washington would begin discussions on possible changes to the New START arms control treaty after it expires in 2026, adding that the two countries were responsible for nuclear strategic stability. Signed in 2010, the New START treaty limits the numbers of strategic nuclear warheads, missiles and bombers that Russia and the United States can deploy.

“The meeting represented a watershed moment for the prominence of cybersecurity on the global agenda. Not only will it ensure that cybersecurity remains a recurring agenda point in future bilateral discussions between these two nations, but it will also be a prompt for other nations to reflect upon their cybersecurity posture, given that cyber threats transcend national borders”.

The past decade has seen the impact of cybercrime on our economies and societies grow tremendously. In 2020 alone, cybercriminals launched more than 300 million ransomware attacks, affecting individuals and SMBs as well as international companies, governments and critical services. Beyond the direct financial cost - estimated at USD 1 trillion globally - malicious cybercriminal activities undermine the foundations of trust in the digital age.

The increasing digitalization of critical infrastructure sectors and associated industrial systems, with the convergence of information and operational technology as well as the growth of the IoT (Internet of Things), is changing the nature of cyber risks across supply and value chains. For example, there are 16 critical infrastructure sectors, including healthcare and food, whose assets, systems and networks are considered so vital that their incapacitation or destruction would have a debilitating effect on security, national economic security, national public health or safety or any combination thereof.

It's becoming increasingly clear that the stealthy nature and the unpredictability of offensive online activity are creating vulnerabilities at a scale and speed that we haven't seen before, which often means the risk and impact of cyber threats are not always well understood.

Official announcement said that experts from the two countries would be tasked to work on “specific understandings of what's off-limits” and to follow up on cyberattacks that originate in either country, Biden said. What that will entail remains to be seen, but cybersecurity experts say the talks will likely be conducted by working groups composed of low-level officials from across the Biden administration and their Russian counterparts.

The US president said he handed Putin a list of 16 sectors such as energy and water services that the US insists are out of bounds to attacks. These were designated as critical infrastructure sectors under a 2013 presidential directive.

“I talked about the proposition that certain critical infrastructure should be off-limits to attack, period — by cyber or any other means,” Biden told reporters. In addition to energy and water systems, the list includes information technology, healthcare and public health, and food and agriculture — all of which have been the targets of cyberattacks in recent years.

Afghanistan issue also featured at the meeting. The two Presidents deliberated in detail the issues related to US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. No further details were given in this regard but it is obvious that the two Presidents discussed the issue in context of the ongoing peace process involving Afghan government and Afghan Taliban. Pakistan is sponsoring the talks between the two sides.

Russia has strong reservations about the possible rise of another security threat in the North of Afghanistan—the region of Afghanistan bordering Central Asian states of Uzbekistan,

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, all three falling within the security parameters of the Russian Federation.

In March 2018, regional neighbors of Afghanistan gathered in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent and proposed different ideas for peaceful resolution of Afghan conflict and while at the same time expressing concern about the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan. The idea is to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table with Afghan government so that together they could confront the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan.

The rise of ISIS in Afghanistan has made Pakistan military's age-old dream of bringing the Taliban into the diplomatic mainstream of regional diplomacy a reality. Now every regional country is in talks with the Afghan Taliban.



Though the contacts between Taliban and Russian government were no secret, Russian officials serving in region have recently acknowledged publicly that there have been political contacts between Russian government and Afghan Taliban. The contact between Iranian government and Afghan government came to the surface when former Taliban supreme commander, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor was killed in a US drone strike on Pakistan-Iran border while he was entering Pakistan territory from Iran.

The Wall Street Journal has reported that the strike took place as Mansour was being driven by taxi from the Iranian border to Quetta, after a “lengthy” stay in Iran. Similarly, renowned Afghan expert, Rahimullah Yousafzai told The Truth International (TTI) the Chinese government was in contact with both the Afghan government and the Taliban.

“The Chinese want to mediate between Afghan government and Afghan Taliban”, he said.

All this diplomatic activity involving contacts between Taliban and major regional players including Iran, China and Russia will consequently accord political legitimacy to Taliban both within Afghan society as well as in the regional security situation.

The results of discussion on Afghanistan during the summit meeting will start becoming visible in the coming weeks and months as the diplomatic activity to bring Afghan government and Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table intensifies. It appears that Moscow and Washington hardly have any difference as far as installing a broad based Afghan government in Kabul is concerned.

US pullout deadline diminished Islamabad's leverage, says PM Khan

The US decision to set a date for withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan diminished Pakistan's leverage on the Taliban.

In an interview to senior editors of "The New York Times" Opinion pages, recorded on Wednesday, PM Khan said his government wants a new bond with the US after Sept 11, 2021, when the United States plans to pull out all its forces from Afghanistan.

The interview was published on June 25, when US President Joe Biden had his first face-to-face meeting with his Afghan counterpart, Ashraf Ghani, at the White House.

Mr Khan also talked about his efforts to build a closer relationship with Afghanistan and improve relations with India, regretting that the current Indian government does not seem interested in normalising relations, perhaps a change of government in Delhi would help.

"Given that the United States gave a date of withdrawal, from then onward, our leverage diminished on the Taliban. And the reason is that the moment the United States gave a date of exit, the Taliban basically claimed victory," Mr Khan said. "They're thinking that they won the war. And so therefore, our ability to influence them diminishes the stronger they feel."

The prime minister said that Pakistan used its leverage to persuade the Taliban to join the Afghan peace process. "They were refusing to have talks, so it was Pakistan who got them to talk to the United States.

Pakistan, he said, also played a key role in convincing Taliban leaders to talk to the government in Kabul. "Really, it was [us] pushing them, pressurising them to talk to the Afghan government. So that's how far Pakistan has got," he said.

In an introductory piece published with the interview, Yara Bayoumy, the world and national security editor, and Jyoti Thottam, the deputy Op-Ed editor, noted that "with US forces leaving Afghanistan by Sept 11, Pakistan faces two urgent questions: What strategic clout does it have now? Where



does it fit in the great power confrontation between the United States and China?"

They pointed out that while Mr Biden met President Ghani, he "has yet to have a conversation with Mr Khan. The interviewers also noted that in a recent interview with Axios, Mr Khan made "it clear that he would not accept CIA bases in the country for missions in Afghanistan".

So, what's the future of the US-Pakistan relationship?

Civilised relationship with US

Mr Khan recalled that Pakistan has had a closer relationship with the United States than other nations in the region, such as India, and was a US partner in the war against terrorism, an argument used by previous Pakistani rulers as well without much success.

"Now, after the US leaves Afghanistan, basically Pakistan would want a civilised relationship, which you have between nations, and we would like to improve our trading relationship with the US," the prime minister replied.

Asked to elaborate his concept of a civilised relationship, he said he was seeking relations like the one that existed "between

the US and Britain, or between US and India right now. So, a relationship which is evenhanded".

"Unfortunately, the relationship during the war on terror was a bit lopsided," he said, adding, "It was a lopsided relationship because [the] US felt that they were giving aid to Pakistan, they felt that Pakistan then had to do US's bidding. And what Pakistan did in terms of trying to do the US bidding cost Pakistan a lot ... 70,000 Pakistanis died, and over \$150 billion were lost to the economy because there were suicide bombings and bombs going on all over the country."

The main problem with this lopsided relationship was that "Pakistani governments tried to deliver what they were not capable of," and it led to a "mistrust between the two countries", Mr Khan said. "And people in Pakistan felt they paid a heavy, heavy price for this relationship. And the US thought Pakistan had not done enough."

The prime minister said that his government wanted the future relationship to be based on trust and common objectives, including a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

Asked if Pakistan will continue to have any strategic relevance to the US after the

pullout, Mr Khan said: “I don’t know, really. I haven’t thought about it in that way, that Pakistan should have some strategic relevance to the US.”

Pakistan, he said, was a country of 220 million people, in a strategically sensitive area, with “one of the biggest markets on one side (India), and then China on [the] other side”.

Pakistan also had access to the energy corridor, Central Asia and Iran, and that’s why he believed his country “strategically placed for the future in terms of economics,” Mr Khan said.

The prime minister said he could not predict the future of the military and security relationship between Pakistan and the US. “Post the US withdrawal, I don’t know what sort of military relationship it will be. But right now, the relationship should be based on this common objective that there is a political solution in Afghanistan before the United States leaves,” he stressed.

Leverage on Taliban

Asked if Pakistan was still using its leverage with the Taliban to move the peace talks towards a deal, Mr Khan said: “Pakistan has used the maximum leverage it could on the Taliban.”

Does it mean that Pakistan has no more leverage left?

The prime minister said Pakistan has been emphasising to the Taliban that they should

not go for a military victory because it would only lead to a protracted civil war. And since the Taliban are primarily a Pashtun movement, this will have two effects: Another influx of refugees into Pakistan and upset Pakistan’s efforts to lift its economy through trade, he explained.

‘We have signed very good trade deals with the Central Asian republics, but we can only go there through Afghanistan. If there is a civil war, all that goes down the drain,’ he said.

The prime minister said that during a visit to Kabul earlier this year, he “gave our full support to the Afghan government, telling them we will do everything for this peace settlement”.

Despite constant communication between the civilian and military leaderships of the countries, “there is still a feeling in the Afghan government that Pakistan could do more, which I have to say is very disappointing,” he added.

What can Pakistan do to stabilise Afghanistan?

“Let me assure you, we will do everything except the use of military action against the Taliban. I mean, we will do everything up to that,” Mr Khan said, adding: “All sections of our society have decided that Pakistan will take no military action.”

The prime minister pointed out that there was never any border between Afghanistan and Pakistan but now Pakistan has fenced almost 90 percent of the border.

What if the Taliban try to take over Afghanistan through the military?

“Then we will seal the border, because now we can, because we have fenced our border, ... (but) Pakistan does not want to get into, number one, conflict. Secondly, we do not want another influx of refugees.”

Will you recognise the Taliban takeover?

“Pakistan will only recognise a government which is chosen by the people of Afghanistan, whichever government they choose,” the prime minister said.

Would a different government in India make a difference?

“When I assumed office, the first thing I did was I made this approach to Prime Minister Modi (to seek) a normal, civilized trading relationship. ... We tried but didn’t get anywhere.”

“Had there been another Indian leadership, I think we would have had a good relationship with them. And yes, we would have resolved all our differences through dialogue.”

Status quo remains on Kashmir a win for India?

“I think it’s a disaster for India because it will just mean that this conflict festers on and on ... and (prevents) any relationship — normal relationship — between Pakistan and India,” Mr Khan responded.



The Return of the Taliban

Growing pluckier by the hour, the Taliban continue to expand their presence across Afghanistan as they say no to a security role for Turkey.



By Haq Nawaz Khan

As the US led coalition troops are withdrawing, Taliban are gaining more power in the highly chaotic scenario in Afghanistan. The rescheduled deadline is fast approaching but no progress is seen in the 'intra-Afghan dialogue'. Signals from Doha, the capital of Qatar, are not encouraging, where Taliban have their political office. Unless Afghan partisans reach an agreement for the future political set up, violence will flare in the months ahead and the resultant chaos may end up destabilising the whole region.

The US is ending the longest war of its history on 11 September 2021 to mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11. But everyone concerned eyes on what next, when the foreign troops are withdrawn from the Afghan soil. Who will lead the war-ravaged country? Will the world accept the Taliban to take control of Kabul through military means?

Both the Afghan government and Taliban are fiercely fighting each other, attacking and counter attacking each other's bases. If the US repeated the 1990's like role to abandon Afghanistan, then the country could see another wave of a civil war like situation.

Kabul administration is said to have been run with the support of the US led foreign forces, but its writ is restricted to the urban centres. Taliban are running the show outside the cities, but since Afghan Taliban signed the peace deal with the US, the foreign troops turned into non-combatants. This handed the Taliban an advantage, allowing them to concentrate their forces against the Afghan government forces.

Afghan Taliban claims that they have control over 80 percent of the area of the country, and are getting more power and influence across Afghanistan. "We have total control of 80 percent of Afghanistan, and hundreds of Kabul's forces are surrendering to our mujahedeen," Zabihullah Mujahid, a key spokesman of Afghan Taliban, told this to The Truth International (TTI).

"Our fighters have taken control of some 56 districts in the last one and a half months", he said. "In most of the cases, the enemy [Kabul government] forces fled, leaving behind their posts, and our fighters took control."

Some reports coming out of Afghanistan confirm Taliban's claims of growing influence. However, the international

community is monitoring the situation and is pushing the warring sides to reach a political settlement.

In the latest situation, Taliban fighters are seen taking over areas all across the country, from South to North, and East to West. Some pictures and video clips, released to the media, are showing Taliban have entered in Mazar-i-Sharif, and taken control of the areas bordering Tajikistan in the North. The ongoing violence has displaced many Afghans, and the Afghan forces are not in a position to protect the lives of civilians and also protect their posts from falling into the hands of Taliban.

Dr Omar Zakhilwal, a former Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, told TTI, "Taliban had been a reality in Afghanistan from the outset. If the international community involved in Afghanistan as well as the opposing Afghan political and warring factions had accepted that reality in 2001-02 and recognised their government's legitimacy, today's Afghanistan could have been a much better place."

Today the Taliban, no doubt, are gaining both the ground and also international acceptability. However, they will be

making the same mistake repeated so many times over the past 40 years including once by them if they aim for total domination. That will prove to be as much disastrous for them in the longer run as it will be for the country, warned Zakhilwal.

The intra-Afghan dialogue is moving very slowly, and very little progress is observed during the last 10 months. Both sides are publicly stating that they will reach an agreement soon. Taliban spokesman said, they want to have a viable outcome of the talks in Qatar.

Mujahid said, they want lasting peace in Afghanistan, and gives priority to peace over war. "We have been fully committed to implementing the Doha deal."

"We are open to a representative government and call upon the different groups to join hands for a political way out. The [Kabul government] has been creating hurdles in the way of peace process. Many of the clauses of the agreement have not been implemented as yet."

But Afghan officials had raised the questions that Taliban were not accommodative. The delay in any breakthrough in the intra Afghan talks are due to Taliban, which they denied. Kabul repeatedly called for a ceasefire during the peace negotiations, which the Taliban responded that let first reached an agreement, then there should be a permanent ceasefire.

Many countries have been facilitating the Afghan sides to have peaceful resolution of the conflict. Qatar has been hosting Taliban political leadership, Turkey offered to have negotiations for the political outcome, but Taliban didn't attend the conference.

The issue of US asking for military bases in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan also created heated debates in the media, but Pakistani political and military leadership contradicted the claims, saying Pakistan will not provide air bases to the US. Taliban also issued a statement, warning the "neighbouring countries" without mentioning of serious consequences.

Pakistan, sharing a 1,600-mile border with Afghanistan and hosting nearly 3 million of Afghan refugees for the last 40 years, has also been playing a proactive role to end this war. Pakistan's role has been lauded by the international community for its role.

However, Pakistan and Afghanistan have not been enjoying cordial bilateral relations for decades. Some elements in Kabul accuse Islamabad of providing sanctuaries to the Afghan Taliban. To pressurise Pakistan, some Western media outlets also carry such reports that Taliban have been controlled by Islamabad. The terms like Quetta Shura, Peshawar Shura and Haqqani network are thrown around to insinuate the Taliban top leadership is peacefully residing in Pakistan.

But Pakistan and Taliban have repeatedly rejected the allegations. However, one cannot totally brush aside the allegations as Pakistan shares longest porous border with Afghanistan. Pakistan says it has done maximum work on the fencing of border. The increased surveillance makes it hard for the militants to freely move across the border.

Pakistan has recently announced to review its policy by shifting from the geostrategic to geo-economic, that could be a major breakthrough, if acted upon. Both countries could get benefits of their location.

The Muslim countries should play a role to use their good offices, but let the Afghans resolve their issues, and they should play neutral role with facilitation only. If any country sided with any group, then this could be much disastrous than what Afghans, the region and world had faced before 9/11.

Taliban have a clear-cut policy and not welcoming any foreign troops, whether they are from the neighbouring or regional Muslim countries. Turkey's latest proposal to guard important and sensitive installations and airports in Afghanistan was rejected by Taliban.

A recent Taliban statement categorically stated, "The presence of foreign forces under whatever name or by whichever country in our homeland is unacceptable for the Afghan people and the Islamic Emirate."

"Every inch of Afghan soil, its airports and security of foreign embassies and diplomatic offices is the responsibility of the Afghans. Consequently, no one should hold out hope of keeping military or security presence in our country, nor should steps be taken that could strain relations between peoples and countries."

"If anyone does make such a mistake, the Afghan people and the Islamic Emirate shall view them as occupiers and shall take a stance against them as they have taken against invaders throughout history, the responsibility in which case shall also fall on their shoulders."

The situation could further aggravate, if the US left Afghanistan without any political settlement of the conflict. The infighting could plunge country into the bloody internal war. The notorious international militant groups may return to the war-hit country once again.

In the peace agreement, Taliban assured the US and its allies that they would not allow any militant group to use its soil against them. They denounced al Qaida and other non-Afghan groups, but the world still suspects the claims, as some reports emerged from Afghanistan that al Qaida members were killed and arrested in the recent fighting in Afghanistan.

How could the warring parties be influenced by the world to have a peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict? The only way is to engage the warring parties in a dialogue and continue financial support conditioning with the end to the violence.

Afghanistan needs reconstruction and rebuilding of the country to put it back on track. The need of the hour is to have a strong, united and stable Afghanistan with improving law and order situation and zero interference, fighting corruption, demilitarisation, dewatering and making the country drugs-free.

In the statement, Taliban want to maintain positive and beneficial relations with the world, regional and neighbouring countries. "Our country has been facing a multitude of issues and problems for the past four decades and on this basis, Afghanistan is in need of the selfless and humanitarian assistance of international, sympathetic and friendly nations."

Writer intro: A freelance journalist for the Washington Post, commentator on national and regional issues with world's known broadcasting outlets, reporting experience in the field of journalism for the last 25 years. Associated with daily The Nation, daily Telegraph, TRT World, but currently covering Taliban activities in Afghanistan, and Doha, Qatar. Attended the historic US-Taliban peace accord signing ceremony in Doha on February 29, 2020.

Post-Divorce Acrimony Haunts UK-EU Ties

Bitterness from the painful breakup and politicking over contentious issues risk waking the sleeping demons of the past.



By Dr Khalid Bajwa

The relationship between the UK and the EU is marked by mutual acrimony and mistrust as the Brexit has cast its dark shadows on these relationships. Even after six months of the painful divorce between the two continues to define the relationship between the two former partners.

Multiple contributing factors determine this relationship. One of the factors that is shaping the relationship between the two is the capacity of the two parties to deal with the pains of the divorce. It seems that the negative feelings arising out of the Brexit divorce will continue to shape the relationship in the immediate future.

In the UK, it suits the government to paint EU negatively to justify Brexit and blame the economic hardships and mismanagement on the EU. This is necessary to buy time from the voters who voted for the Brexit in the hope that their lives will turn around for the better.

It also acts as a diversionary tactic to distract public attention from the failure of the UK government to tackle Covid crisis effectively until the success of vaccine programme, again, followed by another blunder by not putting India in the red list countries for obvious reasons and resulting in the latest wave of Covid-19.

Negative feelings about each other are rampant in both the UK and the EU as exemplified by the Eurovision song contest where the UK obtained zero points, as the public in the EU showed its sentiment overwhelmingly.

However, a recent survey for the Euronews shows that there is less negative sentiment in different countries of the Europe for the UK. Majority of the people are willing to take the UK back into the EU if this unthinkable, at the moment, happens. So, it is not all doom and gloom at this point of time.

The Covid crisis did not help either as the UK's economy plunged deeply because of it but as Brexit and Covid crisis coincided, it is very difficult to see the effects of both separately. However, it is very easy to blame all the ills on EU by portraying that all the problems are due to the long-continued UK's membership of the EU.

The EU reaction towards AstraZeneca vaccine was deplorable and devoid of any sense or sensibility and soured the relationship further. The threats and counter threats of bans on export of AstraZeneca and its raw material did not help either.

Luckily, better sense prevailed in the end and both parties retreated from their illogical positions. However, this episode is an exemplar of how things can go wrong if not handled correctly and with patience.

Another factor that weighs heavily on the relationship between the two is the internal

political dynamics of the UK and the member states of the EU. Brexiteers continue to champion breaking up of the EU by supporting anti-Europeans rightwing populist leaders.

However, it looks like a futile effort at least for now as anti-European sentiments in the member states have subsided significantly and even the populist parties and leaders are not as vocal against the EU as they used to be. Nevertheless, it does leave a bad taste in the mouth.

Border checks, fishing rights in UK waters, and Northern Ireland protocol are some of the main irritants that can further spoil the relations between the two. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's threat to suspend Northern Ireland protocol overshadowed the recent G-7 summit in the UK.

President Biden, President Emanuel Macron, and other European leaders took up this issue with Mr Johnson and asked him to refrain from such rhetoric.

The breach of Northern Ireland protocol can seriously jeopardise the hard-earned peace in the island which can have far reaching consequences not only for the EU and the UK relationship but also for transatlantic relationship the UK is seeking for. This can delay the trade deal between the US and the UK.

The external pressures and security concerns are likely to exert pressure on the two to forge closer relationships though. The perceived Russian threat calls for increased cooperation in the field of defence and strengthening of the NATO.

However, the recent tilt of the UK toward the Indo-pacific region is likely to shift emphasis away from the demands of collective defence. It seems that the UK is in the hunt of conflicts far from its shores and it may prove to be a catalyst in bringing new conflicts to Europe.

The China factor is more complex. It is not just about security but also about economics. The level of cooperation between China, EU, and the UK will have significant impact on the economic wellbeing of the people.

China is one of the major trading partners of the EU and the UK and has ample resources to invest in friendly or strategical-

ly important countries. It is more than likely that there will be no effective alliance against China, as individual countries will weigh the consequences for their economies.

However, if the UK get involved in some sort of conflict in the Indo-pacific region, it can become very difficult for the EU member states to pursue their independent policies towards China. This may trigger a split in the defence and security set up of the Europe and will have a bearing on the EU and the UK relationship.



If another bout of populism, based on nationalism and racial connotations, sweeps across the Western world, in the near future, it would not bode well for the intra-national relationship within and outside Europe. There can emerge three or four distinct groupings at loggerheads with each other.

The UK, under populist leadership, and other populist parties of the Europe can be instrumental in the process of fragmentation of the EU unity. This will have a direct negative bearing on the relationship between the EU and the UK.

If the European Union does not act by demonstrating patience about the negativities arising out of the UK under the influence of Brexit project and instead opt for a tit for tat attitude, things can deteriorate quite quickly. That is where the top-class diplomacy is needed.

Talking of diplomacy, no other country in the EU is as well equipped with the diplomatic skills and experience as is the UK. However, skilful diplomacy has taken a back seat in the face of hawkish tone of the political elite.

Similarly, some in the EU, especially the French, have adopted a hawkish stance towards Britain. Both parties need to engage in backdoor diplomacy and avoid public enunciations for political consumption because so much more than politics is at stake.

The most important factor which many people ignore is the burden of history in the Europe. The European history is rife with internecine warfare. Throughout history European nations have been at war with each other killing millions of people in the process.

Apart from causing death and destruction, the wars are good at feeding nationalism and sense of racial superiority or distinctiveness. Frequency, duration, and destruction of wars contribute heavily towards these kinds of feelings so much so that it becomes the part of the psyche and nature of the nations. There is no dearth of this phenomenon in Europe.

The point is that both the UK and the EU needs to walk through these times with utmost care and diligence lest the sleeping demons of the past wake up.

Justice on Vacation

Islamabad High Court has decided to skip the summer break his year in view of the huge backlog of cases.



By Asadullah

With over 2.1 million pending cases, the superior judiciary is going on annual summer vacations. The Supreme Court’s 12-weeks summer vacations start in mid-June and continue until 13 September. The High Courts observe these vacations from second week of July until first week of September.

According to Khushdil Khan, vice chairman Pakistan Bar Council (PBC) – the apex representative body of the lawyers - said that the summer vacation for the judges of superior courts is centuries back tradition and it is continuing till today.

Since this region experienced scorching heat, these vacations bring some respite for the lawyers as well as some of them can go to hill stations or even abroad along with their families.

He however said that since there is a huge backlog, which is piling with the passage of time, therefore, the lawyers bodies are working on the proposal to reduce the summer vacations.

The tradition of summer vacation started during the British era when all the judges used to be English who could not cope with the scorching heat of the Indian subcontinent.

Hence, during the summer, English judges — like other English officers — would leave for their country during the summer through ships and other transport from port city to their hometown.

The journey expanded over weeks, therefore, they required ample time to spent vacations with their families.

A senior lawyer said that since the courts are well equipped with the air-conditioners, the judges have air-conditioned cars and accommodations therefore, the summer vacations are not required to relax the judges.

He further said that there was no backlog at that period and the courts were not overburdened.

According to the statistics of the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan (LJCP), the total backlog of Pakistani judiciary is over 2.16 million.

Some 46,516 cases are pending before the Supreme Court; 188,176 before the Lahore High Court; 41,042 before the Peshawar High Court; 4,194 before the Balochistan High Court; 16,288 before the Islamabad High Court; and 178 before the Federal Shariat Court.

The backlog of district judiciary Punjab stands at 1,372,908; of Sindh at 115,815; of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 230,869; and of Islamabad at 48,242.

It may be mentioned that during the summer vacations, all the courts are not shut down and stop administration of justice, as duty judges continue to work on their turn in the superior and district judiciary.

The High Courts have also devised policy for the summer vacations and notify the benches to hear the urgent cases, bail matters and petitions seeking enforcement of fundamental rights.

According to a judge, the appointment of the judges in the superior judiciary is made in accordance with the constitution and the President issued formal notification for the said appointment.

He said that the leave and other privileges of the high court judge have been defined in Presidential Order titled, “The High Court Judges (Leave, Pension and Privileges) (Amendment) Order, 1998, for the apex court the Presidential Order is called “The Supreme Court Judges Leave, Pension and Privileges Order, 1997”

As per the said Order, a judge could avail 65 days of leave per annum, the jurist said adding that the summer vacations should either be abolished or be merged with the annual leave so the backlog may be cleared.

However, this year, Islamabad High Court (IHC) only decided to skip these vacations and decided to clear backlog during this period instead.

According to a circular issued by the IHC last week, the administration committee comprising IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah and other judges “decided that all the pending criminal appeals against conviction will be listed during the period commencing from July 1 to October 1.”

The court has advised the lawyers to “ensure their availability during the above span of time” and warned that “no adjournment shall be granted” due to non-availability of the counsel therefore it is suggested that they will make alternate arrangement when they are unable to appear before the court.

A couple of years back, a lawyer had filed the petition against summer vacations of the court before the Peshawar High Court (PHC).

The petitioner asked the superior judiciary to abolish the vacation system so that courts can remain open the year round and clear the massive and still-growing pile of pending cases in the district and session courts, high courts and even in the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

Though the petition ended in futility, it raised valid questions and generated debate among the masses.

The petition noted that in the backdrop of such a high rate of pendency, it seems like a luxury for judges to enjoy extended vacations during the summer.

“Every day that a court is closed, the backlog of cases will always increase. Leaves must be regulated in such a way that the judicial process does not stop, and we are able to deal with cases continuously,” it contended.

The petitioner noted that a high court judge costs the state around PKR 45,000 per day. However, a judge’s daily case disposal rate was barely 1.4 percent.

Citing the poverty in the country, he said that the country can ill afford such an expensive judiciary, where, in spite of providing justice, judges are passing paid days as vacations.

To lower the case backlog, he stressed that there must be some form of emergency reforms in the judicial system —including the abolishment of long vacations.

The petition said that the tradition begun during the British era when all the judges used to be English who could not cope with the scorching heat of the Indian subcontinent.

Hence, during the summer, English judges — like other English officers — would leave for their country during the summer.

“But our judiciary is still following that tradition, though there is no such provision of long summer vacations for government officers in the country.”

The petitioner added that unlike now, there was also a backlog of cases during the British era, therefore now there is no need to allow judges to go on long vacations.



What Will it take to Get the Retail Sector to Pay Taxes?

Retailers remain unimpressed by a new FBR plan to increase compliance by integrating retailers to the taxation system.

By Azeem Waqas

Pakistan's ambitious new plan to bring the retail sector into the tax net has met skepticism from traders' representatives as well as officials at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), The Truth International (TTI) can report.

The IMF seems unconvinced with the FBR plan able to integrate more than 80,000 retailers of the Tier-1 in 2021-22, due to the resistance by the retailers and the technology hurdles, well-placed source told TTI.

The government's plan, presented by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), envisages the use of technology to stem massive evasion of Sales Tax by the retail sector. The centerpiece of the plan is to integrate a large number of retailers through Point of Sales (POS) over the next fiscal year.

POS is a machine performing the sale transactions for goods or services, either in cash or through processing of credit and debit cards as well as online transactions in an internet enabled environment.

The FBR's flagship plan looks to increase the number of POS from existing 11,000 to 100,000 to achieve additional revenue of 50 Billion for the next fiscal year.

Chain Stores Association of Pakistan – representing Tier-1 retailers of the large cities – has also termed it unrealistic for the FBR to integrate 80,000 retailers with the POS machines in a single year. Tariq Mehboob, Chairman Chain Stores Association of Pakistan said that FBR is burdening the already integrated retailers and it will create an anti-retail sector in the country.

Finance Minister Shoukat Tareen while holding the post-budget press conference alleged that the Intiaz Super Store is making a sale of 200 to 300 billion annually but it is paying a very nominal tax.

According to FBR, "The data provided by financial institutions reveals only transactions through debit/credit cards including 64,000 POS and 2,411 Merchants have declared PKR 433 billion Sales for 2021.

These sales data do not include cash sales at the counters".

According to the plan, FBR will expand the scope of Tier-I integrated retailers to online platforms and retailers who have acquired POS from financial institutions.

In the longer-run, FBR wants documentation of the retail sector by enhancing the number of POS to 500,000 and expansion of Sales Tax base, looking to reap PKR 200 billion in additional revenue from retail sector.

FBR has estimated that during the tax year 2021, there are 1,119 retailers who have a turnover of greater than PKR 100 million, who recorded a turnover of 484.5 billion. Also, there are 20,235 retailers who have turnover greater than PKR 10 million but declared retail sales of PKR. 747.2 billion.

FBR has reduced taxes for retailers being integrated with POS. According to FBR output Sales Tax on sale of locally



produced textile and leather product by integrated retailers was reduced to 14 percent vide Finance Act, 2019. The rate was further reduced to 12 percent vide Finance Act, 2020.

Any further reduction in output Sales Tax rate of integrated retailers below 10 percent shall result in refunds. Reduction in input Sales Tax from 17 percent to 9 percent in case of Tier-I integrated retailers below 10 percent shall result in decline in revenue.

FBR will introduce the concept of tax credit on amount invested in acquisition of POS; Rationalization of rates of turnover Tax; The concession of reduced rate i.e., 0.25 percent be restricted to Tier-1 integrated retailers as well as integrated service providers.

Rationalization of WHT rates on Supplies made by Distributors of fast moving consumer goods from existing 2.5 percent and 2 percent to 0.25 percent FBR will introduce an incentive scheme for customers to make purchases from integrated retailers to encourage customers to make purchases through Tier-1 integrated retailers

A detailed scheme is to be separately issued through Sales Tax Rules. Prizes of several denominations to be distributed based on expenditure sanctioned by finance division.

Finance Minister Shoukat Tareen has announced that prizes of PKR 350 million would be distributed among the customers who will present a bar code invoice through a lucky draw. FBR has also stated that it will appoint some people who will do mystery shopping on behalf of FBR to check the POS integration. FBR will bear all expenses of mystery shopping.

FBR will impose a maximum penalty up to PKR 1.0 million and sealing of outlets until the defiant retailer integrates.

FBR cannot implement this plan if the retailers do not have incentivized, easy and plenty of POS machines. Credit and debit card machines are the basic need of POS Plan but just before the budget it has a tax of 40-50 percent.

FBR has reduced duties from 3 percent CD & 2 percent Additional Customs Duty on POS machines to 0 percent. It will cover both types of Point of Sale Machines, the one used as Electronic Cash Register as

well as Card Readers type in the next year's budget.

While talking to The Truth International (TTI), Habibullah Khan, founder at Penumbra, a digital marketing agency that assists startups, said, "It is a gigantic task for the FBR to add 80,000 more POS in the retail sector in one year".

In-fact Tier 1 retailers have been integrated with POS machines. Problem comes with the middle level retailers who do not have POS at their counters. For them it's a difficult process to run a POS machine. Government should offer incentives to encourage use of POS machines to implement this flagship program, says Habibullah.



He said, "In Pakistan five companies are providing POS machines out of them four are banks and one is a Fintech startup. The government should encourage and incentivize Fintech startups to help expand the use of POS machines."

Habibullah said, "FBR can only succeed in this plan if it withdraws all duties on POS machines. FBR's greatest success of capturing tax at retail has come from integration of their system with POS machines. Practically speaking, we have 30,000 POS active. Common sense states we need to seed country with POS machines as a national imperative".

He suggested that the fastest way is to give two-year tax holiday on POS and get Special Technology Zone Authority to use PPP model to manufacture locally via Private sector.

Talking to TTI, Tariq Mehboob, Chairman Chain Stores Association said that the current taxation structure for Tier-1 Retailers was highly distorted, due to which

our country's retail sector continues to be largely undocumented.

He said, "The General Sales Tax (GST) rate applicable on finished fabric, locally manufactured finished articles of textile, textile made-ups, leather and artificial leather, had been reduced to 12 percent instead of the standard rate of 17 percent, vide the Finance Act 2020".

Tariq Mehboob is of the view that "The nominal incentive alone for a specific segment of Tier-1 retailers will not serve the purpose of encouraging voluntarily compliance of the entire organized retail sector especially businesses that have a low proportion of registered purchases and/or

high-volume low-margin retailers such as superstores and hypermarkets".

Tariq Mehboob suggested that "The only game-changing and truly effective solution to achieve the aggressive target of over 50,000 integrated points-of-sale is a 5-7 percent GST rate for all integrated Tier-1 Retailers on all goods at all stages, i.e., import, manufacturing, distribution, wholesale and retail".

Chain Stores Association of Pakistan has proposed allowance of 100 percent infant adjustment of sales tax for publicly listed companies should also be extended to integrated retailers as their sales are being reported transparently in real-time to the tax authorities.

The Chain Stores Association has recommended that in order to effectively improve taxpayer sentiment, integrated Tier-1 Retailers should be treated specially without the fear of frivolous notices and repeated audits to create a positive example for the majority of Tier-1 retailers that are still to be integrated.

Criminals Off the Hook, Victims Suffer the Consequences

What is the point of punishing the unsuspecting victims while the perpetrators of Karachi's illegal realty development scams live large?



By Hamza Qureshi

Fakhir bought a flat in Nasla Tower in 2016 after confirming the NOC of Sindh Building Control Authority, Sindh Government's lease and other legal documents.

Now the Supreme Court has declared it illegal and ordered its demolition.

"Where are we to go? What is our fault?" he cries.

This is the exact predicament of other residents of Nasla Tower, built on Sharaf Faisal, the busiest road in Karachi. Residents have been holding sit-ins since the order of the Supreme Court.

Karachi, the largest city in Pakistan, has been in constant crisis for decades. The recent court orders have unleashed a major crisis for Karachiites. This crisis is a result of continued occupation of private and government lands and the subsequent illegal constructions in Karachi.

This irregularity goes back decades but it gained momentum during the last 20 years. Karachi hosts the largest population of socioeconomic middle class in the country. Such families have gotten most affected by the court's recent rulings.

The irony of the situation is, any governmental official involved is yet to be summoned by the court for their wrong doings.

Affected and activists say the Supreme Court must also order to initiate an inquiry against officials of civic departments and the Board of Revenue who have foreign citizenship or permanent residence permits.

A large number of officials associated with the Sindh Board of Revenue, Karachi's civic agencies such as the KWSB, KMC, KDA, SBCA, LDA, MDA and LEAs such as Sindh police, FIA, Anti-Corruption and other agencies, allegedly hold dual nation-

alities. Canadian citizenship is said to be particularly popular among the lot. The corrupt officials have reportedly bought and built properties abroad.

In order to evade departmental inquiries, some officers have bought their families foreign citizenships or permanent residence permits. Even grade-12 and 14 clerks hold foreign nationalities. When things become difficult for them, they utilize their options to visit abroad.

Sources claimed that encroachment sites involving PPP top leadership are never identified or taken over by government officials. In a sad state of affairs, the PPP and MQM have reportedly supported each other in the nefarious enterprise of constructing buildings on illegally grabbed land in the city.

This unholy nexus of the two main political powers has given a boost to corruption and

looting in Sindh, especially in Karachi and Hyderabad. Countless buildings and settlements have been built on amenity plots grabbed through what is called China Cutting or fake goths schemes (Kachi Abadis).

These plots were meant for educational institutions, playgrounds, cemeteries, parks, hospitals, libraries, mosques, madrassas, community centres, etc. The PPP, MQM and government officials under their patronage provided protection to all encroachments by providing legal documents which were later proven to be counterfeit.

A former Mayor of Karachi, the late Mr Naimatullah Khan approached the Supreme Court in 2010 against the illegal seizure of welfare plots. Court kept issuing orders against encroachments from time to time in Karachi on which the city administration acted reluctantly.

Now, however, the matter is being taken up more seriously. The current Chief Justice of Pakistan, Gulzar Ahmed, is a Karachiite and has proven difficult to deceive.

Court proceedings

A Supreme Court bench presided over by the Chief Justice heard the case at Karachi Registry from 14 to 18 June. During the hearing, notices were been issued to Zia-ud-Din Hospital, Clifton, built atop a drain, and South City Hospital, built on a welfare plot.

The court sought a report from KDA upon Benazir Bhutto Park near Bilawal House regarding COM-3 towers in Clifton. The Supreme Court has been asking for a report about the said building in the last several hearings but KDA has not been able to do so. Now KDA has denied ownership of the place.

The possessor of this tower is said to be an important figure of the Pakistan People's Party.

The court also ordered to end all commercial activities from Cantonment Land. The court remarked that Defence Secretary has assured to abide by the order of the Supreme Court. However, the report submitted by the Defence Secretary is incomplete and fails to answer the questions raised by the court.

The court ordered an end to illegal construction and commercial activities involving military lands. The Defence Secretary has been instructed to present a comprehensive report on cessation of commercial activities from cantonment land at the next hearing.

Previously, on 19 May, the Supreme Court ordered the Defence Secretary to stop all commercial activities and illegal construction in Cantonment areas. Under this order, the Nueplex Cinema on Rashid Minhas Road was also supposed to be demolished, but no action has been taken against it so far.

Demolitions

On the other hand, some other demolitions have been undertaken with unusual zeal, without proper intimation to the affectees. Although the Supreme Court has not given any clear order regarding leased houses, particularly those around Gujjar Nala and Orangi Nala, many leased houses adjacent to Gujjar Nala have also been demolished.

The court directed the Sindh government to provide alternative accommodation to the victims immediately. However, the Sindh government is demonstrating its usual incompetence and so far the matter has not gone beyond mere verbal deposit.

All structures in KMC Sports Complex, Kashmir Road have been demolished except a swimming pool and tennis courts. KDA Officers Club has been demolished. All bungalows on Kidney Hills have been demolished. The shopping mall at Ala Din Park and Pavilion End Club was

demolished to the ground despite protest from shopkeepers.

Saleem, aged 63, is a shop owner at Ala Din Mall and the sole breadwinner of his family of eight. He told The Truth International (TTI) he has all relevant legal documents. He complained that the business activities were already at a record low due to COVID situation and now a bulldozed shop means that authorities wanted them to starve to death.

Encroachments at Karachi Circular Railway track and stations, major rain drains, Regal Chowk, Empress Market are being cleared in phases.

What the builders' association have to say on this?

A joint press conference of builders' nationwide organization ABAD, Karachi Chamber of Commerce, NGOs such as Sailani Welfare Trust and Alamgir Welfare Trust, have appealed against the demolition of Nasla Tower. They pleaded to review the decision under a larger bench of the Supreme Court.

Affectees say they have reached the point of suicide. Those who seized and illegally built concrete structures, made their money and are nowhere to be found. Some say Younis Memon is handling the affairs of illegal constructions from Canada and there is no one to stop him.

Activists are askance why the corrupt government officials, ministers, and politicians who looted billions of rupees are not named in the court's ruling while the ordinary buyers have been trapped.



Murder Most Foul?

A prodigal son of Balochistan, Senator Usman Kakar leaves behind a nation shocked and mystified in equal measure.

By Shahzada Zulfiqar

The mysterious death of former senator Usman Khan Kakar and the horrifying allegations of foul play levelled in its wake have left the nation in shock and awe, with tributes and condolences pouring in from everybody from the leading lights of Pakistan's politics to the members of intelligentsia and the common people of his native Balochistan.

Kakar was hospitalised at Quetta after being found unconscious with an apparent head injury. His personal physician, Dr Samad Panezai, was quoted as saying he was hospitalised within 30 minutes where he was operated upon and put on a ventilator.

He was later moved to Karachi's Aga Khan University Hospital via air ambulance under the auspices of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, where he lost his battle for life on 21 June 2021.

The Dawn newspaper quoted Panezai said Kakar had been found by his family lying on a carpet in his drawing room with blood flowing from his head, but it was not known what caused the injury.

An aura of intrigue shrouded the matter soon after his death was announced, when his family members and party colleagues rose suspicions of foul play, albeit with no real evidence. Notably, no such suspicions were reported during the time Kakar was hospitalised fighting for his life.

"My father was found unconscious in the drawing room of our home in Quetta with a head injury", his son Khushal Kakar told addressing party workers. "I think something hit his head that sent him unconscious".

In one of his social media posts, he claimed that unknown visitors injured his father in the drawing room of the residence and fled the scene.

"Usman was murdered at his home and I hold agencies responsible for this gruesome act", party Chairman Mahmood Khan Achakzai said addressing the mammoth funeral gathering. He sounded a warning his party's reaction would be severe.

The party's only MPA in Balochistan assembly Nasrullah Zeray during a press talk received the news over phone on the first day of incident and explained to the media that Usman Kakar was injured in an accident. On the funeral, however, he declares him a martyr because of his cold blooded murder by unseen powers.

Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal Khan and Home Minister Mir Zia Langau assured the Kakar's family their choice of a judicial or police investigation into the circumstances leading to his death. The party or the family are yet to respond to this offer.

A bold voice for democracy and human rights in the parliament and a harsh critic of the political role of intelligence agencies, Usman Kakar was known for raising his voice about sensitive issues like missing persons, Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, the national question, the IDPs of former FATA, and the PTM (The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement).



Popularly known as Usman Lala, the 60-year-old served as a member of the Senate of Pakistan from 2015 to 2021 on a ticket from Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP). Although he would make such speeches at every public forum, his public profile rose nationally because of his eloquence on the floor of the Senate.

It was a salute to his courage and valour that the Pakistan Democratic Front (PDM) paired him with National Party President Mir Hasil Khan Bezenjo for election respectively as Deputy Chairman and Chairman Senate when a no confidence motion was brought against the incumbents in 2019. The motion failed, as did Kakar's bid for Senate in 2021.

Usman Kakar had been associated with Pakhtunkhwa Student Organization, a sister organization of PkMAP, from his school days. He was the head of PSO when he entered the University of Balochistan.

After graduating from the university, Kakar joined PkMAP and served three consecutive terms spread over fifteen years as the President Balochistan of its chapter. He was considered the right-hand man of his party Chief Mahmood Khan Achakzai.

Kakar would always speak over the burning issues of Balochistan mainly equal rights for all nationalities on the bases of federating units instead of population. He was known for helping out common Balochistanis irrespective of creed and cast regarding their posting transfer and employment in government departments and corporations.

Unlike Awami National Party, he has been advocating for a separate province for Pashtun population comprising northern areas of Balochistan.

The workers of Baloch nationalist parties in Balochistan National Party-Mengal, Balochistan National Party-Awami, National Party, and Jamhoori Watan Party paid their respects to him by showering rose petals on the ambulance that carried his body in all district headquarters and towns came on the way from Karachi to Quetta and up to native town Killa Saifullah.

People belonging to all ethnic groups and political parties thronged to his funeral, making it a historic political gathering.

Balochistan Government has established a two member judicial commission to investigate the death of late Usman Khan Kakar.



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Covid-19 Situation Improving Despite Bungled Response

With the hiccup over vaccine acquisition behind us, Pakistan is focusing on vaccination with renewed vigour.

By Noor Aftab

Pakistan found itself in the middle of the crisis when Covid vials were not available in most of the vaccination centres after exhaustion of Chinese and European vaccine donations. The situation compelled the Imran-led government to send SOS signals to Beijing and COVAX for provision of vaccine shipments. The federal government then dispatched reserved doses in emergency to Sindh and the Punjab provinces to meet their daily requirements.

The issue was addressed to some extent when Pakistan received 1.5 million coronavirus doses on 20 June; 2.5 million on 22 June; and 3 million on 30 June. But the crisis is not over as these stocks would meet the requirements only for next two months.

Unfortunately, when Covid-19 immunization drive picked up speed, Pakistan started facing shortage of vaccine, raising fears whether country would be able to come out of this situation. The government was relying on double-dose vaccine Sinopharm from China, followed by AstraZeneca by Oxford UK, to currently available SinoVac and single-shot Cansino from China.

What went wrong?

The government did not make any plans to buy vaccines at the initial stage and instead decided to tackle the Covid-19 challenge through donated jabs and vaccine gifts from friendly countries. The health organizations at the private sector also criticized lack of interest of the government to procure coronavirus vaccines from foreign countries.

The issue was then raised by the opposition parties when National Health Service (NHS) Secretary Amir Ashraf Khawaja informed the Public Accounts Committee that the



government had no plan to buy vaccines anytime soon and aimed to tackle the Covid-19 health challenge through herd immunity and donated vaccines.

Surprisingly, the government also made a claim that around 15 percent of the population had developed antibodies and that they did not need to be immunized.

Misgovernance

When the government realized the situation, it immediately held a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) to provide technical supplementary grant of PKR 20 billion to the National Disaster Management Fund to ensure timely procurement of vaccines for effective national response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The task of procuring vaccines was first given to the National Health Ministry but later the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) was asked to carry out this job that dealt with Chinese vaccine manufacturers (Sinopharm, Sinovac and CansinoBIO) and Pfizer for procurement of their vaccine doses.

The NDMA also set up a Vaccine Procurement Cell to purchase the vaccine from international market and governments. Simultaneously, the

government was also relying heavily on National Institute of Health (NIH) for preparation of single-dose Chinese vaccine Cansino.

The NIH had hoped to provide 3 million doses of Cansinovaccine per month but it failed to deliver on the commitment. Now the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) have revised the guidelines for two-dose Chinese vaccines, increasing the gap between the doses to six weeks.

The shortage of vaccines is the main reason behind enhancing the gap between the two doses but a government official claimed that instead of decreasing efficacy, a delayed second dose could provide better immunity.

The NAB factor

Officials privy to the developments say that the procurement of vaccine was a complicated process as it involved number of technical issues due to increasing demand for the coronavirus vaccine at the international level. Top bureaucrats were hesitant to become part of the procurement process as they feared that they might fall prey to National Accountability Bureau (NAB). This is why files and documents were being passed from one office to another but procurement

process did not take off despite clear directives from the federal government.

Senior government officials tried to quell the worries but the track record of NAB was enough to foil those attempts. A group of senior bureaucrats in September 2019 had also complained to Prime Minister Imran Khan of harassment and threatening behaviour by the NAB, which they said was making government officials reluctant to sign off on government initiatives.

Local production

The officials of the National Health Ministry claimed that NIH has now assured them that it would prepare 3 million doses of coronavirus vaccine on monthly basis that would greatly help meet the requirements at the local level.

The NIH had made a formal request to the Chinese government to transfer the vaccine technology and raw material. The process of manufacturing the single-dose Covid-19 vaccine will now begin following the restoration of the NIH plant, which was closed a few years ago. A team of Chinese experts will also arrive in Pakistan to oversee the process and provide technical guidelines to the staff members of NIH.

The federal government is pinning high hopes on local production of vaccine because it would help meet the target of providing jabs to one-thirds of the total population by the end of this year.

Currently, Pakistan is getting coronavirus vaccine from three sources: China, COVAX Programme and purchases through cash grants from World Bank and International Monetary Fund. According to the World Health Organization, a total of 90 million vaccine doses have so far been provided to 191 countries under COVAX Programme.

Demand for Pfizer vaccine

Pakistan has only received 100,000 doses of Pfizer via the COVAX facility but the demand for the vaccine is increasing each day. Pakistani expats staged a protest in Islamabad this week outside the mass vaccination centre at F-9 Park, demanding

the availability of Pfizer vaccines. The two factors driving the demand for Pfizer are the blood clot fear associated with Astra-Zeneca and the perception that the Pfizer vaccine is better.

Pakistan hopes to receive more Pfizer doses after the US administration announced agreement with Pfizer to buy 500 million doses to distribute to nearly 100 countries.

Statistics

There are 948,268 confirmed cases in four provinces and Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. The number of active cases is 33,972 while 892,319 patients have so far recovered and 21,977 have died fighting Covid-19.

A total of 12,977,740 vaccine doses have so far been administered in Pakistan. The number of fully vaccinated people is 3,457,578 while 6,945,344 have received the first dose of the vaccine. The national positivity ratio was recorded at 2.14 percent. In all, 280 patients are on ventilators across the country.

Some 38 percent ventilators allocated for Covid-19 patients are occupied in Multan; 26 percent in Bahawalpur; 20 percent in Lahore; and 20 percent in Peshawar. Similarly, 30 percent oxygen beds allocated for Covid-19 patients are occupied in Gilgit; 28 percent in Abbottabad; 25 percent in Karachi; 24 percent in Multan; 22 percent in Muzaffarabad; 20 percent in Swabi; and 20 percent in Peshawar.

Improved situation

Pakistan recorded the lowest positivity rate at 1.9 per cent on June 19. The current situation is quite satisfactory for the health authorities but at the same time they are also issuing warnings to the government that unnecessary relaxations in Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and slow rate of vaccination can again push the country into the troubled waters. National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) has allowed reopening of outdoor restaurants and tourism spots while shrines, cinemas, indoor dining, indoor gyms, amusement parks, contact sports, festivals will continue to remain closed till further orders.

Delta variant in Pakistan

Sindh Minister for Health Dr. Azra Fazal Pechuho cautioned all district administrators to prepare well against a possible fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the province. She said the Covid situation in the country could get critical again as new variants, including the Delta strain first found in India, was discovered in the country.

According to media reports, the Delta variant or B.1.617.2 that was first detected in India and has spread to more than 60 countries. It accounts for about 60 percent of all coronavirus cases in the United Kingdom and 6 percent of all infections in the United States, though in some states it accounts for over 18 percent of sampled coronavirus cases.

Vaccination is the only solution

Some medical experts have opined that while the medical community is optimistic, there is cause for concern that with the appearance of viral variants across the globe that we might be facing a decidedly novel stage of the contagion: COVID 2.0.

Galit Alter, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, in her comments said new coronavirus variants never seem to affect T-cell immunity all that much and they [the T-cells] seem to be as effective in recognizing these variants as they do the original virus.

This there is actually a very important backup mechanism built into our vaccines that will continue to provide protection against these newly emerging variants. She further said the vaccines greatly reduce severe disease and death, so a vaccination campaign that removes the most severe cases from the pandemic would mean that those that remained would be mild and asymptomatic cases.

Keeping in view the latest views of globally renowned medical experts, it can be said that the vaccination is a highly trustworthy solution to control the coronavirus disease. Pakistan like rest of the world should focus on vaccination of large majority of its population that can greatly help defeat coronavirus pandemic.

The Raging Fire of Islamophobia

When will the Western political leadership wake up to the steady rise of Islamophobia in their countries?



By Mishaal Ashraf

While the world is becoming more cognizant of concepts like globalization, it is also experiencing an increase in right-wing extremism in many countries. A worrying development in this connection has been the steady rise of Islamophobia in the West.

On 6 June 2021, Salman, Talat, Madiha, Yumna, and Fayeze of the Afzaal family went for a walk in London, Ontario. Little did the family know that this would be the last time they were going out, for they had to pay a heavy price for being Muslims.

Police investigators found out that the attack on the Afzaal family was intentional and was categorized as a hate crime. The attack has left the Muslims residing in Canada bewildered and petrified.

This is not the first time that Muslims in Canada have been targeted. Around a year ago, Ejaz Ahmed Choudary, a schizophrenic father, lost his life for being a Muslim in Canada at the hands of Ontario police. Canadians have become desensitized to the vulnerability of Muslims. Classifying who belongs to Canada and who does not rely on processes and institutions like media, education, and state practices' narrative.

Canada is not the only country where religion-based crime takes place. For example, France is home to the largest

Muslim community in Western Europe. In 2020, 235 attacks on Muslims were reported, with a 53 percent increase from 2019. Most of these attacks took place in Paca, Rhônes-Alpes and Ile-de-France. Attacks on mosques also experienced a 35 percent increase from the previous year.

European far-right extremists have been targeting Muslims in particular, and French Muslims are suffering the most. Members of the French parliament have openly talked about their anti-Muslim and anti-Islam views, which has left the Muslim community fearful.

Emmanuel Macron is considered a liberal leader. Still, his liberalism has strong views against Muslims, making one wonder about his political ideology, which won him the election in the first place. In October 2020, Macron's government announced an anti-separatism law, slamming massive restrictions on the Muslim community.

With the announcement, Macron has become a figure of hate in Muslim countries and is the cause behind many internal controversies. Six percent of the French population is Muslim and having an anti-Muslim government in the residing country is devastating, to say the least.

Islamophobia soared in the West after the 9/11 incident. The belief that Muslims are terrorists has created numbness in Canadians regarding civil rights breaches and otherwise.

Media channels portray it as anti-Muslim sentiments, while political leaders deal it under international security, passing anti-terrorism laws.

Citizens of western countries, but with brown descent, have often been reported as being subjects of extra security checks and getting questioned on their “Americanness,” “Canadianness,” “Frenchness,” etc. Brown Muslims are not only targeted by white supremacists but also by government officials.

Angus Reid Institute conducted a study in 2017 to study religious discrimination. The results showed that Canadians did not have favourable views of Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism. In addition, they rated the mentioned religions as being lower than Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism, respectively.

Azeezah Khanji, a legal scholar, conducted another study that concluded that more than 50 percent of Canadians believed that they could not trust Muslims. They thought that Islamophobia is being catastrophized and that Muslim mosques should be under surveillance by the government. In addition, 46 percent of Canadians believe that Muslims face discrimination because of their own fault.

The use of Islam by terrorist organizations has defamed the religion and its followers. When white people commit crimes, they are seen and treated as individuals with access to all legal rights. However, when a Muslim commits a crime, they are seen as a product of their community and labelled as terrorists by the media and other state institutions.

Big words like liberalism are thrown around in communities to get validated in social circles these days. However, what is forgotten,

though, is that liberalism entails accepting others just as they are. This means accepting their race, ethnicity, faith, sex, etc.

People of colour find themselves at the centre of conflicts more often than necessary, rarely because of their own wrongdoing. When members from marginalized communities commit crimes, the entire race or religion is held responsible for it. The multicultural images displayed by the Western media hide the reality of what actually goes around. People are forced to believe that the west is home to mosaic nations, concealing harsh realities that take place in the form of racial, religious, and other forms of discrimination.

Global politics and societal beliefs, especially in Europe and the Americas, saw a 180 degree shift post 9/11. The societal beliefs and multicultural discourse fell out of alignment as Muslims and terrorists became synonymous. Biased media reporting and western politician’s rhetoric are only adding fuel to the fire. Muslims are becoming victims of oppression all around the world. Voices of the radicalized are only heard once extreme acts of violence take place.

Islamophobia has become a burden that Muslims cannot carry anymore. Whether online or offline, hostility towards Muslims only shows how deeply rooted and problematic white supremacists’ perspectives are.

Islamophobia completely negates the impression of “western liberalism” when racial inequities take place on a daily basis. Abhijit Naskar writes in his book:

“Discriminations suit animals, not humans. And yet, the unfortunate reality is that humans discriminate against each other on the grounds of imaginary labels, not the animals. This way, animals are more civilized than humans.”



The Terrible Plight of the Wretched of the Earth

The already marginalised transgender community is bearing a disproportionately high burden of the worsening climate. This must change.

By Eric Shahzar

The COVID-19 global pandemic has spawned a plethora of problems, the foremost of which is a rampaging worldwide livelihood crisis for the lower strata of the society. However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit us, accelerated climate change was already exacting a terrible toll on the vulnerable and the marginalized who, in most cases, have been denied any part in socioeconomic progress.

Within the most marginalized segments of our population lies another neglected, oppressed, subjugated community - the transgender community. This group of people is rarely heard in public spaces and have been deliberately snubbed and silenced. Today, with accelerated climate change becoming more destructive than ever, the plight of the transgender community is worse than ever.

As heatwaves, torrential rains and extreme weather conditions become more common – the transgender community bears the brunt of the accelerated climate crisis. This community prefers to live in segregated locations in a bid to reduce the risk of discrimination from neighbors or landlords. As a result, they end up living in dilapidated conditions where the hazards of worsening climate are drastically amplified.

One cannot forget the destruction caused by the monsoon rains of Karachi in 2020 – where the poor and vulnerable lost their homes and livelihoods. Many of them are still struggling to cope up with the aftermath of the destruction. Among these people is the transgender community. What is more upsetting is that little help and spotlight was given to the transgender hit by the disaster.

The roots of the climate crisis are deeply tangled with the roots of multiple oppressions. People from low socioeconomic backgrounds contribute the least to the climate crisis but suffer from its greatest impacts.

According to United Nations (UN) statistics, the transgender community's unemployment rate is three times that of the general population, inevitably putting them at a higher risk of homelessness and poverty. These developments make them less equipped to face growing environmental catastrophes brought about by the looming climate crisis.

In a country like Pakistan, where government statistics on the poor and marginalized in terms of employment are already outdated and overlooked, how can we expect to have clear, transparent and constructive records of the transgender community? Even before the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted damage of unprecedented scale and nature, the transgender community was forced to make a living through begging and non-desirable work. This community in particular has been subjected to exclusion, violence of all sorts and exploitation because of social stigma and discrimination.

Despite the predicament of the transgender community, Pakistan's parliament did enact a progressive law, "The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018" in order to empower this marginalized segment of this society. But the implementation of this law has left a lot to be desired.

The great majority of transgender individuals has no awareness that the law protects them from rampant persecution. Article 6(D) of the Act stipulates the obligations by the government and the steps it should take. It promises to "[f]ormulate special vocational training programmes to facilitate, promote and support livelihood for Transgender Persons".

Nevertheless, the law fails to take due cognizance of how climate stress is further intensifying the livelihood crisis of the transgender. It is the principal duty of the government to disburse funds to the marginalized communities whenever climate-induced disasters take place, like last year's devastating floods of Karachi.

A climate-friendly stimulus package that paves the way for sustainable economic growth, targeting the most underprivileged, is the urgent need of the hour. If our world is to become more sustainable and inclusive post COVID-19, we must do everything in our power to make constructive policies and legislation to tackle the rising inequalities created by the climate crisis.

While the government's focus should be on flattening the COVID-19 curve – key issues such as a nation-wide gender-sensitivity programmes must not be kept on the back burner because the COVID-19 crisis is heavily intertwined with the climate crisis and the transgender person's plight. As hatred and discrimination against the transgender community is on the upward trajectory, the concept of gender sensitivity through education at an early age could bring in positive results.

Many Pakistanis, regardless of age - do not consider the transgender people as equals, which inevitably perpetuates the deep-rooted bigotry and intolerance. This must change if we are to have any chance of becoming a progressive society.

We must recognize that the increasing impacts of climate trauma on the transgender community come not simply by virtue of identity, but by the existing societal discrimination towards that identity.

With transformative and progressive policymaking, the government can address the root causes of these underlying inequalities, reduce vulnerabilities of people to climate stress, and build long term resilience. It is now high time to connect the plight of the transgender with the climate change discourse. A society's record of accomplishment is inevitably characterized by how it treats its minorities, and the most vulnerable.

Sergio Ramos, a Spaniard Entertainer & Gladiator on the Arena of Football

By Ali Abdullah

Not many athletes are considered as GOAT (greatest of all time) or legend. Many of them come, play the usual game and leave. The ones who are considered as legends leave the field but not from the minds of fans. Tough times, controversies, sitting on the bench waiting for day and many other tests make one a legend and Sergio Ramos was such a Spaniard legend in Real Madrid.

Born & raised in the city of Camas, Seville region of Spain. Sergio Ramos' father worked as a manager and mother was a house wife who was busy raising her children in their father's absence. Ramos, a family man, loving his kins so much that, not many people know, one of the tattoos on his arm are the initials of his siblings and parents.

Despite financial difficulties, his parents helped their beloved 12-year-old child to become a part of Alevin F.C. From this point, the young Ramos began jumped into this hobby fully. He left school in 2004 after signing his first ever contract with Seville. Lack of time for studies kept him from school. Though, finally, Sergio did receive his secondary education certificate after he passed the last examinations in Biology and Ecology in 2014.

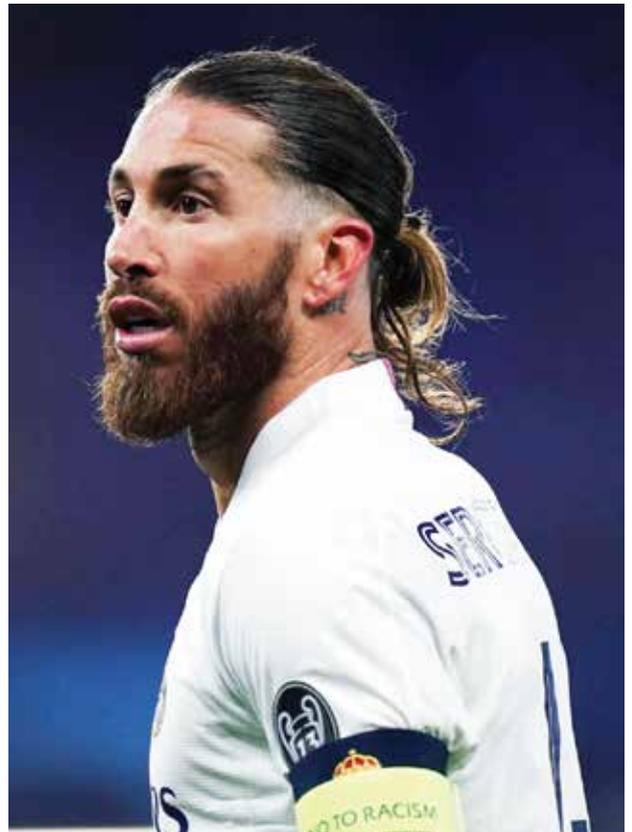
He made his first-team and La Liga debut on February 1, 2004, coming on as a 64th minute substitute for Francisco Gallardo. Unfortunately, luck swapped him in the ground with victory in the lap of opponent team Deportivo La Coruna on 0-1 score.

In the 2004–05 UEFA Cup, he scored his first continental goal, and won 2-0 against C.D. Nacional. His skills attracted many big clubs in Europe including Liverpool, Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus to sign Ramos in the summer of 2005. In the end Real Madrid bought him for €27 million and this is when his legacy started.

Sergio Ramos shared the dressing room on his debut with big names like Iker Casillas, Roberto Carlos, David Beckham, Ronaldo, and Raul Gonzalez against Celta Vigo.

After Iker Casillas left, Ramos was given the responsibility to captain the big names in the team. Ramos bid goodbye to the place he called home after 16 long and successful years. In those 16 years, he won 22 trophies, made 671 appearances and scored 101 goals. And this relationship, could have continued well.

"I have never wanted to leave Real Madrid. I would have liked to stay here many more years," says Ramos adding, "In recent months, the club made me an offer of one year, with a lower salary, and I want to emphasize that money was never a problem. I wanted two years for continuity, for me and my family. There was never a financial issue. When, I finally decided to accept the offer of one year and a lower salary, I was told the offer had an expiration date that I was not aware of."



When Ramos was named the captain, he saw the team going into a rebuilding phase after the Galacticos era. Players like Kaka, Mesut Ozil, Karim Benzema, Marcelo, Luka Modric and Gareth Bale came during his time in Real Madrid. After Ronaldo left even Eden Hazard and Thibaut Courtois joined the team and played under Ramos' captaincy.

Alongside Pepe, Sergio Ramos had made one of the toughest defending wall for Real Madrid. He was also known as the late scorer in the game as he scored many late goals to save his team from loses including a Champions League final. He also played a crucial role with his penalties.

Nothing mattered more to him than his club. In his 16 years, he conceded 26 red card as a defender. Whenever the team needed him he used to play alongside Ronaldo, Bale and Benzema in the striking position. He was fearless.

The good thing for Real Madrid is that they won't face the same crises, they faced when Cristiano Ronaldo left, as they have already signed Alaba, Nacho Fernandez, Raphael Varane and Eder Militao. But, the team now likely to suffer from the absence of leadership on the pitch to offer opponents a sense of fear.

In his press conference he also said that this is not a goodbye forever, in fact he will come back sooner or later. There are rumors that Sergio Ramos might move to England soon.

PLS6: Multan Sultans Own the Summer of 2021

The explosive second leg of the region's hottest tourney delivered on the promise of fireworks, but the Sultans left no doubt as to who is the boss.



The Abu Dhabi leg was much more than just a bunch of thrilling matches. The first leg started on 9 June 2021. Experts did expect and predict that the points table might see a shuffling in the second leg of the PSL. At the beginning of the Abu Dhabi leg, finalists of the last year HBL PSL Lahore Qalandars topped the points table with the most successful team of the tournament Islamabad United at number two.

It did not take long when team number five on the points table came back into the tournament on the power of back-to-back victories, rising from fifth to second position. Lahore Qalandars could not perform well in the second leg of the league and were unable to qualify, even though the squad were in red-hot form in the Karachi leg of HBL PSL.

Another unfortunate season for the Gladiators and their fans. Quetta was the first team to be disqualified from the tournament.

Islamabad United, Peshawar Zalmi, and Multan Sultans were the teams who qualified without a problem. In the end, the defending champions Karachi Kings won and became the fourth team to qualify for the playoffs.

Multan Sultans and Islamabad United played the first playoff. Playing their maiden final of the tournament, Multan were able to defeat United by 31 runs to qualify for the finals.

The game is not about personal accomplishments but Rizwan's individual record in every prospect is worthy of unreserved praise. His place in the national team has been debatable in competition with Sarfaraz Ahmed.

Rizwan and Sarfaraz, both middle-order wicket-keeping batters, have shared delightful moments on and off-field but are considered to be in rivals when it comes to owning the place in the squad.

When Sarfaraz's road to the team became doubtful after lack of fitness and mediocre showing in some games, his place was questionable and replaceable as a skipper. With his return to the team after a series of inspiring domestic performances, it became a matter of debate who the leading wicket-keeper of Pakistan will be.

Now both of them are placed in the national team getting chances in the playing XI at once for either role. Rizwan has turned his past critics into fans with his magnificence both behind the stumps and with the bat. He is now one of the three Pakistani batsmen and the second wicketkeeper in the world to have a century in all three formats of cricket. His inspired performances may have seized the board to proceed with him in all three formats deliberately.

Before captaining Multan Sultans, he was benched in almost all matches when he was with Karachi Kings. Rizwan has shut all up

with his performance both as a player and the captain clearing Sultans' road to the grand finale for the first time in four years. Maybe the Tareens too were inspired by his past captaincy sights in domestic as he was coming from a National T20 Cup win for Southern lately alongside different triumphs for Peshawar region.

At this point, Islamabad still had a chance to qualify. The second playoff involved Peshawar and Karachi. After a thrilling contest, Peshawar won and qualified for the next round to play against Islamabad United.

Afghan warrior Hazratulla Zazai did not stop playing his natural game. He had a slow start against Islamabad but deep in his innings, he was nothing less than a rocket. The speed and power of his bat showed everyone what he is capable of.

Islamabad United failed to score runs and to build a solid partnership. They scored 110 runs with seven wickets down. A cameo of 45 runs by Hassan Ali supported

by of Wasim Junior gave Islamabad a respectable total of 170.

In response, Peshawar chased the target with no difficulties because of Zazai and Wells' fiery innings. Islamabad lost and Peshawar Zalmi qualified for the finals.

Just a few hours before the final, two players of Peshawar Zalmi confessed that they breached the bio-secure bubble and met someone who was not part of the bubble. Umaid Asif and Haider Ali were not allowed to the final. Haider Ali's has since been replaced by Sohaib Maqsood for England and West Indies series.

Come the finale, Peshawar Zalmi won the toss and the skipper Wahab Riaz elected to bowl first. Multan Sultans remained unchanged whereas Peshawar made one change. Multan started really well with the bat. Both openers were involved in a 68-run partnership.

Sohaib Maqsood continued his red-hot form and scored 65 not out. Then came the

talented Rilee Rossouw who scored a brilliant half century in the all-important game. Multan Sultans set the highest target in a PSL final, 207.

Peshawar Zalmi got a decent start by Kamran Akmal alone. He made a quick 36 after which their first wicket fell. Danger-man Hazratullah Zazai was kept quite by the sultan bowlers. He was able to score just 6 runs.

The end seemed night for Zalmi until Shoaib Malik came to the middle and scored a fiery 48. He got out and there was no chance for Zalmi to win their second PSL trophy. Imran Tahir, Imran Khan and Blessing Muzarabani were brilliant with the ball.

Peshawar Zalmi lost by 47 runs and Multan Sultan lifted their first HBL PSL trophy. Sixth season of the Pakistan Super League came to an end. The second leg was organized perfectly as the management learnt from their past mistakes.

By Ali Abdullah



Pakistani Filmmakers Have Designs on the International Market

Karachi's Pakistan International Film Festival 2021 Women's Edition draws luminaries from across the nation.



By Hasan Kazmi

After the downturn in the third wave of COVID 19, activities in the metropolitan of Karachi has resumed a bit with following all guidelines and SOPs due for global pandemic.

One of it e was the three-day Pakistan International Film Festival 2021 Women's Edition, organized under the banner of the Karachi Film Society from June 11 to 13 June at Frere Hall, the heritage site situated at the heart of the city.

In view of the social distancing necessitated by the Covid-19 global pandemic, the festival this year was restricted to the workshops and seminars with limited audience comprising of showbiz and media fraternity as well as the founding members of KFS and the media fraternity.

The seminar on Day 1 was on the issue of 'What is Stopping Our Films from Growing Internationally' which was attended by Chairman Senate Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting, Senator Faisal Javed Khan. The session was moderated by Kamran Jawaid, a senior film critic.

The panel include Sheikh Amjad Rasheed, Chairman IMGC Group, one of the leading film production and distribution groups in Pakistan; Selina Rashid, CEO of public relations firm, Lotus PR; Irfan Malik, Senior Vice President ARY Group and the current head of ARY Films; and Omer H Paracha, founder of streetwear luxury brand PARAVAL and an executive producer of film Echo Boomers.

The panel discussed the lack of growth of Pakistani films in the international market and the reasons and challenges behind it. They also discussed the low return on investment,

quality of films, government facilitation, the need to experiment with various genres of filmmaking, and upgrading filmmaking technology and equipment.

Following the panel discussion, Senator Faisal Javed Khan in his keynote speech stressed the need to concentrate on the local side of the film industry before discussing the international aspect of it. He said that Pakistan's film industry needs a minimum of 1,000 screens and at least 100 films a year just to sustain it.

The Senator warned the filmmakers not to copy the neighbouring country if they wanted to go global and advised them to present their own ideas to the world. While addressing the government's incentives and facilitation for the film industry, he informed the audience that Prime Minister Imran Khan had approved an entertainment and film policy that would be launched soon.

The Day 2 of the festival began with a workshop on Fighting Harassment at the Workplace, followed by a panel discussion on Covid-19: Challenges & Opportunities, Understanding the 'New Normal'.

The workshop on Fighting Harassment at the Workplace was conducted by Xenab Ansari, giving her experience to spread awareness about harassment and teaching attendees how to protect themselves. She also shared her skillset and knowledge on the subject.

Dr Fouzia Saeed, Director General PNCA and member of the board of governors KFS was the chief guest at the workshop, who also shared her experience on the topic.

The keynote speaker on Day 2 of PIFF was Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Fawad Chaudhry, while it was also attended by Governor Sindh, Imran Ismail as guest of honour.

The panel discussion on Covid-19: Challenges & Opportunities, Understanding the 'New Normal' was moderated by Sidra Iqbal, a celebrated broadcast journalist, and the participant for the discussion included Senator (R) Javed Jabbar, a famed filmmaker and intellectual; Dr Fouzia Saeed, a social activist, gender expert, trainer/facilitator, folk culture promoter and author; Ameena Saiyid, Head of publishing company Lightstone, former MD of OUP and founder of Adab Festival; Amin Hashwani, the founder of Charter for Compassion Pakistan, a businessman and a social activist; Dr Farah Essa Zaidi, Director Radiology at Dr Essa Laboratory & Diagnostic Centre ; Duraid Qureshi, Co-Founder and CEO of HUM Network Ltd; and Fizza Ali Meerza, CEO Film Wala Pictures and an active member of the Executive Body of Pakistan Film Producers Association.

The panel discussed issues and challenges related to Pakistani films and entertainment industry post covid-19, the portrayal of women in Pakistani media, access of the lower and middle class to cinema, the need to establish a digital entertainment platform and challenges in adapting to the new normal since Covid-19.

The Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Fawad Chaudhry, in his speech, commenting on the title of this year's PIFF, the minister said that men had the upper hand over women for thousands of years but with the advent of technology and public awareness, the gender disparity is gradually lessening.

Citing the example of his own daughter who wants to be a fighter pilot, the minister said that women now are opting for roles which were once considered unconventional. While expressing his views on the decline of Pakistan Film Industry after the 80s', the Federal Minister said that the biggest factor was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

On government facilitation for the film industry, the Federal Minister announced that they were coming up with a film policy which focusses on lessening the electricity charges for cinemas, zero taxes on the film industry and government loan of up to 50 million for film-makers among other amenities.

The minister also spoke about the government's intention of establishing the most advanced and state-of-the-art Pakistan University which will offer courses on journalism, animation, music and other media related fields.

The Federal Minister also urged film-makers to focus on Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Middle East as an alternative to counter lobbies that don't allow Pakistani content to run on international streaming platforms.

The Pakistan International Film Festival, Women's Edition 2021, was concluded with a workshop on 'Women Entrepreneurship in a Creative Economy', followed by a panel discussion on 'Gender Stereotypes in Media and What are Women Doing About It?'

The workshop on Women Entrepreneurship in a Creative Economy was conducted by Ashifa Paracha, CEO Brand Advertising,

WCCI member and founder of the Pakistan Digital Awards & Corporate Lounge and Sadaf Mahmood, CEO Xiphios Innovations and COO Nutshell Communications.

Organized under the umbrella of Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the workshop detailed how women can learn, start and promote businesses in the digital world.

The seminar/webinar on 'Gender Stereotypes in Media and What are Women Doing About It' was moderated by Tazeen Hussain, an associate professor and head of the Department of Communication Design at Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture.

The panellists present were Sultana Siddiqui, President KFS & HUM Network Ltd; Atiqa Odho, Chairperson of Focus PK, an entrepreneur, social activist and artist; Sangeeta, film director and actor and Tasneem Ahmar, head of UKS Research Centre and executive producer for Meri Awaz Sunno.

The chief guest for the panel discussion was Provincial Minister of Sindh for Culture, Tourism, and Antiquities, Syed Sardar Ali Shah.

The panel discussed and addressed the discrimination persisting against women in the media industry. Atiqa Odho said that although these issues do exist in our industry one has to be strong, persistent and vocal about all kinds of discrimination. She also said it was her co-actors (men) who helped her in the field in the beginning of her career.

Sultana Siddiqui added that women in the field of media are judged differently than men. It is the need of the time to change the lens through which women are viewed and judged and men and women should learn to co-exist if they want to succeed, she added.

The panel also discussed the need to change the mind-set of the masses through realistic portrayals of strong and successful women characters, changes required in PEMRA laws and the need to establish strong, independent association to protect the rights of women in media.

Provincial Minister, Syed Sardar Ali Shah, began his speech with a tribute to Shaheed Benazir Bhutto who inspired millions of women across the globe. He appreciated the efforts of KFS board members in organizing such meaningful dialogues and assured his government's support for the film industry. "We can start an initiative to support the film industry within a year if all the stakeholders can come on one page," he added.

President of KFS, Sultana Siddiqui while addressing the stressed on the need to engage women, especially young blood in the film-making process to learn the finer points of film-making and shed light on the festival's objectives of providing the aspiring young people with a platform to showcase their talent to the world.

Siddiqui also spoke about the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in foreign movies and the need to counter islamophobia in our productions.

The three day event was well conducted by Festival Director Misbah Khalid.

Maya Ali Is Always Determined About Her Next Move

For a variety of reasons, Pakistani entertainment producers are unable to capitalise on the exploding digital content market.



By **Kaukab Jahan**

Maya Ali is one of those few stars of Pakistan, who are known for their memorable roles in dramas and films. She is not only working in both the mediums but also making an example of excellence in her craft, acting.

Ali began her career as a video jockey in the year 2012 and made her debut in acting with a brief role in the telenovela *Durr-e-Shehwar*. Then there was no turning back. She received praise for playing the titular characters in the television series; *Aik Nayee Cinderella* and *Aun Zara* (all 2012), *Zid* (2014), *Mera Naam Yousuf Hai* (2015), *Diyar-e-Dil* (2015) and *Mann Mayal* (2016). Her performance in *Mann Mayal* earned her the Lux Style Award for Best Television Actress.

She stepped into films in 2018 as the female lead of action comedy *'Teefa In Trouble'* with Ali Zafar. Next year, she did the

romantic comedy *'Parey Hut Love'*. Both the films rank among the highest-grossing Pakistani films.

Ali has come back to the mini screen after a hiatus of five years and appearing in drama serial *'Pehli Si Muhabbat'* on ARY Digital as female lead.

Besides acting, Maya Ali is very vocal about many social issues especially mental health, endorses various brands, and supports charities.

The Truth International reached Maya to know what this hardworking and enthusiastic actor is currently doing and have more for her fans in future.

You are working in drama after a gap of five years. Is it a break from films?

I have never decided that I would work only in films as many people think. Actually I didn't find any interesting script for me

in those years. I was waiting for a script, which I really wanted to do. Eventually I got this *'Pehli Si Muhabbat'*, written by Faiza Iftikhar and directed by Anjum Shehzad. A wonderful package!

Most of your roles in dramas, including *Rakhshi* of PSM are of an aggrieved girl. Why?

People ask this question to me very often. But I think these types of roles in dramas are very close to reality. Happiness and sorrow are part of real life. There are hurdles in every one's life. Dramas show how they are coping with them. In *Pehli Si Muhabbat*, there is romance in the beginning, then there are problems and finally there is an end to all of this.

For those who want me to watch a strong and liberated woman, watch my film *'Teefa In Trouble'*. My role in the film is entirely different from what I do on television.

Would you like to work more on television in future?

Yes. Of course! Television is my home. It has given me recognition as an actor. There are many more projects in line; some of which are in their final stages of approval. If a good script with a good team comes to you, then why not?

You are working in a film by Shoaib Mansoor. What is your role in the film?

I am playing a journalist in the film. I always wanted to do that kind of role. It is very interesting and different. Shoaib Sahib told me in the beginning that I didn't have to bother about my looks, hair and makeup but just to focus on acting and my character. I have tried my best. People will tell how much justice I have done with this.

How was the experience of working with a veteran like Shoaib Mansoor?

I consider myself lucky that I got the opportunity to work with Shoaib Mansoor. I learned a lot from him. I actually expressed myself more while working with him.

The last film by Shoaib Mansoor, Verna could not do much with critics and at the box office. Were you concerned about that?

I think the name 'Shoaib Mansoor' attached with a project is enough for an actor to say

'yes' to it. Moreover, directors try new things to get variety in their work. They even take risks with some new ideas and technology.

As far as I am concerned, when the script came to me with Shoaib Mansoor's name written on it, there's no reason to say NO. I was not concerned about what his last project did. All I knew was that he was an institution in himself. I am not much worried about what happens to the film but believe I have learned a lot by the completion of the film.

Did you do any special efforts for the role of a journalist?

Yes. Shoaib Sahib sent me so many links to have an idea of the role. Moreover, I started my career as an anchor. So I already had a sense of doing it. So with all these references I did it.

When are your fans going to watch this film?

I don't know when we will resume working on the project. The first spell has been completed and for the second, we have to fly to the US and because of Covid 19, everything is standing still, so let's see what happens. I think the film will be released sometime next year.

You are a brand ambassador of Quetta Gladiator in Pakistan Super League

(PSL). Have you ever played cricket yourself?

I think all of us have played some cricket in our childhood. I did it again in the anthem for the Quetta Gladiators. Not more than this. But I always had an interest in other sports and also played them at college level.

Being an actor and a public figure, you face a lot of trolling on social media. How do you cope with it?

In the beginning I used to take them seriously and got upset. But by the time, I realised that people don't bother to know about the backdrop or background of any picture or story and just start commenting on it. I think those people have a lot of free time that is why they do these useless things. So, now I ignore them.

Do you have any message for these social media trolls?

I believe that we can spread goodness with the same social media but we don't. There is already very negativity and hatred all around us so if we have an opportunity to express ourselves through this tool of social media, why not use it for positivity and love.

While trolling someone on social media, they don't even consider what the other person is going through. I feel pity for the sick mentally of these people, who in order to get rid of that sickness, spit hate.



CandyLand

HAR PAKISTANI
KI JAAN MAIN MILI!



Oliver Twist

Author's name: Charles Dickens

Reviewed by: Alizay Ashraf

ISBN: 0-14-036773-3

Publisher: Puffin Classics

No. of pages: 346



The book *Oliver Twist* is a novel written by Charles Dickens about a young boy, till the age of nine spends his life in a workhouse orphanage where he becomes famous for daring to ask for more food. When he runs away to London, he falls into the company of a gang of pickpockets including Fagin, Bill Sikes and the artful dodger. Oliver's future looks uncertain until Mr Brownlow comes in his life and helps him out.

This is such a classic and a great story and not too boring for young readers, I really enjoyed reading the story of Oliver. The storyline of the book is very interesting and keeps the reader more and more curious. There were many conflicts about Oliver. There was robbery, murder, betrayal and much more dark stuff.

There was a lot of humour throughout the story. The writer pokes fun even at many serious moments, which made the book more fun to read for young readers.

The themes of the book were thievery and crime and murder. There was much about poverty and social bonds. The book shows readers how you should not be giving up and how you should be more independent.

It shows that if a person will work hard with fate in their heart, they can do anything. The main theme of the book was that a person has to struggle to get what they want and how they go through many hardships. All the good characters in this story go through that, but especially Oliver himself experiences considerable challenges and hardships.

The characters were also very good. All of characters interacting very realistically towards each other. The relationship between Bill and Nancy was very well put.

There were a lot of ups and downs and many unexpected things that happened. There was full suspense and excitement. It was very well written for children. It is very entertaining, and it makes you want to read more.

If you have not read this book, do give it a read, especially if you like classics. This book is extremely well written and one of my favourite books of all time. Overall, I really liked this book and would definitely recommend to family and friends. It would be suitable for children above the age of 8. It would be more interesting and fun to read for them.

Kim

Kim is a white poor boy who speaks the local Indian dialect and was born in Britain. His father died when he was only three years old, but he told Kim that one day a Red Bull on the green field would appear and befriend him. He has grown up very poor, a street kid with incredible smarts. His adventure begins when he meets a lama monk who is on a search for a sacred river. Kim becomes his sort of servant and a companion.

The novel is part adventure, and part travelling. It is very delightful and interesting to read. The interesting thing is that this book is also written by an Englishman. The author has and displays a vast knowledge of India, its culture, its many religions, the lives of common folks, especially the poor. He tells good stories, and I was gripped by them. These stories were so interesting and fun to read. I think

readers will get to know much about India and its culture.

I found this book very fascinating and interesting. I learnt much about the Indian religion. This book is very informative and makes you want to read it more.

The main theme of this book is basically identity. Even though Kim's parents are Irish, he is raised as an Indian boy on the streets after the death of his parents and living on the streets in the sun only made his skin darker and brown, which made him look more like an Indian boy. The other themes of the book include, cleverness, and loyalty, duty and youth. Appearance and race are the other themes of the book.

I loved reading this classic, informative book, and I would recommend to everyone who has an interest in classical books. This book will be very fun to read at the age of 11 years old.

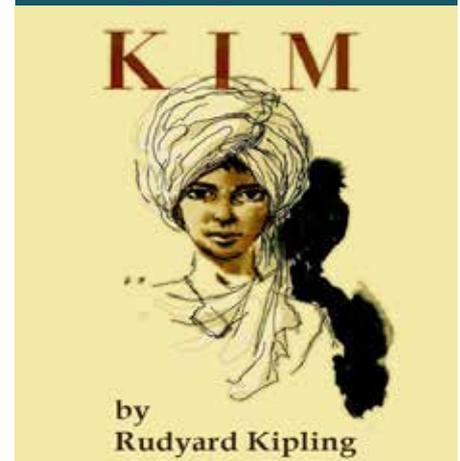
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