

# The Truth International

15<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021

Life Under the Taliban

People of Afghanistan still waiting for the other shoe to drop

PDM Comes Out of Hibernation

Will the second round be any different?

Terrible Toll of Sky High Energy Prices

Power sector worsened rather than improving

## Afghanistan Long Way to Go



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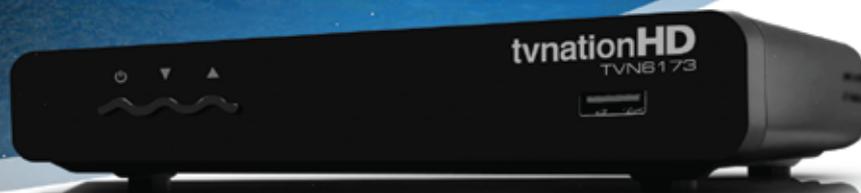
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**Publisher:** Muhammad Fahad Thaheem  
**Editor:** Zaheer ud Din Babar Thaheem  
**Advisor to Editor:** Ashraf Malkham

**Printer:** Masha ALLAH Printers Basement # 9, Ratta Mansion, Fazal e Haq Road, Blue Area, Islamabad

# Taliban in the saddle

By M. Ziauddin

Switching roles is never easy. More so, if it is a switch from a 20-year long role of waging a resistance carried out almost with bare hands against the occupying troops of world's sole super power armed to teeth with the most sophisticated weapon systems to the role of running a government without money and civil administration.

That is exactly what is being expected of the victorious Afghan Taliban who only a month or so ago had taken back their country from a disintegrating Afghan Armed Forces after the foreign occupying troops started withdrawing following the signing of a peace accord between the US and the incoming new rulers.

The Taliban say they want to engage with the wider world, but on terms that are true to the group's political and religious beliefs. These are based on their strict interpretations of Sharia.

The acting Prime Minister Mohammad Hasan Akhund in a written statement, said that the leaders will "work hard towards upholding Islamic rules and Sharia in the country, protecting the country's highest interests, securing Afghanistan's borders, and ensuring lasting peace, prosperity and development".

"We want to have a peaceful, prosperous and self-reliant Afghanistan, for which we will strive to eliminate all causes of war and strife in the country, and [for] our countrymen to live in complete security and comfort."

Furthermore, the Taliban wanted to have "strong and healthy" relations with all countries based on mutual respect, he said.

"We are committed to all international laws and treaties, resolutions and commitments that are not in conflict with Islamic law and the country's national values," Akhund stressed.

He also emphasized that the interim government will take "serious and effective steps" to protect human rights as well as the rights of minorities and underprivileged groups within the framework of the demands of Islam.

The next big step is expected to be the drafting of a new constitution. And it has

also been promised to take people from other parts of the country – implying positions for women and Shiites may still be open, but not at the top level.

The so called free-world led by the US is being seen using the purse strings to blackmail the new rulers in Kabul to shape their country in the image of a modern, democratic entity adhering to the global rules set by the world's sole super power.

However, the US can hardly claim to be a pure player in the arena of human rights. Friends get a pass; in the Middle East, Egypt and Saudi Arabia leap to mind.

Perhaps if the Taliban let remnant US citizens leave, stop short of wantonly persecuting US-friendly Afghans left behind and permit no terror attacks to be launched from its territory, the US would find it not so difficult to live with the Sharia ruled Afghanistan.

Russia, China and Iran seem ready to live with such an Afghanistan but with guarantees of non-interference in their internal affairs by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Understandably, India would like to see the outcome of the blackmailing pressure being mounted by the US before making up its mind on how to adjust socio-politically to the Talibanized Afghanistan.

Pakistan falls into a totally different category. A unique one too because of its multidimensional relationship with its neighbor with which Islamabad shares a 2,640 km long border, the two are also mainly Sunni Muslim countries and ethnic Pashtun live on both sides of the border, predominant in Afghanistan (43%) and make up 20 per cent of Pakistan's population. Being a land-locked country most of Afghanistan's external trade is conducted through Pakistani ports.

And socio-politically the relationship between the two countries have remained most of the time too far from being ideal. Kabul had delayed for too long officially recognizing independent Pakistan. Over the first two decades of its existence Pakistan had suffered a separatist movement called "Pakhtunistan" which was

aided and abetted by the rulers in Kabul.

In the first Afghan war (1979-89) Pakistan aided by the US helped Afghan Mujahideen defeat the Soviet invaders. Then Pakistan aided Taliban in its power struggle against Mujahideen. Next, in the second Afghan war (2001-2021) Pakistan helped the US-led NATO troops in ousting the Taliban from Afghanistan. In the first 10 years of this war, Pakistan was confronted with the spillover as enraged pro-Taliban elements in Pakistan brought the country to a bloody pass with its terror attacks. Pakistan successfully countered the Threek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) mounting military campaigns like Rah-i-Raast, Zarb-i-Azb and Radul Fassad.

The threat of TTP has become all the more ominous since the seeming defeat of US at the hands of Afghan Taliban. One cannot rule out the possibility of the TTP inspired by the success of Afghan Taliban try to take over Pakistan using terror tactic. Pakistan, especially its military should be on guard.

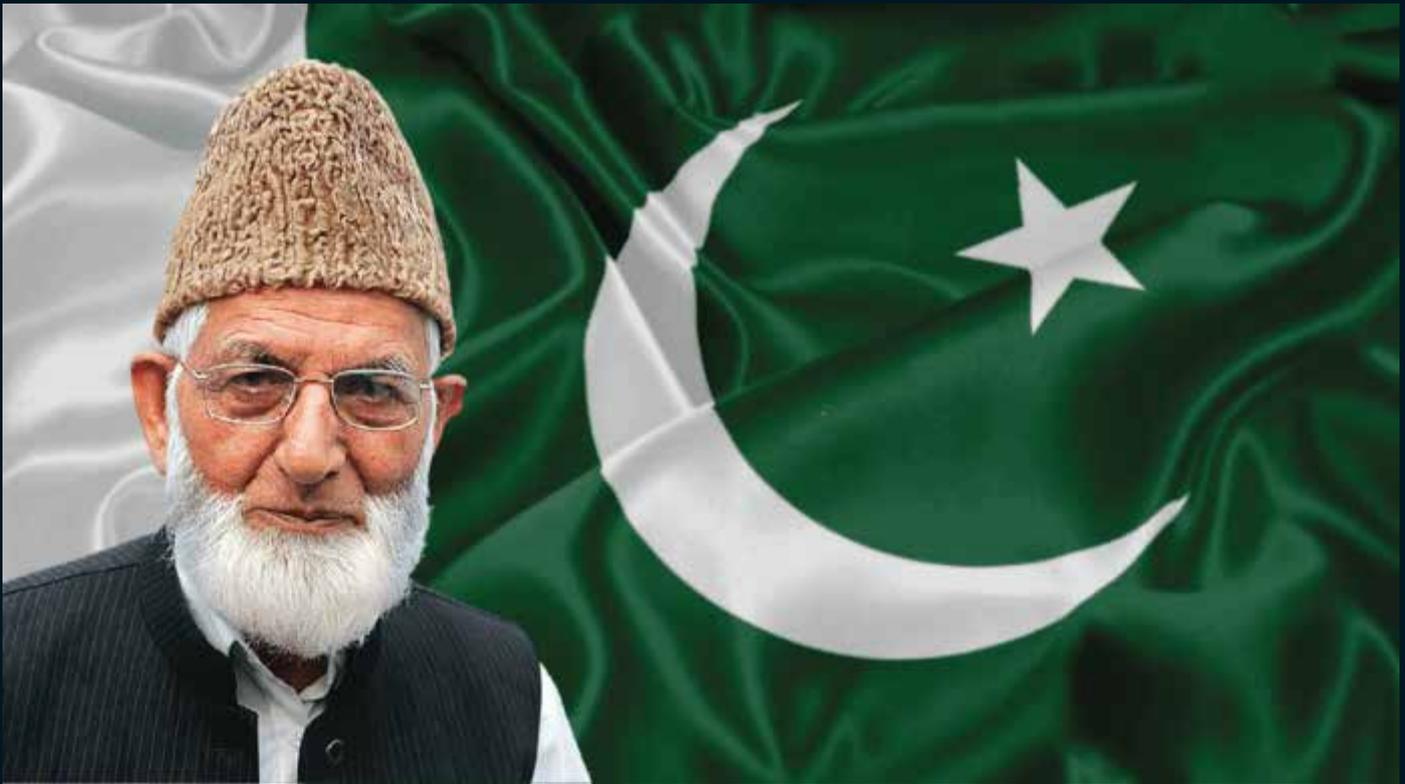
And over the 20-year war, Pakistan has also at the same time provided sanctuaries to Afghan Taliban fleeing the occupying troops and also allowed it to hold Shura meetings in Quetta and Peshawar. And now it is strictly guarding the fenced borders but without disrupting much the essential two-way flows of traffic and trade.

All this has won Pakistan a lot of friends in Afghanistan but these very events have also earned it a lot of bitter enemies in that war torn country.

So, Pakistan's first task should be to bend backwards to create the impression of being completely neutral vis-à-vis the various Afghan factions and groups contesting in the country's political power play. Next, all decisions such as recognizing the new government or helping it in any way should be taken along with the other regional players, preferably via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Also, possibility should be probed for the setting up of a Free Trade Zone comprising the Afghanistan's Southern provinces and Pakistan's KP province. And induction of Afghanistan in the CPEC should also be pursued earnestly.

# Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Pakistani by Self-Determination, Dies at 91

*The towering stature of Geelani, the charismatic resistance leader loved by Kashmiris as a father figure, will forever hold in awe his friends and foes alike.*



**By Tariq Mahmud**

**S**yed Ali Shah Geelani (29<sup>th</sup> September 1929 – 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021) was a Pakistani not by birthright or emigration but by sheer conviction: He was a Pakistani where it was a crime even to favourably mention Pakistan – and he steadfastly remained a Pakistani when being a Pakistani was going out of fashion even in Pakistan.

The titan of Kashmiri resistance breathed his last on 1<sup>st</sup> September 2021. His son Naseem Geelani confirmed the news of his death to the media without specifying a cause. He had been known to struggle with heart and kidney disease for over two decades.

Indian occupiers knew well who Geelani was. They tried to silence his voice and staunch his struggle while he lived – and they tried even harder after he died. They miserably failed. Geelani triumphed in death when minions of occupation, in their desperation to hush his funeral, laid bare the illegitimacy of the Indian rule.

“Death is inevitable, but what followed after our old man passed away, has been horrifying”, his granddaughter Ruwa Shah tweeted. “Aba’s home was a jail for over a decade and now his graveyard is a jail too.”

Born in 1929 in the Zurimanz village in Bandipora tehsil (now called Sopore) of occupied Kashmir’s Baramulla district, Syed Ali Shah Geelani was the son of a landless labourer in the canals department. He received his early education in Sopore before moving to Lahore where he studied at a madrasa attached to the Masjid Wazir Khan and at the Oriental College.

After completing his education, Geelani returned to Kashmir and took up a teaching job. At around the same time, he became active in politics, joining the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference (JKNC) and becoming the secretary of the party unit in Zurimanz.

In 1946, during the Quit Kashmir movement of the National Conference, he joined

the JKNC newspaper Akhbar-i-Khidmat as a reporter – a job that afforded him valuable exposure and experience that would later stand him in good stead as a leader and author. He has left behind more than a score of books, pamphlets, and letters, including the memoirs of his imprisonment.

He joined Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir in 1953 and remained a member of the Islamist party until 2004, when he founded his own Tehreek-e-Hurriyat. He initially participated in electoral politics and was elected to the Legislative Assembly on a Jamaat-e-Islami ticket from his native Sopore constituency three times – in 1972, 1977 and in 1987.

But his discomfort with that line of action grew as more and more Kashmiris became disillusioned with India’s hollow promises for a plebiscite. Eventually, he quit electoral politics as political upheaval gathered steam in the occupied valley. He, however, came round to supporting armed struggle only in 1991, when an armed insurgency had already engulfed Kashmir.



The veteran leader held the Kashmiri's right to self-determination above everything else, and steadfastly opposed any proposal for an 'outside the box' solution to the issue whether floated by India or Pakistan. To him, the only legitimate way to determine the will of the people of Kashmir was a plebiscite as promised by the United Nations in 1948.

In 1993, Geelani cofounded – with Abdul Ghani Lone, Abdul Ghani Bhat, and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq – the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC). He served as the Chairman of the umbrella organisation of pro-independence parties of occupied Kashmir until June 2020.

His relentless and articulate defiance of Indian rule won Geelani massive popularity throughout occupied Kashmir. He led widespread shutdowns and massive public protests throughout his political career.

Geelani was a great friend of Pakistan – and he made no secret of his desire to see Kashmir become part of Pakistan. He will always be remembered as the creator of the popular slogan chanted by Kashmiris at their rallies, 'Ham Pakistani hain, Pakistan hamara hai'.

But he never shied away from criticising the policies of Pakistani leaders. He was bitterly critical of the Pakistani military's Kargil adventure. He appreciated Pakistan for extending moral, diplomatic, and politically support to Kashmiris' just and indigenous struggle for independence, but asserted none of this meant "Pakistan can

take a decision on our behalf'.

Geelani's love for Pakistan was reciprocated by the government and people of Pakistan. The news of his death led to widespread mourning in Pakistan. Leading publications published effusive obituaries and television channels ran sombre packages for him, and in absentia funerals were held for his eternal peace in several cities.

While he lived, the Pakistani High Commission in New Delhi kept in touch with him. In March 2015, a three-member delegation from the High Commission led by the Pakistani High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit paid Geelani a visit at his residence to enquire after his health.

On the occasion, Ambassador Basit assured Geelani of Pakistan's unwavering commitment to the liberation of occupied Kashmir, and extended him an invitation for the Pakistan Day commemoration at the High Commission on 23 March.

On 14 August 2020, the government of Pakistan conferred on Geelani the country's highest civilian award, the Nishan-e-Pakistan.

Geelani's selfless struggle for the emancipation of his people from Indian bondage won him wide respect throughout the Islamic world. In 2015, he was invited to participate in the annual meeting of the foreign ministers of member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Kashmir Contact Group to be held in New York from 27 September.

When unrest broke out in occupied Kashmir in the wake of the custodial death of Burhan Wani in 2016, Geelani wrote to the United Nations listing six confidence building measures India must take to restore normalcy in occupied Kashmir.

Syed Ali Geelani's role as a patriarch of resistance and his love for Pakistan earned him infinite ire of the Indian occupation. He was hounded and persecuted all his life on one pretext or the other.

In 2010, Geelani, along with Indian writer Arundhati Roy among others, was slapped with a raft of charges under a notorious Indian sedition law.

In the wake of the 2019 Pulwama attack, occupation authorities punished Geelani with a penalty of INR 1.44 million and ordered confiscation of nearly 0.7 million in cash under a repressive law targeting possession of foreign exchange.

Even before his home became a veritable jail, a police vehicle was stationed permanently outside his residence to keep tabs on his activities.

Geelani gave his life to spearheading the Kashmiris' struggle for liberation from illegal Indian occupation. It is apt that his death turned the spotlight on the issue once more time, highlighting for the world to see the brutal tactics of the illegal occupation, when India's minions denied him a proper funeral, fearing an upheaval would break out.

*The writer is retired Federal Secretary.*

# Life Under the Taliban

*By and large, the people of Afghanistan are still waiting for the other shoe to drop.*

By Haq Nawaz Khan

The panic symbolised by the chaos shown in viral videos from Kabul's Hamid Karzai International airport is largely over. But the people of Afghanistan are still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Hopes mingle with fears as there is still no clarity as to what life under the Taliban is going to be like, especially for women and those ideologically opposed to the Taliban.

Many in the rural areas say they have felt no change after the Taliban takeover. Their lives continue to follow the set patterns and familiar routines as before. The residents of urban areas have not been so lucky.

People in the urban centres as Kabul and other provincial capitals have been expressing their fears and concerns. Still, there are those who have hopes for a better future. Still others welcome the end to conflict. The war has stopped after decades of bloodshed in Afghanistan.

The majority of the tens of thousands of Afghans who fled the country feared the Taliban's wrath for the jobs they had when the US and international forces were on ground.

At the start, when Taliban took control of Afghanistan, there was extreme anxiety as there was no government in Kabul for three weeks. Everyone was focused to see when the government would be announced and who would be in the government. The people were confused as to what will be the next order of the day. Analysts believe it will take time to bring life to normalcy.

There have since been scattered incidents of violence against women, house-to-house searches by Taliban fighters in the cities as reported in the media. However, the Taliban have contradicted such reports, and assured the people to live with peace as there is a complete amnesty for all.

"Life is not normal for us", an Afghan woman told The Truth International (TTI). "I have been at home since Taliban took over Kabul. Anything can happen, and let's see how life returns to normal.

"I have returned to my job. No one stopped me or questioned me. But the fears and concerns are there." A resident of Kabul, she wished not to be identified.

Taliban leadership has been repeatedly assuring people and the world at large that they would respect women in line with Islamic principles. However, the Taliban have not made the guidelines public for working women or students.

Initially, Taliban instructed universities and educational institutions to bisect classrooms with curtains to segregate male and female students. "So far no direct interference in the campus, but have drawn a curtain in the classrooms," a university teacher in a private university told in a telephone interview.

"Taliban fighters are on their security duties outside the campus. They are not entering the campus, but we do take precautionary measures."



Time alone will tell if the Taliban have really changed now from its previous rule during 1996-2001 or if this is just a myth, far from reality. Supporters of the Taliban in Afghanistan and abroad insist it would not be the replay of late 1990s.

Twenty years have passed since the Taliban last ruled Afghanistan. Time has totally changed, especially in the urban centres of Afghanistan. Many of today's urban young have the advantage of modern education. The young men and women have access to the highly digitalised world, making it difficult for the Taliban to govern Afghanistan.

The Taliban, styled the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, have announced an interim government headed by Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund, a close and trusted aide to the founder of Taliban Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid.

Zabihullah Mujahid, a deputy minister for information and culture, and a key spokesman of Taliban, has stated in his press conference, "We have consultations with everyone in Afghanistan."

One of the deputies to the head of the interim government Abdus Salam Hanafi is ethnically Uzbek and a senior member of the Taliban Rahbari Shura or leadership council. Qari Fasih Uddin, the interim army chief is said to be ethnically Tajik. But there is no one from the previous regime, and women.

The Afghan people were said to be tired of wars, fightings and violence for decades have a hope to see the bloodshed stopped, and there should be peace and security in the country. Some people are happy to have defeated the mighty US led coalition and got their sovereignty back.

Over a 100,000 people were evacuated from Afghanistan until the last troop withdrew from Kabul on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021. The US and its allies are still pushing the Taliban to allow Afghans with the US citizenship, or visa to fly abroad.

The Taliban say there are technical issues on the airports, and only the planes with humanitarian goods or special guests are allowed to land in or take off from the airports around the country.

# The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan 2.0

*A quick look at who is who and what is what in Taliban's Afghanistan.*



By Syed Fakhar KaKaKhel

Eventually, the Taliban announced an interim cabinet. Earlier, there were reports of internal differences in the formation of the government, but looking at the 33-member cabinet, it is clear the Taliban have ironed out any differences by including almost all senior Taliban leaders in the cabinet.

The cabinet includes two Tajiks and one Uzbek minister while the rest are Pashtuns.

Now it is not difficult to have a sense of the future Taliban government and its policies. On the one hand, the Ministry of Women's Welfare has been completely abolished and on the other hand, the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has been established in the old way.

Initial reports said Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar would lead the government but after a long debate, Mullah Mohammad Hassan was given the responsibility. Addressing a press conference in Kabul, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid clarified that these were political figures who would lead the ministries.

It is clear that the ministers are often selected from the important leaders of a winning political party and so did the Taliban. Since Kandahar is the birthplace of the Taliban, a significant number of ministers are from the south.

But that doesn't mean fewer leaders were taken from the rest of Afghanistan. You will see many names of the Haqqani Network in this cabinet.

One thing to consider is that this is a caretaker cabinet, which means that the process of government formation has not been completed yet. Thus it is written with the name of Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund that these cabinet ministers will be caretakers or patrons.

Who will run the state is not clear yet. Therefore, it can be said that the head of the state is now the head of the movement, Amir al-Mu'minin Hebatullah Akhund, who has not yet come to the fore.

Here is a roll call of some of the cabinet members who would play a crucial role not

only in the cabinet but also in shaping the new Afghanistan, followed by a brief look at some of the key issues facing the Taliban.

## Mohammad Hasan Akhund, acting prime minister



Mullah Mohammed Hasan Akhund is a Taliban leader and was a close associate and political adviser to Mullah Omar, the founder of the movement and its first supreme leader.

A member of the group's Supreme Council, he served as deputy foreign minister in their previous regime and was placed on a UN Security Council sanctions list connected to the "acts and activities" of the Taliban.

His name surfaced after a consensus with different leaders who opposed Abdul Ghani Baradar in the driving seat. He has previously served as the Taliban governor of his native Kandahar province.

He also served as foreign minister and deputy prime minister during the Taliban's first stint in power in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

### **Abdul Ghani Baradar, acting deputy prime minister**



Abdul Ghani Baradar was raised in Kandahar. Like most Afghans, he spent his time waging Jihad against Soviet invasion. He is believed to have fought side-by-side with Mullah Omar at some point. The two comrades would go on to found the Taliban movement in the early 1990s during the chaos and corruption of the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal.

After the Taliban government was toppled in 2001 by US-led forces, Baradar is believed to have been among a small group of Taliban members who approached interim leader Hamid Karzai with a potential deal that would have seen the group recognize the new administration.

Arrested in Pakistan in 2010, Baradar was kept in custody until pressure from the United States saw him freed in 2018 and relocated to Qatar. There he was appointed head of the Taliban's political office and oversaw the signing of the troop withdrawal agreement with the US.

### **Mullah Abdus Salam Hanafi, acting second deputy prime minister**



Mullah Abdus Salam Hanafi is an Uzbek from Jawzjan province. He was deputy education minister in the previous Taliban regime. He is known to be a scholarly figure among the Taliban.

### **Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, acting deputy minister for foreign affairs**

Previously he worked as deputy foreign minister under Maulvi Ahmad Mutawakil. He also served in Afghan National Army in his youth. He got training from the military academy in India before becoming a jihadi against Russia.

### **Sirajuddin Haqqani, acting interior minister**



The son of the known commander and Jihad hero from the war against the Soviets, Sirajuddin Haqqani has been dubbed as the deputy leader of the Taliban and head of the powerful Haqqani network.

### **Khalilur Rehman Haqqani, acting minister for refugees**

The younger brother of Haqqani's founder leader Jalaluddin Haqqani and uncle of Siraj Haqqani, he is known to be the most important leader and the political face of the organization. Insiders believe that he is even more important than Siraj Haqqani.

Known for their independence, fighting acumen, and savvy business dealings, the Haqqanis are mainly based in eastern Afghanistan and hold considerable sway over the Taliban's leadership council.

### **Mullah Yaqoob, acting defense minister**

The son of Taliban co-founder Mullah Omar, Mullah Yaqoob heads the group's powerful military commission that oversaw the vast network of field commanders charged with the takeover of Afghanistan as the foreign forces withdrew.

Yaqoob's father enjoyed cult-like status as the Taliban leader, and that potent lineage makes him a unifying figure in the movement.

### **Mawlawi Amir Khan Mutaqi, acting foreign minister**



Originally from Paktia province, Mutaqi calls himself a resident of Helmand. He served as minister of culture and information as well as minister of education in the previous Taliban government. Mutaqi was later sent to Qatar and was appointed a member of the peace commission and negotiation team that held talks with the United States.

While fighting raged for control of the country, his statements and speeches projected a moderate voice, calling on forces holed up in provincial capitals to talk to the group to avoid fighting in urban areas.

## Mullah Taj Meer Jawad, acting minister for general intelligence

Another important leader, Mullah Taj Meer Jawad was the head of intelligence in charge of the eastern zone comprising of three provinces including Nangarhar, Kunar, and Badakhshan.

## Noorullah Noori, acting minister for border affairs

Noorullah Noori served as governor for the province of Balkh in the Taliban's previous regime. He too is from the Haqqani network and spent 12 years in detention at Guantanamo Bay. He was set free in exchange for a US Marine in 2014.

## Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa, acting minister for information and culture



Mullah Khairullah Khairkhwa remained the governor for Herat province in the previous Taliban regime.

## Leadership council

Apart from the cabinet, the leadership council has also been announced with Mullah Muhammad Zakir and other leaders included in the leadership council.

## Policy direction

The Taliban have changed, times have changed, but looking at the cabinet, it is clear that the basis will be the same. The Western world, however, will care how much the Taliban respect basic human rights and the cooperation of the international community will depend on it.

However, there are indications that the Taliban will take care of these rights as far as the leadership is concerned. In response, the international community has also met with the Taliban leadership.

Kabul is now considering different options to open up diplomatic channels. Apart from the Qatar office, it will take time to decide which countries will open Afghan embassies. At the moment, all their attention is on internal issues.

The fall of Panjshir was the long-awaited stage. Panjshir was an area that the Taliban had not been able to conquer in their previous days, so it is being taken as a great achievement.

## Anti-Taliban public demonstrations

As far as public demonstrations are concerned, there are two classes: those who have become accustomed to a particular way of life in the last twenty years, and those who have heard from others about the Taliban regime. Clearly, there is a trust deficit between the new regime and the Afghan public.

The second category is those who are tired of the economic and professional environment. Because for the last several months when the previous government was in power, the officials in the health, education, and other sectors were not getting their salaries and now it is impossible for them to survive because they are facing difficulties in getting the savings in the banks. If the reservations of these two classes are not taken seriously and their problems are not solved, then the problems will continue to grow.

## The absence of technocrats

Talking to different sources in Kabul, the problem they pointed out was the absence

of technocrats. They said that majority of technocrats have fled the country. Without technocrats, the systems and institutions that have been in place for twenty years will not be able to function.

"We have the lists and we are trying to bring them back to their positions and jobs," one source in the new regime said.

## A lack of coordination

As for the rest of the internal issues, the Taliban leadership is hoping that these issues will be resolved in three months. Asked about what happened to journalists recently, the source said there was a lack of coordination.

The Taliban have a military presence in thousands, making it difficult for all commanders to communicate. Because the Taliban currently have military forces in Kabul and other major cities, there are problems. Once the civil institutions start working, then these problems will not exist.

Right now, the expectation of the United States and Pakistan is the stability of Afghanistan. The United States faces international stigma and pressure, while Pakistan has its regional constraints.

In addition, Central Asian states face another threat. Concerns are being raised that the arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan may trigger an Arab Spring kind of movement in the region.

The Afghan Taliban themselves may face a law and order problem. At such a time, if the economic, political, and administrative problems are not resolved, a threat like ISIS in the region could create a problem of law and order in Afghanistan.

Referring to the cleric who was first abducted and then killed a few days ago, Kabul sources said he had considerable influence in religious and public circles. Sources also said that he was recruiting for ISIS in Kabul. That is why the Taliban government was blamed for his death, but the Taliban has denied the allegations.

The suicide bombing at Kabul Airport and the subsequent death of the cleric show that the threat is slowly increasing. The same threat has been very often mentioned by China, Russia, and Iran.

# Is Afghanistan Ready to be the Next Pariah State?

*Will the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan bite the bullet or will it bite the bait?*

By Azmat Mumtaz Saqib

Since the adoption of Universal Character of Human Rights by the UN in 1945, it has become a convention that any state that does not follow it in governance becomes a pariah state.

In 1979, Iran adopted its version of Shariah law and in 2021 Taliban of Afghanistan have vowed to adopt Islamic Shariah for governance. The nascent Islamic Republic embraced a concept of Human Rights based on the Shiite interpretation of the Islamic Shariah – and became a pariah state.

Afghanistan under the Taliban will likewise become a pariah state if it shuns the Western ideals and embraces the Shariah, unacceptable to the world dominant powers and the UN.

Throughout history, whenever a state defies the dominant powers and adopts a system of governance other than their approved models, that state has to face hardships of similar nature.

Hence Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's present hardships and what it will face in near future is nothing new in history. Unfortunately the defeated superpower of the time follows the same heavy handed approach as seen in history earlier.

American war of independence (1776-1783) was Britain's Vietnam. They were fighting a war 3,000 miles away at the end of a very long supply line. Britain considered George Washington as 'traitor' and the Continental Army of freedom fighters 'a band of rebels' who were not subject to the laws of war.

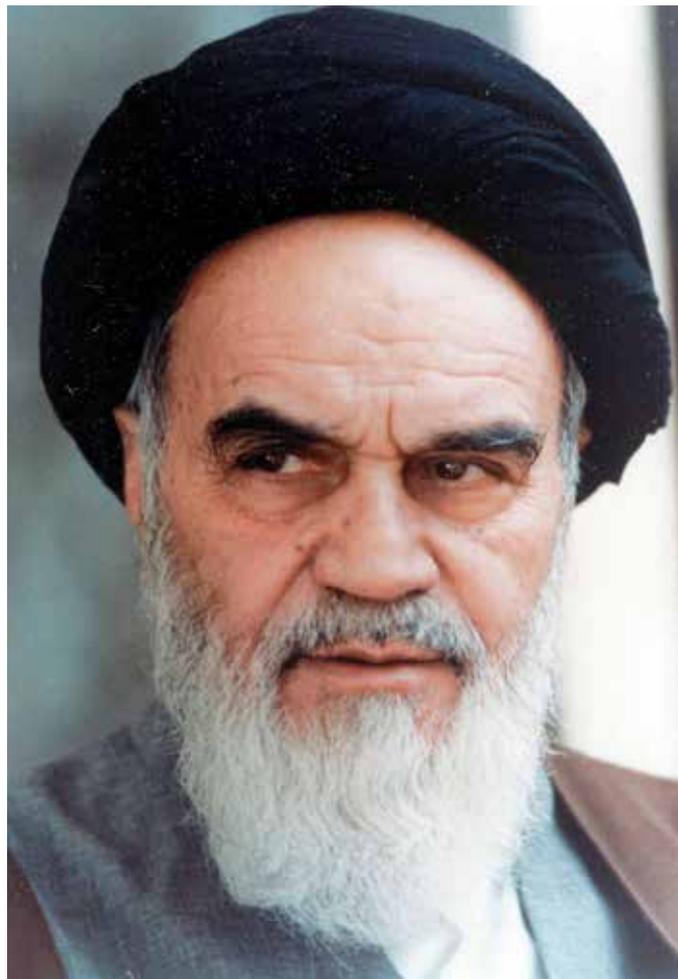
When fighting came to an end, US economy was in shambles. Americans adopted a democratic form of government, a pariah in a World of kingdoms. Exports to Britain were restricted and British law prohibited trade with Britain's remaining sugar colonies in the Caribbean.

British manufactured goods were cheap compared to local American ones contributing to post war economic slump. The rich and established families in business and politics (mostly loyalists) left the new republic, further weakening the nascent republic.

Around 70,000 of about 400,000 loyalists immigrated north (to present day Canada) and south to areas under British rule. Economic problems facing the young republic deeply touched the lives of most Americans in the 1780s.

Chairman Mao Tse Tung in 1949 defeated the Chinese Nationalist army under Chiang Kai-Shek and adopted socialism as state governance model, again a pariah state as seen by the US and the West. US-backed Nationalists fled to Taiwan. America supported and recognised the government in Taiwan as the legitimate Chinese state.

Washington viewed China as a satellite of Moscow and advised its allies not to accord it diplomatic recognition but to form a common front against it. The US imposed a trade embargo and sued its allies to join in.



Stalin conveyed to Mao that he did not want China to risk a war with United State of America. For this reason, Mao's moderate stand towards the US was a matter of tact and not real bonhomie with Washington. But all friendly gestures from China were rebuffed by the US.

To stem the communist expansion in South Asia, Americans funded French in their war against North Vietnam and also supplied arms to Chiang Kai-Shek against China.

In 1950, Russia signed a Treaty of Friendship with China and loaned USD 300 million and also provided support against Japan. In return, China had to recognise the Soviet occupation of several Chinese territories, as well as of Mongolia. China eventually distanced itself from this Russia dominated relationship in later years.

In 1975, after a long and bloody war, the US left South Vietnam, which was promptly taken over by North Vietnam resulting in the unification of Vietnam under Communism. The US imposed a trade embargo and did not recognise the Vietnamese government until 1995.



In 1978, Vietnam's became estranged with China, its original backer against the US. It invaded Cambodia under Khmer Rouge in 1978. Vietnam installed a puppet ruler and pulled out.

All the past revolutionary societies of US, China and Vietnam faced common issues of devastated economy after prolonged war, polarised population (pro- and anti-revolution) and poverty of rural population especially farmers. All these countries were demonised by the superpower of the time, expecting the revolutionary zeal to die down with time.

In February 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini landed in Tehran triumphant. The Shah of Iran, fully backed by the US, was forced to flee Tehran. Feeling humiliated since its influence was vanishing from Iran, the US froze Iran's USD 11 billions worth of Iranian assets, slapped a trade embargo, and supported all sorts of uprisings in Iran.

The Iranian revolution was the first of its kind in a Muslim country in modern era. The revolutionary government adopted a confrontational approach with the West and executed the previous regime's collaborators whom it considered criminal.

Post-revolution resistance groups, uprisings, and the Iran-Iraq war were labelled by the nascent regime as ant-revolutionary forces backed by Western Imperialists. Within months of the revolutionary takeover of February 1979, Ayatollah Bazargani, the religious leader of Iran's Turkic population, was side-lined after developing serious differences with Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader.

A bomb blast in Tehran targeting parliament killed 70 of top clergy. Dr Ayatollah Mutahiri, an ideologue, philosopher, and intellectual

behind revolution was killed by a suicide bomber. Between 1979 and 1981, Kurdish uprising in western Iran gave the young revolutionary government in Tehran a tough time.

In September 1980, Iraq attacked Iran and the prolonged war ended in a stalemate in 1988. During all these years, experienced professionals and bureaucrats were leaving Iran.

In November 1979, US embassy was taken over by university students. The occupation lasted for 444 days. During those days Iran had to face severe sanctions from the West. Hence revolutionary Iran had to face and overcome all these challenges before its system started functioning properly.

So, the Taliban of Afghanistan will also have to face their share of problems if they want to follow a state governance model based on Islamic Shariah instead of constitutional democracy. Afghanistan will have its share of uprisings (Panjshir), bomb blasts killing leadership, dissension in the ruling Taliban leadership, trade sanctions, diplomatic recognition withheld especially by the US and its allies.

Some states will conspire to push the new Taliban government to a collapse. A protracted war with a neighbour or another country is a real possibility. At any stage, if the Taliban came to terms with the world dominant powers, they will be welcomed.

Otherwise, they may face all the similar problems faced by US in 1783, China in 1949, Vietnam in 1975, and Iran in 1979. If they persist, a new Sunni Islamic order may be established in Afghanistan with the possibility of its influence spreading into neighbouring Sunni states.

## Can the Taliban Walk the Walk of Peace?

*Afghanistan is war-weary and so is the region, but the road to peace is long and fraught.*



By Dr Ashraf Ali

The triumphant entry of the Afghan Taliban in capital Kabul on 15 August 2021 took the world by surprise. The Taliban, no doubt, registered remarkable victories at the battlefronts but despite their stunning victories on the ground, the group is faced with a number of challenges ahead on how to run the affairs of the state.

Some of the most frequently asked questions are how to govern the war-torn country, how to boost the shattered economy, how to rebuild the militancy-hit country, how to bring the brilliant brains back home and how to relocate millions of IDPs.

However, by far the most important question at this point is how to maintain the law-and-order situation in a country that saw decades of wars, militancy, and terrorism.

The Taliban, while inking a deal with US administration on 29 February 2020 assured the international community they would disassociate themselves from the internationally designated terrorist organization Al Qaida.

They also assured the international community that their soil would not be used for any terrorist activity following the NATO forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan. Now it is time for the Taliban to deliver on those commitments.

Afghanistan is host to dozens of terrorist organizations. However, the presence of the Pakistani banned terrorist organizations on Afghan soil remains a major challenge for the Taliban future administrative set up to deal with.

The Pakistan based militant outfit TTP was forced to shift its bases to the neighbouring Afghanistan in the wake of the Zarb-e-Azb military operation in June 2014. After finding sanctuaries in the country's eastern provinces of Kunar and Nooristan, the group was able to reorganize itself.

However, the group gained momentum after the reunion of its splinter groups – Jamat ul Ahrar (JuA) and Hizb ul Ahrar (HuA) in the parent organization TTP in August this year under its Amir Mufti Noor Wali. The group has been hitting Pakistani installations from

across the border in the past.

The Taliban's takeover of Kabul is seen by many as another encouraging factor for the group's potential strength. The release of TTP's former deputy Amir, Mullah Faqeer Muhammad alongside other war prisoners from Bagram Airbase after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul generated heated debates in Pakistani media about the future of the Afghanistan based Pakistani militant organization.

A considerable rise in the target killing was witnessed in former FATA during the current year. According to media reports at least 45 people have been targeted killed so far only in North Waziristan during the current year.

The rise in the militant activities in North and South Waziristan and Bajaur districts in the recent past is said to be the direct outcome of the reorganization of the almost defunct militant group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

In an interaction, the Bajaur based tribal

elders and business community members revealed every other businessman has been receiving unknown calls from the extortionists and criminals. Kidnapping for ransom was on the rise.

“If one fails to pay the amount demanded by bhatta mafia (extortionist), he has to face the consequences”, said Sheikh Jehanzada, an influential tribal elder and nationalist political activist in Bajaur who survived two rocket attacks at his house in the recent past. “You would either be kidnapped and tortured or killed”.



The Janikhel tribe from the former Frontier Region (FR) Bannu organized a sit in after the assassination of Malik Gul Naseeb Khan on 31 May by unknown assailants. The tribesmen came out on the streets to demand the arrest of the killers immediately after the assassination of the influential malik.

The protesters refused to bury the slain chieftain, and vowed that they would continue the protest until the killers were punished. The sit in continued for consecutive 28 days to attract social and political activists and human rights defenders.

On the 24th day, the protesters started a long march towards Islamabad but the authorities’ erected barricades at Tochi Bridge to stop their advance on the federal capital. As a result, the clashes between police and protesting mob left one man killed and dozens more injured.

As per the plan the protesters had to move on to Islamabad to protest in front of the Parliament, then move on to Supreme Court of Pakistan before marching towards General Headquarters (GHQ), Rawalpindi

and later the office of the United Nations (UNO) in Islamabad but the protest was called off after they were assured of arresting and duly punishing the perpetrators.

This was the second such incident during the last few months. Earlier on 21 March 2021, mutilated bodies of four teenage boys were found in Janikhel area. Two of them had been beheaded, while the remaining two had been shot dead.

Aged between 13 and 17, the youngsters had disappeared without trace some three weeks before after going on a hunt.

The evil nexus – involving TTP, ISIS and small time terrorist organizations such as BLA and FLF – is a potential threat to the regional stability, some of the security analysts believe.

On the other hand, the rising terrorist activities of ISIS in Central, Northern and specially Eastern Afghanistan pose another serious threat to the regional stability. This perception got credence after the bloody attacks in Kabul during the evacuation of the NATO forces from Afghanistan.

The triple attacks by the group targeting the airport in the high security zone left over 70 people dead including 13 withdrawing US troops. The ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.

IS-K exists in small cells with majority of them in Kunar and Nangrahar provinces in the east of Afghanistan that shares a border with Pakistan. They were also reportedly establishing pockets near the borders of Central Asian countries – Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Hundreds of IS-K prisoners were also amongst those who were released from Afghan jails in the recent Taliban move.

The group draw its ranks from Pakistani and Central Asian fighters. After the Taliban takeover of Kabul, it is widely believed that the group may make a global call for intensifying war against the Taliban by dubbing them as traitors who betrayed the cause of Islam. Some believe they may mount guerrilla operations.

TTP and ISIS have long been lived together in Afghanistan. Some of the IMU followers have also joined ISIS. Some of the analyst fears the disgruntled elements from the Afghan society along with members of the former Afghan National Army can also join the evil nexus to form a united front against the ruling Taliban.

Mr. Shahab Al Muhajir, the head of the IS-K has introduced a lot of changes in the structure and format of the organization to equip and organize the groups along new lines. The Taliban have established a unit called Badri313 to fight the group.

At the same time Taliban have to cope with the challenge of the presence of sleeper cells of Pakistan based separatist organizations – the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF).

The Taliban kept their word by addressing the concerns of China on the question of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM),

of Russia and the Central Asian States on the presence of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and of Iran on the activities of Iran based Jaish Al Adl in Afghanistan.

This is no doubt a big challenge for the Taliban to take action against their long-time allies who have lived and struggled together against a common enemy. But the Taliban have a long list of compulsions and this is one of them.

The Taliban need international recognition for legitimacy, funds for running the state institutions, aid for rehabilitation of the displaced communities, expertise for running the affairs of the state, and technical assistance and foreign investment.

To meet these challenges, the Taliban must climb down from their harsh and maximal-

ist stand and make some compromises, especially concerning women issues, fundamental human rights, and freedom of the press.

In turn, the international community must ride to the rescue of the nation on the brink of disaster.

In view of the harsh memories of their five years rule (1996-2001), the anti-democratic, conservative and pre-scientific outlook of the Taliban worries many at home and abroad. Their recent statements speak for their change of mind. However, it is yet to be seen how the Taliban translate their words into action.

On the other hand, to what extent can the international community honour its economic commitments also remains a million-dollar question.

During the two decades of their stay in Afghanistan, the US spent trillions of dollars raising, training and equipping the Afghan national army and building socioeconomic and political institutions.

Abandoning Afghanistan at this stage would mean an open invitation to the international terrorist organizations to arrive in Afghanistan. Since US is largely responsible for the current situation in Afghanistan, it must join hands with international community to help Afghanistan out of this crisis.

The international community should not repeat the blunders it committed after the withdrawal of USSR in 1980s. And last but not least, regional actors must refrain from meddling in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. In this context China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Pakistani merit specific mentions.

On the other hand, Pakistani should maintain a higher level of commitment towards Afghanistan's peace and stability. This would not only earn Pakistan a good name in the eyes of the Afghans who believe Pakistan, still following its policy of strategic depth, is responsible for all the chaos, disruption and disorder in today's Afghanistan but also help wash away the label of a foul player for its dubious role in the past.

Sincere efforts to help build peace in Afghanistan should help Pakistan a) secure

its eastern borders b) earn a good reputation as a peace builder in the eyes of the international community and c) mend its fractured ties with Afghanistan.

Looking at the events unfolding in Afghanistan, some analysts foretell a dark future for the former tribal areas of KP. But those keeping an eye on the recent developments in Afghanistan and specially the ongoing peace endeavours in Doha, Qatar interpret the situation differently.

The Afghan Taliban getting a major share in the future administrative set up would come as a good news for the Afghanistan based Pakistani Taliban who have been their natural allies.



However, there is room for optimism that the Taliban, now more mature and with good knowledge of ground realities and demands of the international environment, in compliance with the February 2020 agreement, would make all possible efforts to deny the TTP sanctuary in Afghanistan. This should greatly help them build good working relationships with Pakistan alongside other members of the international community.

The Pakistani Taliban could either be accommodated in the future administrative set up of Afghanistan or may be rehabilitated in the Afghan society if they face challenges in getting relocated in Pakistani society. It is pertinent to mention here that people from the tribal regions own a lot of properties in Logar, Ghazni, Gardez and Maidan wardak districts in Afghanistan. Three of the top political managers in the President Ashraf Ghani led team were from North Waziristan.

Alternatively, Pakistan can also engage with the TTP. They are also sons of the soil who went wrong after developing a sense of frustrations and deprivations over the years. The country can devise a strategy for rehabilitating at least the soft-core militants into the society who want escape from the militant ranks of their parent terrorist organizations.

Pakistan can benefit from the experiences of Sri Lanka and Saudi Arabia in this regard. The former FATA and Baluchistan have similar stories. The leadership should also engage with the BLA and BLF to address their genuine demands.

Those elements who want to fight back,

Pakistan in collaboration with the Taliban government will require to enhance security arrangements along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border besides enhanced surveillance to monitor, track, and arrest those militants.

ISIS is a common enemy. To eliminate and kick them out of the region, the Afghan authorities in collaboration with the regional actors can launch coordinated efforts against this common enemy by intelligence sharing and launching joint operations.

The international community and specially the regional actors should demonstrate sincerity, honesty and dedication to the greater cause – the promotion of peace in the war-ravaged region. If we miss this golden opportunity once again, not just Afghanistan but the entire region will suffer the consequences.

# How Sincere is Taliban's General Amnesty?

*The Taliban proclaimed a general amnesty but they are executing and torturing people in Afghanistan, says activist Nilofar Ayoubi.*



By Zainab Umer

Afghanistan's Taliban rode to power promising an inclusive political dispensation and followed up their takeover of Kabul by announcing a general amnesty for all Afghans, but it is increasingly clear their actions do not match their words.

"The general amnesty announcement was just to make a good picture for the international community, especially the media", says Afghan activist Nilofar Ayoubi, who evacuated to Poland along with her family including small children.

"People like the media and yourself believe that they have announced general amnesty and they are sticking by their words but they don't", she told The Truth International (TTI) from Poland over telephone.

"There have been so many executions and there is no news channel to cover it because every news channel is being controlled by the Taliban."

Reports from Afghanistan have indeed been rife with accounts of violence including executions and beatings.

A Reuters report last week said two Afghan journalists had been beaten in police custody this week after covering a protest by women in Kabul where they were detained by the Taliban.

"Zaki Daryabi, founder and editor-in-chief of the Etilaat Roz newspaper, shared images on social media of two male reporters, one with large, red welts across his lower back and legs and the other with similar marks on his shoulder and arm", the report said.

According to a report carried by The Friday Times last week, Taliban's announcement of general amnesty seems not to apply to Hazaras.

At the receiving end of the Taliban's raw deal are marginalised groups like Hazaras, women, activists, artists, and intellectuals.

Nilofar Ayoubi is one of the thousands of women who have built thriving, prosperous lives for themselves in Afghanistan over the past two decades. However, after the fall of Kabul, Ayoubi feels her success and her independent personality has become a millstone around her neck.

In the beginning, the Afghan activist was reluctant to leave her country and abandon everything it has given her – property, wealth, business. In the final reckoning, however, the safety of her three small children trumped every other consideration.

During an interview Ayoubi explained the

terrifying circumstances surrounding her escape from Afghanistan.

"After multiple attempts, I succeeded to cross the sewage gate where the suicide bombing happened two or three days ago so the day I was able to cross the gate I had to wait in the sewage for five hours for the [Polish] troops to rescue me."

The journey to the gate was excruciating as Nilofar was accompanied by her family including small children.

"Taliban broke my nose trying to keep me from passing the gate. My husband was hit several times by the Taliban and my kids were hurt. The crowd was enormous. On occasions, we were on the verge of being trampled by the crowd and the other time the Taliban would come and hit us to try to stop us from reaching the gate. And I only left for the airport after getting confirmation of being added to the list of the Polish government and they called us to come to this gate and they gave us some signals and signs so the Polish troops would recognize us."

While waiting for the Polish troops to arrive, Ayoubi had a feeling she was in the middle of a zombie apocalypse where everyone is running for their lives and being

trampled by everyone else in the process. She explained that there were thousands of people behind the gate which made it close to impossible to even get near it.

“And as I said, after three days of multiple failed attempts, being hit to having my nose broken by the Taliban and then waiting for five hours inside the sewage holding up the sign for the Polish troops to recognize me and take us in and we finally succeeded.” Ayoubi said.

Poland had about a 100 people on an evacuation list. The country had pledged to offer places on its planes to other people trying to leave Afghanistan from Kabul airport, where chaotic scenes have caused problems for some evacuation efforts. “About 50 people were evacuated from Afghanistan, they are now safe in the care of the Polish consulate in Uzbekistan,” Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Marcin Przydacz told reporters.

To the terrified Afghan refugees who had just left their entire lives back in Afghanistan for fear of the Taliban, the Polish troops felt like angels. Explaining the relief she felt as the Polish troops arrived, Ayoubi said: “To be honest as soon as the Polish troops pulled our hands we immediately felt safe again, there was still a fear and I wasn't going to get excited until I was in the plane and outside of Afghanistan.

“In Afghanistan since the collapse of Kabul into the hands of Taliban and the collapse of Afghanistan, everything was changing by the second so you could not predict your next minute or second, you could not guarantee anything.”

“And then again when we were boarded in an army flight, we landed in Uzbekistan and then boarded in a chartered flight and from the beginning the staff was very nice, just trying to comfort us and give snacks, food, anything needed for the kids and that was a very nice welcome.”

After the evacuation of Ayoubi and her fellow refugees, they were sheltered in a safe space and provided basic necessities. Ayoubi showed her gratitude towards the Polish troops and explained how Afghans finding refuge in other countries were not as fortunate as her.

She stated: “The Polish troops and the

Polish people are very, very nice and generous, and have been generous to us and everyone. Right now we are living in the middle of the forest in a camp which is a quite beautiful place and everyone has their own small cottages and privacy and every three and a half hours they check on us, they ask if we need anything, anything means absolutely anything.

“They provided clothes, food, diapers for the kids, shampoo, anything you would need in a house. So three times food, they are trying their best to find our taste and make food that matches our taste. They are doing all they can and they are being very, very nice.



“And seriously I could not imagine such a warm and nice welcome. Because I hear from my other friends, activists in the media who are in other countries' camps. They don't have such a nice welcome or such nice behaviour.”

“Right now we have been refugees all over the world, I mean my friends, the bright people of Afghanistan, the elite, the entrepreneurs, the activists, the media. So we are all over the world and we get to talk to each other.

“And I think in most of the places refugees are not being treated well they are not.....How do I say this? Either the camps are not sanitary.... They have issues. Maybe I was lucky to reach Poland and have such a nice welcome and also get to stay in such a good place and have privacy and everything.

“But it has turned out like that, especially the refugees who fled to neighbouring countries, their situations are way worse. Unfortunately, this is a situation which was forced on us and now we have to go through all these bad behaviours or aggressive behaviours which are seriously not appreciated in such a hard time for us.”

Leaving behind the lives that these Afghans had built for them has not been an easy task. Ayoubi still hopes for a miracle to free Afghanistan from the clutches of the Taliban so she can start over in her homeland.

She says: “I love my property, businesses, my wealth, my home, my everything. I

seriously don't want to talk about this. Anyways let's just follow our destiny I guess. For now I am just trying to raise my voice for the people who are left behind and for my country.

“All my focus is on how to raise my voice and at least try to make the country and the international community so they don't recognize the Taliban as a government. That's what we all are going to do, we activists and we the new generation of Afghanistan who have fled the country, we are doing our best to protest and fight so at least the Taliban are not recognized as a government. No matter which country we are in we will do our part and fight for it.”

The Afghans who have escaped are doing their best to let the world know the current situation of Afghanistan and still hope to one day return to their country without having to look behind their shoulder every step of the way.

# The Terrible Run on Flights Out of Afghanistan

*If you think the Afghans desperate to board flights bound for the West were an aberration, think again.*



By Mahmood Jan Babar, Kabul

It was August 25, a few days after Ashraf Ghani's flight from Kabul and the Taliban's assumption of the city's control well before the time of their expected arrival. On this day I left for Kabul from Peshawar via Torkham.

To my utter surprise, within thirty minutes of crossing into Afghanistan, my Pakistani WhatsApp number started buzzing: Broadcasters from India, Spain, and Pakistan, some of them known and most of unknown by me, were bombarding me with calls and messages.

As if spoke to the callers, I realized that the departure of Afghan journalists from Kabul had created some space for people like me. So, these institutions were looking for people with knowledge and skills to understand their work and needs. However, I told them plainly I could commit anything until I understood the situation on the ground.

Late in the afternoon, I reached the house of my host near Kabul's Hamid Karzai International airport. The calls from international media agencies and the viral

videos of the 16 August incidents of Afghans falling from the US planes had aroused my curiosity about the goings on at the airport.

"I have to go to the airport", I told my host after putting away my luggage. Being a very hospitable Pashtun, he took me to the airport which was just a few minutes' drive away. We were outside the airport among the multitudes gathered there, hoping to be evacuated by the United States. Among them were men as well as women, aged people and children, sitting and lying everywhere.

While walking between them, I was constantly examining where bathrooms and food facilities were for these people. Many among them were sick. Most of the people looking to be evacuated from Afghanistan seemed educated and spoke English along with Dari (Persian).

I tried to find an answer to the question as to why they so desperate to leave Afghanistan in a hurry. No one was willing to tell us about their profession and business in Afghanistan – until my host was able to

draft the services of a friend who knew some of them.

When we finally sat down and struck a conversation, I found that most of these people had served foreign forces in Afghanistan over the last twenty years as interpreters or local guides.

Also among the lot were locals who had seen better times in Afghanistan before the Taliban first came to power, meaning their families were in good positions and lost it after the Taliban arrived.

A third category was educated people who had worked in various government departments and were disheartened since the end of Ashraf Ghani's rule, and they found their future dark in this second round of Taliban.

Finally, there were those who wanted to emigrate to a Western country, and finding the open invitation by the United States useful, they had arrived in throngs.

Some of them were shaken by the people falling from the aircraft. They could not imagine why an aircraft would take off with

people clinging to its wings or landing gear, who ended up dying in spectacularly tragic fashion. Could they not wait to remove the people bodily before take-off?

All of them knew that the purpose of taking them away was to prevent the Taliban from tapping their skills and thus be unable to run the country – and they were still willing to go. Some of them believed their lives were not in danger, and yet they were at the airport, hoping to board a flight out of Afghanistan.

Sitting there in the middle of them, I remembered the videos from 16 August, when the people gathered at Kabul Airport were clinging to the planes as if it were not planes but buses they could hitch a ride on.

But the people gathered at Kabul Airport were not only those who were present in Afghanistan or their lives were in danger, among them were those who had lived in Pakistan for many years.

I remembered an incident that happened to me in Peshawar just the day before. I met an Afghan from Kabul named Farooq in front of Yousafzai Market in Hayatabad, a modern town in Peshawar. He is one of the many other Afghan refugees living in Pakistan who do business in Peshawar and live in Hayatabad.

Hayatabad is the first housing development of Peshawar as you travel from Afghanistan via Khyber District. Apart from the big government hospitals, there are private hospitals popular with patients from Afghanistan.

Farooq was happy in Peshawar, and whenever there was talk of returning to Afghanistan, he would laughingly touch his ears in a gesture of mock compunction and say, “Now our body will go to Kabul.”

But as soon as we met on 24 August, he said to me, “Will you help me so that I can get my family to America or Europe from Kabul Airport?” I reminded him that he had always refuse to go to Afghanistan.

Now that this has happened, he said, planes are flying from Kabul Airport taking people to the United States and Europe without travel documents. Now this gentleman holds British citizenship.

He said this was an opportunity for him to take his whole family to the UK, which

would be an impossible task otherwise. I told him I was travelling to Kabul in a couple of days and I would do something for him, and then we both left each other.

I heard from Farooq’s voice later. He told me he had arrived in Kabul, US planes were not picking up Afghan civilians anymore. He reached Kabul two days after the blast at Kabul Airport, in which around 200 people were killed and the air operation was restricted to foreigners only.

He is now in Kabul along with his family, waiting for an opportunity to board a plane to a Western country.

Farooq is not alone in his plight. Thousands of Afghans have descended on Kabul and its surrounding areas in the hope of catching a flight bound for the West.



Hazrat Usman is also from Kabul. The only words I heard from again and again since I met him in Kabul as a Pakistani journalist are, “You are a great and famous journalist. You must be very well known. Please tell your people (at the Pakistani embassy) to drive me and my two brothers to the airport and put us on a flight for America”. I stopped taking him seriously after a while.

I asked him, “You have a good business here. Why must you get out of here?” But he would not listen to any of it. He was eventually able to get in any embassy car to the airport, and board a plane.

Hazrat Usman’s other brother owned a large plaza comprising twenty-eight flats which he has rented out, collecting a healthy sum every month. But he too followed agents all day prepared to pay up to a million Pakistani rupees, hoping to draft their help to board a plane.

These were the days when Ashraf Ghani had left Kabul and the Taliban had to enter the city of Kabul and take over the power. There was uncertainty everywhere. No one knew what would happen next.

Tens of thousands of public servants had gone without their salaries for the past few months due to a tiff between Parliament and President Ashraf Ghani on certain issues. Ashraf Ghani’s sudden exit from the country had further complicated their situation.

The Taliban were present in the streets and some government buildings inside Kabul, but they were not ready to believe that the country was officially their responsibility.

Americans and their allies were confined to the airport and it seemed that at least initially, they had intended to take along as many educated and skilled Afghans as

possible, including every man and woman who had helped them in the past.

There were warnings of a terrorist threat from ISIS targeting the gathered multitudes at and around the airport. Such concerns were also being expressed by US officials and many others, but no one paid attention – until the city’s atmosphere erupted on the evening of 26 August and more than 150 funerals were held the next day.

I initially thought Farooq and Hazrat Usman were the odd ones who were desperate to leave Afghanistan, but I was mistaken. I found out during the days spent in Kabul towards the end of August that every person in Afghanistan, especially the youth, wanted to leave, and for that they were willing to pay a price.

It seemed the only people not eager to leave Afghanistan at that point in time were the Taliban and their supporters.

# Hazards of the Afghan Situation

*The Afghan imbroglio is fraught with hazards of untold hardship and violence for the whole region.*

By Umer Farooq

During his tenure as President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari went out of the way to support the embattled Syrian President Bashar-al-Asad as he was struggling to survive against Sunni militant groups in the Syrian Civil War.

The reason was simple, the Pakistani government itself was struggling hard in the face of the rising threat of militancy which left an impression in the international diplomatic circles that the Pakistan Taliban posed a threat to the survival of the Pakistani government—though there never was any such chance in reality.

President Zardari gave special significance to the possibility that Pakistani diplomacy should not lean in favour of groups attempting to topple the legitimate government in Damascus – although there were tempting trends in the international diplomatic circles to support the groups that happened to be on the right side of international media.

In the event, Pakistan stuck with the policy

of supporting the government in Syria with the view that any weakening of its resolve will create problems of legitimacy for the Pakistani government itself.

Fast forward to August 2021: The Afghan Taliban, an armed militant group with no political and legal legitimacy, stormed the capital city of Afghanistan in the middle of the month and dislodged a democratically elected government of President Ashraf Ghani.

The Pakistani foreign policy establishment blindly jumped into the trap: Although the militant threat to the Pakistani government has been decimated through military operations, militant organizations can regroup at any time given the changing security environment in our neighbourhood.

Militant groups challenging the legitimacy of the Pakistani government still exist, and theoretically speaking, the threat to the legitimacy of the government in Islamabad is as potent or as weak as it was during the times of Syrian civil war.

Pakistan's former senior diplomat, Ambassador Abdul Basit disagrees. "I remember the President taking this position on the Syrian civil war, but the Afghan situation is totally different from the Syrian situation", said in response to the queries of The Truth International (TTI).

"In Afghanistan Taliban government was dislodged through use of force and now they have regained power. The Taliban never recognized Ashraf Ghani as legitimate government".

His attention was drawn to the fact that Pakistan has always recognized Ashraf Ghani as legitimate President. "Well Pakistan has always recognized anyone who is in control of Kabul" said the Ambassador, adding there are very potent voices inside Pakistani society who think the Taliban's militant takeover of Kabul has negative implications for Pakistan's political system.

Nevertheless there appears to be a sense of elation in Islamabad's power corridors over



the victory of Taliban in Afghanistan. Self-congratulatory statements, which reflect a sense of vindication, are coming out of Islamabad. There seems to be a palpable sense of euphoria over the fact that India has been completely excluded from the power game in Afghanistan.

But this is not the end of Pakistan's Afghan worries. The Pakistani military and foreign policy establishment is clearly looking at three scenarios which could prove to be security nightmares as well as a huge humanitarian crises for the country. These are:

a) A civil War in Afghanistan or political unrest, which can send a large numbers of refugees to Pakistan

b) A humanitarian crisis including possibility of large scale spread of Covid-19 and food shortages due to drought again can send large numbers of refugees to Pakistan

c) Spoiler's violence, as western security experts have feared, in which hostile intelligence agencies can use remnants of terror groups for terror attacks and sectarian violence inside Pakistan.

There seems to be little resistance to Taliban's military victories inside Afghanistan. One city after another fell as the Taliban advanced militarily in every part of the country.

However, an old pattern of ethnic minorities rallying around Vice President of former Afghan regime Amrullah Saleh and son of Ahmed Shah Masood mustering material and man to put up a resistance from the north of the country appears to be a glimmer of hope for anti-Taliban forces across Afghanistan.

A largescale civil war seems unlikely in Afghanistan at present, but the possibility of political unrest cannot be ruled out. There were several political protests in Afghanistan's cities after the Taliban took over government powers in Kabul.

These protests were peaceful in nature, although the Taliban did resort to use of forces to quell these protests in some cases.

At present civil war in Afghanistan seems unlikely primarily because none of the neighbours of Afghanistan seems to be in the mood of feeding a rebellion against

Taliban. The regional response to Taliban's military takeover of government in Afghanistan has been mostly supportive.

Iran has described withdrawal of US troops and subsequent events as good omen for the national reconciliation in Afghanistan. Russia does not perceive any threat to itself or to its Central Asian client states from Taliban regaining state power or their military victories. China wants to develop diplomatic relations with the Taliban government. And people in Pakistani state machinery are euphoric over their "strategic assets" taking over the reign of power in Afghanistan.



This evolving regional response is highly favourable to Taliban primarily because in the past civil wars in Afghanistan have always been fuelled by one or more of the neighbours of this war torn country providing weapons, training and finances to the one of the other side in the internal conflict.

Now it seems all the neighbours are happy with the rise of the Taliban as the dominant military force in the country.

A report by Washington based think-tank, CSIS under the title "Taliban Takeover: Humanitarian Implications and Recommendations for the United States" conjures the possibility of large scale violence in post-withdrawal Afghanistan in the following words.

"Although some experts argued that a form of "truce" had been reached between U.S. forces and Taliban fighters, by the end of 2020 Afghanistan was experiencing sustained armed violence that has persisted throughout 2021.

"Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) showed a substantial increase in violent confrontations and armed attacks throughout the country, with violent confrontations in 29 of 34 provinces, especially in rural areas. The impact on the civilian population was substantial.

"The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reports that civilian casualties between January and June 2021 increased by 50 percent from the same time in 2020. In fact, humanitarian and civilian protection advocates had raised the alarm about the rise in violent confrontations,

pointing out that Taliban forces had been prepositioned outside many of Afghanistan's major cities, displacing civilians.

"The operational environment for humanitarian organizations prior to last week was also highly complex. While Afghanistan has always been among the more dangerous places for aid workers, recent attacks on Halo Trust and Action Contre le Faim (ACF), concurrent with the increase in violence, highlighted the dangers faced by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and underscored the complexity of navigating Afghanistan's security environment."

## Humanitarian crisis and implications for Pakistan:

The same CSIS report paints a dismal picture of the impending humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan which the Taliban are ill-prepared to deal with. Forced displacements, refugees returning from

Pakistan and Iran, spread of Covid-19 and drought like conditions all add up to a multiple layers of humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

The report says: “Prior to the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Afghanistan was already mired in multiple overlapping humanitarian crises. Widespread forced displacement, together with refugee returns from Iran and Pakistan, means millions of Afghans have been disconnected from their communities and require assistance from local and international humanitarian organizations.

“Drought conditions threaten agricultural production. Food security indicators are alarming, with concerns over rising malnutrition rates, and a third wave of Covid-19 is spreading, in a country with limited health infrastructure to provide the necessary care.

“The United Nations’ 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Afghanistan called for \$1.3 billion in humanitarian aid, but the appeal remains 40 percent funded, despite renewed attention to Afghanistan that emerged during the 2020 peace negotiations with the Taliban and ongoing troop withdrawals.”

This paints a very dismal picture of the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and with government structures in complete disarray, there is hardly anyone on the ground to take care of the Afghan people, raising concerns in neighbouring countries especially Pakistan that the direction of any future exodus will be towards Pakistan.

## Spoiler’s violence and Pakistan’s fears

There is a dreadful prediction in the western security experts forecast about what international terror groups like Al-Qaida, Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and ISIS could do in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan as the post-withdrawal Afghanistan is likely to plunge into a military chaos or anarchy in the coming days, weeks and months.

In what western intelligence officials, reportedly, are describing as spoiler’s violence the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan could use the remnants of international terror groups still hiding in different parts of Afghanistan to settle their scores with their rival countries.

In this regard, western intelligence is specifically mentioning the names of Pakistan, India and Afghanistan as countries whose security apparatus or intelligence agencies could settle old scores by using remnants of terror groups to carry out violence in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan.

American officials and leaders have variously described Al-Qaida in Afghanistan as a shadow of its former self or very weak to carry out terror attacks in mainland America. ISIS saw its peak in Afghanistan in the period between 2014 and 2016 when there was a sudden rise in its profile and groups and bands from Afghan Taliban defecting to their mother organisation to join ISIS. ISIS in Afghanistan in recent days has also seen a declining profile as the groups and bands of former Taliban defect

ISIS to re-join their mother organisation

Spoiler’s violence could take the form of terror attacks inside Pakistani territory and if Western intelligence experts are to be believed Indian intelligence could use remnants of terror groups against Pakistan.

This doesn’t seem far-fetched when seen in the light of Pakistani allegations that India intelligence has penetrated Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and was instrumental in pushing the militant group to carry out terror attacks inside heartland Pakistan.

There are countless reports indicating the webs that link TTP with international terror groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the remnants of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan are hosting terror groups which originated in Central Asian societies and which have been engaged in military conflict with the Central Asian governments.

The Chinese are no less concerned about the developments in Afghanistan: They know that the Chinese separatist elements are in alliance with ISIS, Taliban and Al-Qaida. Some of these Chinese separatist elements are in alliance with Pakistani Taliban and were being hosted by the latter until recently. So the fears of spoiler’s violence reaching Chinese territory are real.

Pakistan’s military establishment believes that a centralized Afghan state is absolutely necessary to control this threat. The international community must ensure that the regional countries don’t play dirty and don’t try to push forward their own proxies in the Afghan power struggle.



## Burn the Witch!



By Hammad Ghaznavi

The government seems to have decided to introduce the Electronic Voting Machines and I-voting for expat Pakistanis in the 2023 general elections. The opposition is deadly against the idea of EVMs. The opposition thinks it's a move to steal the next general elections while the government advocates the effort as a guarantee of the first rigging free polls in the history of the country. Stakes are high and the two sides are fully cognizant of the fact. This is not just another treasury-opposition controversy as it has the potential to plunge the country in a total deadlock that may, many argue, take the entire political system down with it.

Under the constitution and the Election Act 2017, it is the Election Commission of Pakistan that is primarily responsible for holding a free and fair election in the country. The ECP has stated more than once in the past that it had not been consulted by the government on the final decision to employ the EVMs or during the development stages of the said gizmo. The controversy came to the limelight recently when the ECP raised 37 objections to the introduction of the EVMs and I-voting in the next general elections, in its report submitted to the Senate Standing Committee on parliamentary affairs. The gist of the objections is that the machine can be tampered, its software can easily be altered, time is too short for such huge procurement and deployment of EVMs, the training of staff concerned, and that the machines need to be introduced in stages. Importantly, the ECP stated that the machine cannot guarantee the secrecy of ballot, a constitutional must. The ECP also expressed serious concerns about the custody of machines at rest and during transportation. Interestingly, the government, vociferously dismissing every concern raised by the ECP, is silent on this one. Understandably so. When every institution of the country grows controversial, there is no neutral umpire available who can be tasked with the custody of the EVMs without attracting dispute.

The ECP report then points out perhaps the most valid concern it has about the whole scheme – the stakeholders are not on board. Without the opposition's support, the whole

plan loses credibility. It has to be kept in mind that the opposition combined, according to the last elections, enjoys the confidence of more voters than the PTI.

Independent observers also express concern over ignoring of the ECP all together by the government in this regard. Former secretary ECP Kunwar Dilshad in this regard states: "In every country that has employed the EVMs, it's the Election Commission that has fathered the whole concept, including the machines and its features. And it took every country many years, even decades, to fully shift to EVMs."

Prime Minister Imran Khan has said time and again that EVM is the panacea for all our electoral ills and that the machine can give us our first rigging free, transparent elections. The ECP seems in disagreement. It said in its report that EVMs couldn't prevent abuse of state resources, misuse of state authority, election fraud, the law and order situation, low voters' turnout, low women's turnout, electronic ballot stuffing, vote buying, dishonest polling staff, electoral violence, etc. (the ECP, for obvious reasons, didn't mention the disaster that RTS, our first romance with technology, proved to be in the last elections.)

In a word, the ECP vetoed the introduction of EVMs and I-voting. It required amendments in the constitution, the ECP said with certainty. The government is convinced that amendments in the acts and rules concerned are enough to implement its decision on EVMs. Things have come to a head. The government has taken on the ECP, considering rolling heads in the Commission. A federal minister was so upset at the ECP's opposition to EVMs that he thought the Election Commission of Pakistan 'took bribes to rig polls' and thus deserved to be burnt.

It is most likely that the political players fail to resolve the issue amicably, and the feud ends up in the courts. Will the decision of the court in this regard, resolve the issue? It seems unlikely. The issue certainly has the potential to hurl the political system in an unprecedented chaos.



## Jittery as a Squirrel, PDM Comes Out of Hibernation

*The first round of agitation by the broad-based opposition coalition came to nought. Will the second round be any different?*



By Khalid Wasim

After an eight-month hiatus, the opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) alliance is finally back into action by announcing the second phase of its anti-government campaign.

The Alliance has already started it with a public meeting at Karachi on 29 August. This was the first major activity by the Alliance after the exit of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Awami National Party (ANP) after developing differences over the issue of en masse resignations from the legislatures and the nomination of PPP's Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani as the Leader of Opposition in the Senate in April this year.

The first phase of the PDM's movement had ended abruptly after the Lahore public meeting in December last year when its leaders did not announce any future strategy despite the fact they had previously categorically declared to hold a long march towards Islamabad in January 2021 to give a final push to the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insad (PTI)-led coalition government, which completed its three years last month.

Learning from the experience, this time the PDM leaders have not given any timeframe for their planned long march to Islamabad, though it is still a part of their plan. So far, the opposition Alliance has only

announced three or four activities, including two public meetings in Punjab, until October 31.

In their private conversations, PDM leaders claim that they have prepared a schedule of more than 50 public meetings and rallies all over the country. However, so far they are reluctant to share their plan with the media.

It seems the PDM leadership has decided to adopt a wait-and-see policy because of the announcements by the lawyers, journalists, and human rights bodies to launch a protest drive against the government over some of its recent decisions and planned moves.

It seems the PDM leaders are expecting a situation like the March 2007 when the lawyers had launched a historic movement for the restoration of the judges after the then military dictator General Pervez Musharraf removed former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry from office.

The lawyers' movement soon gathered momentum and the then opposition parties, which had failed to cause any damage to the Musharraf regime from the platforms of the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) and the Muttehida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), cashed in on it.

Taking advantage of this situation, two former prime ministers – Benazir Bhutto and

Nawaz Sharif – decided to end their exile and landed in the country ahead of the elections scheduled to be held in December 2007, but were delayed till February 2008 due to the assassination of Ms Bhutto at Liaquat Bagh in Rawalpindi. This time again, Nawaz Sharif is in self-exile in London.

This time around, media workers, journalists, lawyers and the civil society representatives have launched a movement against the government over its plan to set up a controversial Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) to regulate the media, including social media, and some recent inductions in the higher judiciary.

As the government has adopted an adamant stance and announced to go ahead with its plan to set up the PMDA and unilateral introduction of the electoral and legal reforms, one can expect that the present movement of the lawyers and the journalists can also get some momentum in the near future – the only hope for the opportunist opposition parties.

A constellation of lawyers' bodies, including the Supreme Court Bar Association, have already launched a campaign against what they call the efforts of the establishment to enslave media and judiciary in Pakistan – by completely boycotting the Supreme Court proceedings on 9 September.



The representatives of the Supreme Court Bar Association, Pakistan Bar Council, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists held a joint news conference at Islamabad's National Press Club on 8 September in which they vowed to collectively struggle for the freedom of press and independence of judiciary.

After a meeting of the PDM's Executive Committee presided over by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the Alliance leaders announced that they would organise a convention in Islamabad on 26 September, to which they would invite the representatives of the lawyers, journalists, traders, civil society, and farmers.

After this activity, the PDM leaders are expected to gather at a ceremony to be organized by the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) to pay tributes to former party leader Mufti Mehmood in Peshawar on 14 October.

The PDM has announced to hold public meetings in Faisalabad and Dera Ghazi Khan on 16 and 31 October respectively.

Briefing reporters about the decisions taken at the PDM meeting, JUI-F's Hafiz Hamdullah said the coalition would announce the future plan, including road caravans and a long march to Islamabad, after their 31 October public meeting.

The JUI-F leader reiterated the coalition's vociferous opposition to the government's move to introduce Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in the next elections, terming it a "new ploy" to rig the upcoming elections.

Asserting the coalition wanted to see the current political dispensation wrapped up as early as possible, he claimed the PDM leaders were ready to go into the elections even if these were held today.

The meeting of the PDM committee came a day after PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Maulana Fazlur Rehman held each other responsible for the disintegration of PDM, damaging the opposition's cause, and providing clandestine support to the government.

In his speech at a workers' convention at Rahim Yar Khan, Mr Bhutto-Zardari

lashed out at the PML-N for not supporting his proposal to bring a no-confidence motion against Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar and accused it of doing politics of "hypocrisy".

In an apparent reference to PML-N, the PPP chairman said the parties that raised the slogan Vote Ko Izzat Do (respect the vote) should use their votes to dislodge Mr Buzdar from the office of chief minister.

The rejoinder to Mr Bhutto-Zardari's remarks came not from the PML-N but from Maulana Fazlur Rehman. Addressing a function in Abbottabad he alleged that the PPP had caused "irreparable damage" to the opposition's anti-government movement by quitting the PDM at a crucial time.

Earlier, addressing a news conference in Karachi on 28 August, the Maulana had assailed the PPP for attempting to "stab the opposition movement in its back", giving a strong indication that the alliance had moved on from seeking any future reunion with the party.

Hours after the media reported Maulana Fazl's remarks, PPP's information secretary Faisal Karim Kundi issued a hard-hitting statement, alleging that the JUI-F chief had damaged the PDM only to save himself from the clutches of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).

Mr Kundi further alleged that through en masse resignations from the assemblies, the Maulana wanted to strengthen the hands of the "puppet prime minister" to provide him an opportunity to roll back the 18th Amendment. He recalled that in 2002, the Maulana had become the opposition leader after "striking a deal with the establishment".

The PPP leader asked the JUI-F chief to tell the nation as to what was the offer he had received after which he had announced ending his party's sit-in in Islamabad in 2019.

Later, PPP secretary general Farhatullah Babar in his statement expressed "grave disappointment" over the Maulana's accusation that the PPP by not resigning from the assemblies had played into the hands of the establishment.

"It does not befit the stature of the Maulana to resort to blatant falsehood in responding to criticism of his politics and policies", said Mr Babar, who is otherwise not known for making personal comments against any political leader.

"The Maulana's accusations are absolutely untrue and aimed at covering up the role played by him which will achieve no purpose except to further divide the opposition in its efforts to dislodge the selected regime," Mr Babar went on to say.

According to Mr Babar, the PDM had broken the day when even before the heads' meeting on 8 March in Islamabad to discuss the long march, it announced linking the long march with resignations from the assemblies behind the back of PPP.

He recalled that the PPP had participated in the JUI-F's long march in October 2019, later abruptly called off by the Maulana after his meetings with the Chaudhrys of Gujrat. Although it raised serious questions as to what games the Maulana was playing, he said, the PPP refrained from accusing him of playing into the hands of the establishment.

"The PDM may have decided to find fresh relevance for itself but without a clear objective and an intended outcome, it may appear to be full of 'sound and fury' signifying nothing," says an editorial of Daily Dawn while commenting on the efforts of the PDM leadership to groan back into life.

According to the newspaper, the PDM can amplify its criticism of the government through its platform, and perhaps attempt to create a fresh narrative to counter the government's increasing confidence, but it does not have any tools by which to weaken the government.

The editorial continues: "The duality of narrative within the PML-N is also weighing down on the effectiveness of the opposition alliance. Unless the PML-N can clear this confusion and speak with one voice, the PDM will also remain unsure of what it really wants. The alliance may appear re-energised, but it has little to offer by way of an alternative to the PTI government".



# Top Senate Panel Nixes Treasury's Electoral Reform Bills

*Opposition parties see the legislation concerning EVMs and i-voting as a ploy to rig the next general election, while the ECP has raised multifarious questions of feasibility and credibility of EVMs.*

By Taslim Asim

The Parliamentary tussle between the treasury and opposition entered a new phase last week when a top parliamentary panel threw out two separate electoral reform bills concerning the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and enabling i-voting for overseas Pakistanis.

The government is now likely to make good on its promise of taking the contentious bills to a joint sitting of Parliament, where the opposition will be powerless in the face of the government's sheer majority.

Chairman Senate Committee on Parliamentary Affairs Senator Taj Haider said Government Ministers have once again repeated their threats of getting the bills passed in the joint session of the Parliament. "The unfortunate part is that now it has been almost 60 days when the last session of the Senate had ended," he added.

The government's push to introduce EVMs and i-Voting in time for the next general election suffered a setback Friday, 10 September 2021, when the Senate Commit-

tee on Parliamentary Affairs voted out the bill for the Electronic Voting Machines.

As well, the Committee rejected an amendment relating to the i-voting for overseas Pakistanis in the absence of the treasury members who staged a walkout from the meeting in a protest of not allowing their recently inducted member, Senator Samina Mumtaz to cast her vote online for the bill.

The government has repeatedly avowed to hold next general election through EVMs, maintaining they will help ensure free, fair, and transparent elections.

The opposition has rejected the measure out of hand, maintaining it is as a ploy to massively rig the next elections. They have justified their reservations based on the experience of RTS system that was stalled during the counting in 2018 general elections.

The Election Commission has already rejected the use of EVMs, raising 34 objections. The issues raised by ECP

concern the cost, testing, transportation, security, transparency of EVMs, fears delay in announcement of results, hacking and many technical and legal issues.

The ECP completed two pilot projects of Electronic Voting Machines during the tenure of the PML-N and submitted the reports to Parliament.

The Pakistan People's Party has emphatically rejected EVMs, maintaining the Prime Minister's obsession with EVMs betrays a lack of understanding of the issues at best and it appears a plan for manipulating next elections through technology so as to undo the 18th Constitutional Amendment through a selected Parliament at worst.

"When simpler technological innovation like Result Transmission System (RTS) in the 2018 elections is hijacked and even balloting for plots fails to arouse credibility, who will trust EVM technology in determining issues in transfer of power to the people," asked Secretary General PPP Parliamentarians Farhatullah Babar in a





statement in response to the launching of a campaign at public expense in support of the EVMs by the government.

Babar said that real issues in electoral fraud were far too complex for the EVMs to address. “The EVMs can neither check booths capturing nor put to an end the mysterious midnight phone calls from ‘No Caller ID’,” he said.

He said the EVMs also neither end summoning winning candidates to offices and ask them to change loyalties nor can these machines stop manipulations to disqualify Party leaders from leadership and throw people out even from electoral contests.

Concerning e-voting by expats, Farhatullah Babar recalled that in 2012, NADRA had explored the proposition and was found that balloting will have to be held in embassies after electronic thumb verification by the embassy officials and concluded that it was problematic process. Credible reasons have not been spelt out as to how e-voting by expats without the involvement of Pak embassies abroad has become feasible now.

Former Interior Minister and Chairman Institute of Research and Reforms Senator Rehman Malik termed the idea of launching EVMs another controversy, as new EVM is a modified form of RTS that failed suddenly while communicating the results.

He said that the idea of an electronic voting machine for Pakistan was conceived by him for the first time in his capacity as Interior Minister and he had got a detailed study and also held many meetings with ECP over it.



“A major part of the team was not in favour of this, I, however, directed them to keep working and create a cost-effective feasibility report and EVMs should be rigging-free electronic vote process,” he said.

Rehman Malik said that RTS performed well in communicating the initial results until the concerned staff was ordered to put a stop to the use of it and it remained a mystery as to who ordered the shutdown.

“The mystery of the ordering authority could not be resolved through a voice recording was received through an unknown source, played by me in the parliament in my capacity as the Chairman of Parliament Committee, comprising 23 members that looked into the allegations of rigging,” he said

Elaborating on its technical feasibility, he said that there are 95,000 voter identification units, hence, going by the number of polling stations, polling booths, and voter identification units, Pakistan will need a total of 900,000-1,000,000 of these five different EVM modules to conduct polls for all provincial and national assembly seats in a single day.

He said that the total cost for 900,000 to one million modules will eventually be PKR 45 billion to PKR 70 billion since the EVM is the most expensive module. “The RTS modules will cost a further blow of PKR 2-3 billion and a compromise on price would result in a compromise on quality, and we cannot afford to encounter another failure in our electoral system,” he added.

He said the cost is also not the only headache, and to get one million modules by the time the 2023 election swings around, Pakistan will need to produce 3,000 modules a day.

PML-N Secretary General Ahsan Iqbal also rejected the Electronic Voting Machines use in next elections saying that it could not be alternate of ballot paper. “The government only intends to rig the next election through EVMs,” he said.

He said the ballot paper is only way to secrecy of the vote as EVMs could not ensure the secrecy of the vote.

He said it was easy to rig the election as the data could be hacked. If the data of any polling station is hacked then it will lead to an undesirable change in the polling result.

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# The Hidden Paradise

**Kumrat Valley is full of pleasant surprises, especially if you love mountains.**

Home to numerous stunning picturesque spots, Pakistan is a true wonder of natural marvels. Pretty much every district of Pakistan is dotted with many regular attractions and authentic destinations that every avid traveller should visit at least once.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is a region situated in north-western Pakistan, is a land of mighty mountains. Hidden among these wonderful geographical developments, you will discover the most delightful valleys to be seen anywhere on the planet, one of which is Kumrat Valley.

The valley is famous for green pastures, snowclad mountains, the river Panjkora, foggy mounds, Katora Lake, Jahaz Banda cascades, rich green fields, fresh water springs, colossal mountains, quick streaming spouting waterways and tranquil lakes.

The land is adorned by luxuriant Deodar Trees. The place is also counted among one of the best spot to visit in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Owing to its immense natural beauty, Kumrat is called a hidden paradise on earth' by numerous who visit.

Setting up camp, bonfire, sailing, trekking, and climbing: this spot offers all that an active tourist searches for while traveling. Kumrat valley also serve as a habitat for a great variety of vegetation and wildlife.

Kumrat valley is located in the Kohistan region of upper Dir at the back side of which Swat Kohistan is located. The total distance between Islamabad and Kumrat Valley is approximately 370 km which is nearly 10 hours of drive.

The route from Islamabad to Kumrat is via Islamabad-Peshawar Motorway and then at Colonel Sher Khan Interchange via Swat Motorway towards Chakdara. Onwards: the N45 route, Dir Chitral Road which connects Islamabad to Kumrat Valley.

With the road snaking through breath-taking views of lush green valleys populated by towering deodar trees, the journey through high mountains along with Panjkora River is full of delightful surprises.

After the visit of Imran Khan to Kumrat Valley in 2016, this valley grab attention of tourists, and thousands of them began to visit this place every year, and fell in love with it. Road to Kumrat valley is a non-stop zig zag ride for almost 2.5 hours, up to the small village of Thall, which greets tourists with cold breeze.

Thall is known for the historic mosque made from huge planks of deodar trees adorned with intricate wood carvings and motifs. The mosque looks somewhat similar in architecture to the ancient mosques in Shigar and Khaplu constructed by Kashmiri craftsmen.

After a two-hour journey from Thall, Kala Chashma is a welcome surprise. The gigantic trees and light drizzle follow visitors everywhere, picturesque views of the meadows with the river running through them while travelling towards the Kumrat waterfall.

The isolated Kumrat valley is relatively popular with local tourists from KPK, but is mostly a secret from other Pakistani tourists. Another feature of this Valley is its heightened Deodar trees situated on the ground level near the Panjkora River.

Every summer, thousands of tourists from different areas of the country visit Kumrat valley for its greenery and cool weather. There are many attractions and places to visit in the Kumrat Valley, covering a wide area that is just waiting for you to explore! Perhaps Kumrat valley is the most famous gem of a place to visit in the Dir District.

The best time to visit Kumrat valley for the summer holidays is during May, June, July, August, and September when the temperature is pleasant between 5°C and 16°C.

This entire journey of Kumrat valley is full of precious memories, especially if you are a mountain lover. The diversity of cultures and the relative seclusion makes Kumrat Valley very unique. If Chitral and the Kalash Valleys are next on your itinerary, you may ideally want to head out towards Dir from Kumrat.





## Is NDM a Splinter Group of PTM?

*By announcing his own political party, Mohsin Dawar seems to have parted ways with PTM chief Manzoor Pashteen.*



By Ghulam Dastageer

Around two months back, Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) announced to hold a public meeting in Makeen area of South Waziristan tribal district on 27 July. According to insiders, a day before the moot, a delegation of the PTM approached Mohsin Dawar, requesting him not to turn up in the next day's power show.

Dawar is a member of the National Assembly from North Waziristan who was once a leading figure of the PTM. The late night mission of the delegation is believed to have the blessing of PTM's poster boy and head Manzoor Pashteen.

The reason they presented before Dawar, who came to South Waziristan to persuade the people to participate in the jalsa to make it a success, was that the people of South Waziristan, dominated by Mehsud tribesmen, may humiliate him.

Mohsin disregarded the advice and remained adamant on participating in the jalsa. In the event, no untoward event happened at the public meeting. It was, indeed, a clear sign of rift between Manzoor Pashteen and Mohsin Dawar.

A month later, Mohsin Dawar launched his political party—National Democratic Movement (NDM)—at a media conference in Peshawar, parting ways with the movement for all practical purposes.

Dawar's media conference of 2 September 2021 drew harsh reaction from Manzoor Pashteen, who in a media talk expressed profound resentment over the formation of the new political party and even categorically refused to felicitate his former PTM comrades for forming a new party.

Formation of the NDM has raised serious questions over the future of the PTM, for a number of founding members of the movement have deserted Pashteen, joining hands with Mohsin Dawar.

A section in the PTM strongly advocates the apolitical status of the movement. They argue that PTM is an inclusive Pashtun movement, attracting Pashtuns from all walks of the life, including people from diverse political backgrounds.

But at the same time, another group sees Parliament as the most vibrant forum to raise the voice for the rights of Pashtuns.

These two contradicting viewpoints finally resulted in the division of the PTM.

In retrospect, the PTM distanced itself from Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir when they decided to contest the general election of 2018 from North and South Waziristan, respectively. Both the PTM stalwarts succeeded to make it to the National Assembly.

On the other hand, Manzoor Pashteen disseminated a number of video messages, categorically declaring that PTM has nothing to do with their decision to contest election. But there is no denying the fact that the PTM support was one of the major factors behind their triumph.

The detractors of Manzoor Pashteen say that it was the sense of insecurity, which forced Manzoor Pashteen to keep maneuvering to oust Mohsin Dawar from the movement.

To lend credence to their assertion, they say that the political figures of the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP) are acceptable to Manzoor Pashteen to, at times, dominate even the policymaking process of the movement.



But Mohsin Dawar, a founding member of the PTM, was not allowed to play any role, even advisory, in the movement.

“Compared to Pashteen, Mohsin Dawar is well-educated, politically mature and well-articulated especially while dealing with the foreign media. This indeed triggered a sense of insecurity in Manzoor Pashteen whose all energies, during the last two years, were focused on alienating Mohsin Dawar,” said an insider who wished not to be named.

Talking to the Truth International, Dr. Muhammad Zubair said that the reaction of Manzoor Pashteen over the formation of NDM “was extremely disappointing for me and [now] I know that this bus is going down the hell without having any brakes.”

Zubair is a Mehsud tribesman who has done his PhD on law and democracy from Indiana University in the USA and who also remained a member of the PTM’s intellectual advisory team.

He minces no words saying “the PTM is done” because of Manzoor Pashteen and he is done in the eyes of history. “Whatever the PTM has achieved, has achieved.”

But he hastens to add that PTM has played a pivotal role in giving a boost to Pashtun nationalism, which he considers a great achievement. The political movements that will arise among the Pashtuns, if ever, they will basically start from the point where PTM left.

A number of PTM activists the Truth International talked to agree with Zubair that over the last two years PTM has been reduced to just issuing statements instead of launching aggressive protests on various critical issues, something it was known for.

For instance, PTM did not stage any protest or sit-in on the targeted killing of Noor Islam Dawar, the president of Youth of North Waziristan and a founding member of the PTM, on 27 August 2021.

The PTM leadership argues that the heirs of the slain leader were not ready to hand them over the body so that they could launch an effective protest. On the other hand, it is a fact that they did not have the body of Nageebullah Mehsud but they held one of the most successful sit-ins in the history of Pakistan in Islamabad in February 2018.

Likewise, the PTM did not stage an aggres-

sive protest drive against the ever-increasing incidents of targeted killing in Waziristan region.

There is also anger among the dissidents of the PTM over a section of the constitution of the PTM, declaring Manzoor Pashteen as the head of movement for the coming nine years. In fact, the session of the head of movement has been fixed as three years and Pashteen was made the head of the PTM for three consecutive sessions.

This supports the apprehensions of the detractors of Pashteen vis-à-vis his sense of insecurity which is evident from the fact that presently most of the senior members of the movement have been sidelined.

The other important question is would the NDM be able to present itself as a replacement of the PTM? There is no definitive answer to this question. But if the NDM honours its commitment to engaging the youth, which makes 62 percent of the country’s population, it can not only replace PTM, but can pose a real danger to the future of regional Pashtun nationalist parties, including Awami National Party and Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party.





# Alliances in the Making for the Next Election

*There's still a year to go before the election year starts, but wheelers and dealers of the political world are cooking up alliances and alignments in earnest.*



By Sarfraz Raja

Phrases like mid-term elections and early elections have remained in currency during almost every previous government's term, but the reality remains that for the first time in the history of the country three successive parliaments have completed their constitutional terms and the fourth is on its way.

PML Q, Pakistan people's Party, Pakistan Muslim league Nawaz, and now Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). But which party will be the next in line after the PTI? There are wishes, hopes and plans all around.

For some political gurus, it's now a believed fact that no party can secure individual victory or simple majority and solo flight is not a wise move anymore. The party leading the next government will depend on the support of smaller parties with healthy vote bank.

All the political players are active as election year is around a year away but all are keeping their cards close to their chests. To get some insight into what's cooking and what's on the menu for the election year, The Truth International (TTI) had

some informal and off-the-record discussions with a bunch of political brains and planners in political parties.

Rewinding a year back, in 20th September 2020, an initially successful move was witnessed to unite all opposition parties under one umbrella and an eleven-party anti-government alliance was established in PPP-led All Parties Conference.

Called Pakistan Democratic Movement, it was headed by Maulana Fazalur Rehman, the chief of his own faction of JUI, with main objective to oust Imran Khan from power. But differences soon started to emerge among coalition partners and two major parties Pakistan People's Party and Awami National Party left the alliance after a few months.

Sources privy to all these happenings are of the view that PDM was a short-term arrangement and it could never be an electoral alliance as it actually did not the suit major parties. Also, PML-N and PPP had trust issues and both are actually election rivals, especially in Punjab, where PPP must go toe to toe against PML-N if

wants to makes its presence felt in Pakistan's largest province.

So now that the PPP has left PDM, can it become an electoral alliance? Our information confirms JUI chief Maulana Fazalur Rehman and PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif have agreed to contest the next general election collectively.

A separate line of enquiry suggests that encouraged by the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan, Maulana Fazalur Rehman is looking to cobble together a coalition of religious parties in the tradition of the late lamented MMA – which could have seat adjustment with PML-N.

However, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) is said to have refused to join the Maulana or the PML-N in any such arrangement. Our sources close to the JI say Jamaat is intent on flying solo without regards to winning or losing.

Second important opposition alliance would be Pakistan People's Party and Awami National Party. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari also targeting dissatisfied and



ignored members of the PTI and PML-N, especially in south Punjab. The PPP is also working to establish contacts with regional and nationalist groups who have their vote bank in pockets.

We may see a new political group or party emerge from nowhere ahead of elections as PTI's former Secretary General Jahangir Khan Tareen can also come up with his own independent group to contest elections.

JKT actually played a vital role in PTI's rise to power in Islamabad and Lahore after the 2018 elections and has many followers and sympathizers in ruling party ranks. What is more, he could also secure support from a major political party including PPP, PMLQ, and even PML-N.

As per our information, JKT is also targeting those candidates from southern Punjab who lost the last election by small margins. So JKT is fully in the game, with his political manoeuvrings bound to work some magic in the run up to the election.

The ruling PTI is still not interested in an electoral alliance in Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa but there is a strong possibility of their electoral alliance with Baluchistan Awami Party in Baluchistan to counter any JUI-led religious alliance.

In Sindh, an important political player Pir Pagaro is working to extend the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA), which is allied to the PTI. Many provincial political players have been approached to join them and to give tough time to Pakistan People's



Party who is ruling the province for consecutive third term.

Another Government ally in Punjab, PML-Q is also trying to establish its strength specially Chaudhry Pervez Elahi who is a veteran political manager now trying to liven up his party at the grassroots level in local bodies elections keeping all his options open till next election and he is more interested in provincial assembly seats.

Another alliance may emerge in Baluchistan from the revival of Pakistan Oppressed Nations Movement (PONM), which was previously an alliance of several nationalist parties from Baluchistan and Sindh. There is a move now to again establish alliance of parties like

Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP), National Party, BNP-Mengal, and other to unite the divided vote and get the maximum share in seats in Baluchistan.

If present parliament completes its term like previous three, general elections has to be held before 11 October 2023, within sixty days after completion of parliamentary term, due on midnight 12 August 2023. So it's two more years to go now and as we know last year would be the election year so actually it's one to go before the campaigns start.

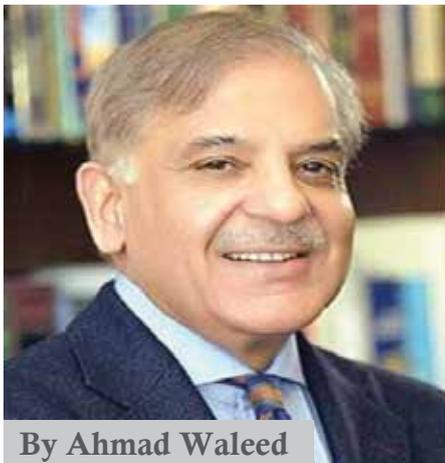
Electoral politics is always a tricky matter and political wheeling and dealing continues until the last minute, so let's wait and see who powers ahead and who is left in the dust.



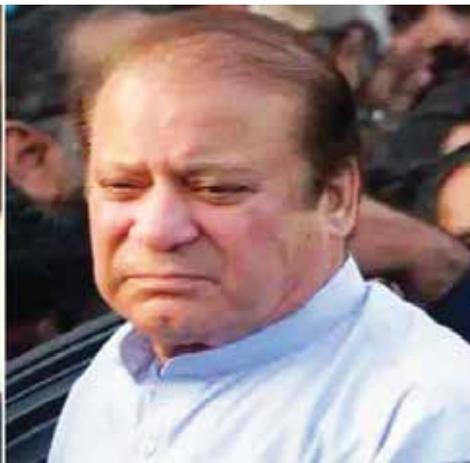


## PML-N at a Crossroads

*Has Nawaz Sharif's tough anti-establishment rhetoric outlived its utility?*



By Ahmad Waleed



Nawaz Sharif has seemingly not exhausted his ire against the establishment. The PML-N supremo gave vent to his anger in a furious speech at the Karachi gathering of a rejuvenated Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) sans its estranged ally Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP).

After remaining dormant for over three months, the PDM has launched yet another protest campaign against what it calls an unconstitutional government to test the political waters after rumours circulating that the ruling party may go for early elections next year. This time they plan to march towards the capital to send the government packing.

Nawaz Sharif again blamed the undemocratic forces for the country's downfall. He alleged that by sabotaging the country's democratic system, a few individuals have occupied all the resources while the masses have been left to suffer in the clutches of rising inflation and unemployment.

However, the louder the former prime minister speaks against the establishment, the wider divide will be seen in his party. His narrative is not welcome in the ranks of PML-N who believe this could create hurdles for the party to come into power in the next elections.

Many leaders of the PML-N think that the repeated attacks on the establishment by Nawaz Sharif are losing worth with the passage of time.

"People don't want to pay attention to the

verbal attacks on the establishment", one of the leaders remarked. "If Nawaz Sharif wants to fight against the system, he should come back home and start a country-wide agitation to bring down the hybrid regime."

While Maryam Nawaz has lately been launching vicious attacks on PPP for renegeing on the promises made at the platform of PDM, the recent phone call by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to Shahbaz Sharif has raised many people's eyebrows.

The very phone call showed that the younger brother is acceptable and although it is reported that both the leaders discussed the candidates to fill the slots of members of Election Commission of Pakistan and an overall political situation.

Nevertheless, the contact between Bilawal and Shahbaz is being considered a very important development amid the rising acrimony between the two political parties. The PPP believes that the PTI government would have fallen if the PDM had decided to march towards Islamabad on the advice of the PPP as resignations was no solution.

However, Maulana Fazl ur Rehman, the PDM chief, has serious reservations against the PPP for 'betrayal' by the party at a time when the 11-party alliance had succeeded in putting a tremendous pressure on the establishment-backed PTI government. "The PPP tried to stab the PDM in the back," he said during a press conference in Islamabad a few days ago.

Meanwhile, Maryam Nawaz has once

again gone into silence for a while. Shahbaz Sharif will be dealing with PDM as the alliance resolves to march towards Islamabad for a final showdown. On the other hand, the PTI government gestures have hinted that Prime Minister Imran Khan may decide to hold early elections.

The anti-establishment narrative apart, now is the time for the PML-N supremo to decide who is going to lead the party in the backdrop of rumours about early elections. If early elections are indeed announced, the PTI will definitely benefit from the infighting within the PML-N.

On his part, Bilawal Bhutto is already in South Punjab in a bid to revive the party vote bank in that part of the province which had been a stronghold of the PPP lately. This area of South Punjab has not been in the priority list of the PML-N through the recent years which resulted in the formation of South Punjab Front comprising the electables that merged into PTI.

All the political parties including the ruling PTI are drawing new lines amid the rapidly changing political and regional developments in the Pakistan and Afghanistan that could lead to some major economic and security challenges for Pakistan in the days ahead.

The PML-N must wake up now and move ahead from the war of narratives. Nawaz Sharif will have to rise above his personal animosity and relinquish his role at least for now and let the party stalwarts devise a new political strategy in view of the country's fast changing political scenario.



# Why Must PM Khan Muzzle the Media?

By Malik Zahoor

*If they lack understanding, good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence.*



Over a cup of coffee (which he never drank) in Washington's Mayflower Hotel where I had invited him in 1997, Imran Khan outlined his vision of governance in Pakistan. Earlier in the day, he had delivered an impressive speech at one of the premier think tanks, mesmerizing the who's who of the town by spotlighting what ailed his country. His handling of the Q&A was brilliant – a rarity for Pakistani politicians, with few exceptions such as Benazir Bhutto.

We kept seeing each other during the early years of the millennium, either over dinner at my Potomac house in Washington or in his ramshackle Bazar Road office in Islamabad, where he drove a rickety car in the down-to-earth demeanor which he still supports.

As the clock moved forward, his convictions showed zero signs of diminishing. Though at that point in time his desire to test the political waters became more pronounced, it looked like just a solo flight. His out-of-the-box kind of political brand made a lot of sense and could sit comfortably with those who were sick and tired of seeing the same faces over and over again. A much harder line on corruption, across-the-board accountability, drastic poverty alleviation ideas, economic uplift, rule of law, religious tolerance, more funding for health and education and to cap it all the Westminster style of answerable parliamentary democracy – it all sounded rather too musical to the ears.

Conversely, those already holding or hoping to hold the citadel of power didn't sit back. Back in the 1990s, his frequent appearances in the world capital didn't go

unnoticed. His fundraisers for Shaukat Khanum Hospital attracted Pakistani Americans in droves. In an angry and weak moment Imran once said to me that even as a child he had never asked his father for money. But that he needed money then to launch a movement against what he called the 'Nawaz-Shehbaz Brotherhood'. He asked me to ask my friend Moeen Qureshi to make some contribution towards his party. Moeen Qureshi was non-committal. He said he liked Imran but that also that he found him just "another Asghar Khan in the making". Yet, he said he would 'try to get him some help'.

My next stop was George Soros, the billionaire, philanthropist and most successful investor in the history of the United States. He established the Open Society Foundation which granted scholarships to Black students from South Africa under Apartheid, and funded projects for freedom of expression, justice and democracy all over the world. In his heavily accented voice, Soros said, 'that cricketer fellow? OK, I will fund him. Tell him to join forces with Benazir'. Imran's reaction was stunning. He refused to accept any funding from a foreigner (and I was told the amount ran into seven figures). And as for joining Benazir, it was just out of the question for Imran. At that time, being an MNA, he lived in one of the apartments at the Parliamentary Lodges.

So who is Imran Khan? I am still struggling with this question after a lapse of nearly two decades. The rise and rise, and perhaps reversible decline, of Imran is a study in political science. How an apparently well-intentioned leader riding the horse of populism could drive an extraordinarily high octane country down a spiral of doom and destruction is a big question. Once in power, he turned his back on the lofty promises he made to an innocent and trusting nation. He captured his dream job. But his dream would translate into a national nightmare.

Imran is a good, simple man. His world is either black or white with a rather simplistic approach to governance. He probably didn't

do any homework before taking power, didn't build any team like he used to do in his cricketering days. Instead, he just rode the wave of a rock star, which catapulted him into power. He seems to have honestly believed that his old school remedies would fix every wrong, thereby resulting in the reversal of our dwindling fortunes. Now off, now on lapses into home-spun philosophies of statecraft did the rest.

The laws of unintentional, unforeseen consequences took over the driver's seat. The hopes that he would inject 'fresh thinking' faded, dashing people's huge expectations to the ground. Delusion dominates his style even after two years in office. How relevant to our predicament is Albert Camus, who said, "the evil in the world almost always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence if they lack understanding".

There is no running away from the intoxicants power brings along. They say power corrupts. Apparently, Imran still is doing well in that department; his cabinet meetings are more open and democratic. His press conferences are relaxed and media men and women can ask him any question under the sun.

But there is a big puzzle. Why muzzle the media? Let the law of the land take its course. The arrest and incarceration of Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman on flimsy grounds didn't bring accolades to the government nor to those who were gunning for him. Nor did it uplift the lofty claims of an independent judiciary, which seems more interested in who should head PIA or how best Covid-19 should be handled.

Charles De Gaulle once said that no one is indispensable and "graveyards are full of indispensable men". Imran Khan like many leaders before him is not indispensable and so is true about those that supported him from within the power structures of the country. Ambitions need to be kept in check.

*The writer is a former information minister at the embassy of Pakistan in Washington.*

# Parliament Looks to Judge the Judges

*A top parliamentary panel is looking to reassert Parliament's rightful role in the appointment and accountability of superior court judges.*



By Asadullah

While the lawyers' bodies are making hue and cry over the criteria for the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court and a large segment of society wants across the board accountability, a parliamentary panel has further fuelled the debate by observing the existing system is 'faulty' and recommending legal amendments to drastically change the framework for the appointment and accountability of supreme court justices.

Recently, the lawyers staged protests and passed resolutions against supersession of four judges of the Sindh High Court (SHC). The Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP) again considered Lahore High Court (LHC) Justice Ayesha Malik for a vacant position of the Supreme Court whereas she is at number four in the LHC's seniority list.

The bipartisan Parliamentary Committee on Appointment of Judges has approved for observation of seniority as central consideration for appointment of judges to the apex court.

The committee during a recent meeting consented to the amendments in the bill tabled by its chairman Farooq H Naek that to limit the powers of the President to appoint an ad-hoc judge of the Supreme Court and linked it with the parliamentary nod.

Under the proposed amendment to Article 175 A (3), the parliamentary panel recommended that the elevation of the judges to the Supreme Court be made in accordance with the seniority of the judge, determined with reference to their date of appointment as a judge of the High court.

It may be mentioned that the recent elevation of Justice Mohammad Ali Mazhar to the Supreme Court ignited the heated debate among the legal fraternity. Lawyers have also expressed concerns over the proposed elevation of Justice Ayesha A Malik to the Supreme Court since she is at number four of the seniority of the Lahore High Court.

A few years ago, the appointments in the superior judiciary – High Court and

the Supreme Court – were made through a multi-stage process in which executive and the judiciary selected the lawyers and sessions judges for their appointment as judges high courts judges and generally the Chief Justice of High Court used to be elevated in the apex court.

However, the Constitutional Reforms Committee in 2009 proposed an amendment to Article 175-A of the Constitution. The 18th Amendment of the Constitution changed the mechanism for appointment of judges.

Under the amendment in Article 175-A, the Parliament established the Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP) for nominating the judges and the Parliamentary Committee confirmed these nominations.

According to Senator Mian Raza Rabbani, who is considered the lead author of the 18th Constitutional Amendment, the Parliament has changed the mechanism in order to institutionalize appointments to the superior judiciary.

He said that earlier it was the prerogative of the President and the Chief Justice. However, the amendment of Article 175-A formed two institutions: Judicial Commission of Pakistan and Parliamentary Committee for Appointment of Judges. Hence the roles of individuals have been minimized.

However, legal experts think that despite the creation of a collegiate body under Article 175-A of the Constitution, it is the Chief Justice of Pakistan who exercises considerable influence when it comes to the selection of the judges to superior judiciary.

According to a former federal law minister, before the 18th Amendment, the Chief Justice of a high court consulted with the provincial and federal law ministers for appointment of judges to their respective high courts. Then, the Chief Justice used to consult the provincial Governors.

Likewise, the Chief Justice of Pakistan with the consultation of the President used to nominate the judges for elevation in the Supreme Court. These appointments were made with the consultation of the CJP and the President.

However, at present, the CJP of the high court proposes the names for judges' slots. The Judicial Commission of Pakistan headed by CJP examines the names and these are forwarded to the Parliamentary Committee.

It may be mentioned that after the 18th Amendment the then government introduced the 19th Amendment to minimize the role of Parliamentary Committee in order to avoid the wrath of the then CJP Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry.

Justice Chaudhry through a judicial order passed in the case of a judge who was not confirmed by the Parliamentary Committee minimized the Parliament's role and virtually made the committee a mere rubber stamp.

The Parliamentary Committee is now trying to reclaim its role in the appointment of judges. The committee headed by Farooq H Naek has examined and proposed certain changes in Article 175-A and Article 209. One of these is related to the improving system of appointment of judges and the other deals with their strict and across the board accountability.

According to Mr Naek, the law for appointment and accountability of the judges must be revisited.

The Committee also approved an amendment to Article 209 of the Constitution which is related to disciplinary proceedings against a sitting judge. It proposed that a reference on account of misconduct against the Judge of the Superior Judiciary will be decided by the Supreme Judicial Council

within 90 days.

At present there is no timeframe for disposal of a complaint or reference against the judges of the superior courts and according to former Chief Justice of Pakistan Anwar Zaheer Jamali, around 90 per cent of the complaints filed against the judges of superior judiciary had become outdated because the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) had been inactive for the past few years.

He said that a majority of references filed against the conduct of the judges of the superior courts under Article 209 of the constitution had become infructuous since most of those judges had retired after completing their terms in office.

Under Article 209, the SJC may initiate proceedings on a reference against any judge on account of misconduct.

According to the article, if the SJC after proceedings "reports to the president that it is of the opinion that the judge is incapable of performing the duties of his office or has been guilty of misconduct and that he (judge) should be removed from office".

The matter related to the judges' appointment is still under consideration as the Parliament not only wants to take back powers in the appointment of judges but also it is trying to exercise a more effective role.



# The Woes of Pakistan's ICT Sector

*Pakistan's tax machinery seems intent on meeting unrealistic collection targets at the cost of the ICT sector.*



By Azeem Waqas

The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has sent notices to hundreds of information and communication technology (ICT) companies working in Pakistan, asking them to prove themselves as an ICT companies.

The FBR has stopped issuing exemption certificates to 70 to 80 major companies as well, sources in the ICT sector told The Truth International (TTI).

The growing ICT sector is facing a continuous harassment at FBR level while the Ministry of Finance has still not implemented the ICT package, which was approved by the former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi cabinet, they say.

The PTI government has withdrawn the tax exemption regime that was to last until 2025 for ICT sector and started a tax credit scheme, which is proving counterproductive.

Managing Director S&P, Mujeeb Zahoor said that it is astonishing that Ministry of ICT and Commerce is recording the export

numbers of these companies but FBR is not recognizing them as ICT companies. The government has announced a package but it has yet to be implemented. The delay is inexplicable.

Zahoor said that lack of talented and skilled workforce is one of the bigger challenges ICT sector is facing in Pakistan today. In Pakistan, ICT companies have to train their workforce and then hire them for a particular project, which is a drawback.

Mujeeb Zahoor said, "The government talks much about ICT sector but it needs to be recognized as a key strategic sector like in other countries of the world. It is need of the hour to make the ICT sector a strategic priority. For the promotion of ICT sector, commercial counselors need to be trained".

P@sha chair Barkan Saeed said that government should improve things at FBR related to ICT industry and create dedicated commissioners in all RTOs who deal with ICT matters and understand the ICT industry. It should increase the budget for

ICT industry participating in conferences globally and reform and revamp PSEB as it has almost become a dead organization.

Pakistan Business Counsel chair Ehsan Malik says the ICT sector is struggling hard to secure financing from banks, who seek collateral. State Bank of Pakistan should start a scheme to provide collateral-free loans to the ICT sector to help with cash flow issues.

P@sha says that many export-oriented companies which also have offices in other countries will refrain from sending any additional export remittance to Pakistan and will only send payroll expenses here due to fear of tax credit removal during the FBR audit process.

This sudden change in the policy based on the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is going to have adverse effects on the growth and rising exports of the ICT sector.

Such inconsistencies in the policies send

out a discouraging message to enterprises and investors looking to enter into Pakistan. This decision has shown investors that any policy benefit to any sector can be reversed at anytime without consulting the relevant sector.

ICT & ITeS (IT enabled Services) is currently the fastest growing sector of Pakistan with more than 40 percent growth as compared to last year. The sector has been able to do that without any substantial incentives offered by the government such as cashback on exports, subsidized electricity tariffs, loans on lower interest rates, etc., which have been offered to other sectors over the past several decades.

While other regional countries offer incentives to their ICT sectors. Bangladesh offers 10 percent cash reward on the ICT/ITeS exports despite the tax exemption. China and India have Special Economic Zones where numerous incentives and including tax relief are already available for the ICT and ITeS sector for the past many years.

The Government of Pakistan, instead of incentivizing the rising sector, has taken back the only relief it had available.

According to the estimates, the average yield of a worker in traditional industries is

around USD 600 per annum whereas the average yield of a knowledge-worker in the ICT/ITES industry is more than USD 20,000 per annum.

Systems Limited (SYS) becomes the first Pakistani information technology company to cross PKR 100 billion market capitalization. The company has announced that its current share price stands at PKR 740.93, which translates to PKR 102 billion in market capitalization. The reports from the second quarter demonstrate a strong balance sheet and financial strength of the company.

Pakistan has set a target of doubling its ICT exports during the current year. ICT Sector exports increased to a record USD 2.1 billion during the fiscal year 2020-2021 despite the Covid-19 pandemic. The share of ICT exports in the overall exports related to the services sector is around 36 percent.

Ehsan Malik hopes that ICT exports could jump to USD 4 billion in a year if the package for the ICT and telecom sector announced by the government is indeed implemented. The provincial general sales tax (GST) regime has to stop taxing call centres and business process outsourcing units for services rendered to overseas clients, he said.

MOIT has set the target of USD 3 billion in export remittance inflows from Pakistani ICT and ICT-enabled services freelancers in next three years and asked to prioritise all possible measures to ensure sustainable growth of gig economy in Pakistan.

The government announced to establish a PKR 10 billion fund for providing cash rewards to ICT companies based on their export performance. The government is also set to offer a five percent rebate on these exports. Freelancers would be allowed to open a special dollar account to receive payments for their individual ICT exports.

ICT Industry says that it is high time for the government to realize that the ICT sector is going to be the only sector that can resolve the issue of balance of trade, create employment for the huge population, and transform Pakistan into a knowledge economy.

With its immense growth potential, the ICT sector has the potential to help end Pakistan's economic woes and rid the country of further IMF programs. However, if conducive policies are not introduced and incentives are not offered, growth of exports will slow down and large sums will be parked abroad.



# The Terrible Toll of Sky High Energy Prices

*The situation of Pakistan's beleaguered power sector seems to have worsened rather than improving under PM Khan's government.*

By Amer Mahmood

Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) had promised to reduce the electricity tariff, resolve the power crisis, and settle the circular debt issue. However, three years into the PTI rule, the power tariff has soared into the stratosphere, circular debt has doubled, and power outages have returned.

Systemic inefficiencies have resulted in increase of the power tariff, pushing up the cost of production and overburdening the people. The monthly increase in power tariff and petroleum products prices have further impacted the industry and the people.

The blackouts a decade back were inflicting losses equal to 3 percent of the GDP per annum, and the sky high power tariff now is guesstimated to cause a similar loss to the economy, said an official source.

For instance, the steel industry uses massive electricity for its operations. The increase in power tariff has pushed up the steel prices from PKR 70,000 per tons to PKR 170,000 per ton. The increase in steel prices has negatively impacted the government's pet construction industry project.

The government is forcing the steel millers to cut steel prices that have been detrimental in the construction of affordable houses scheme. However, the steel mills are demanding reduction in power tariff to reduce their product prices, officials say.

The PTI government is under immense pressure from the international financial institutions to implement its agreed increase in the power tariff. The government had agreed to increase the base tariff by about PKR 5.65 per unit in a cascading manner within three years to generate an additional PKR 900 billion.

The power tariff was increased by about PKR 2 per unit after signing the USD 6-billion loan agreement with the

International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, the government backtracked on its commitment after realising that the increase in base tariff and monthly fuel adjustment and quarterly adjustments have resulted in doubling the burden on the consumers.

The power tariff was to be increased by another PKR 1.40 per unit in April this year. However, the government backtracked after noting that the monthly fuel price adjustment was also burdening the consumer with an increase of PKR 1 to 1.50 per unit. This is a double whammy. Increase in power tariff also leads to doubling the electricity losses and non-recovery.

The government has already jacked up the base tariff by PKR 3.34 per unit, sending it from PKR 13.35 per unit to PKR 16.69 per unit. What is more, the tariff is likely to go up to PKR 21 per unit by July 2022. Meanwhile, the increase in petroleum prices and LNG in the international market led to an increase in monthly fuel adjustments.

This commitment was made under the government conceived Circular Debt Management Plan, and its implementation is linked with the continuous financial support for power sector from World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

The government is now under immense pressure from the IFIs to deliver on its commitments to continue receiving assistance for different projects. Fulfilling the commitment will further burden the people, which is not politically feasible with the approaching general elections.

The five major export-oriented industries were protected from the planned hike in power tariff by providing them fixed energy tariff. It was done to provide them power tariff with regional comparable countries to keep them competitive internationally. These sectors will be provided a tariff subsidy of PKR 68 billion this financial year.



The power subsidy provided to export industries is leading to demands from other sectors to provide them with similar power tariff. Cement and steel industries want a reduced tariff to decrease their product prices to help boost the construction industry.

According to experts, this government too, like the previous ones, had only paid lip service to improving the energy sector.

A few oil and gas exploration blocks were awarded only to the cartel of state owned companies, who have a poor track record in new discoveries over the last two decades. This means that there are no chances of any major new discovery during the next one decade.

The state-controlled power companies, GENCOs and DISCOs will continue to bleed under the non-professional management in cahoots with the mandarins in the line ministries. The companies have manual financial system, obsolete accounting formats and highly ill-equipped staff.

Ironing out these administrative issues does not require foreign qualified experts. But it is also a fact that GENCOs and DISCOs will not improve until millions of dollars in foreign funding are forked out by the IFIs for administrative reform programmes. Who benefits by strapping Pakistan with further debt is anybody's guess.

# The Strange Slide of the Pak Rupee

*Has Pakistan's move to a market based exchange rate regime backfired spectacularly?*



By **Khalique Ahmad**

The Pakistani rupee has lost over 10 percent value against dollar in less than four months but the slide has accelerated in less than a month. Interestingly, this happened as Pakistan recently received a hefty USD 2.8 billion “unconditional” deposit from the International Monetary Fund, taking overall foreign exchange reserves to the highest ever USD 27.22 billion mark.

This is unusual. In normal circumstances, the local currency should have appreciated with reserves at the highest peak. Interestingly, the currency shed its value more about the same time when SBP had robust inflow.

This coincided with the changing situation in Afghanistan. As borders closed in the aftermath of US forces fleeing Kabul and Taliban taking over war torn country, the inflows of USD 8-10 million a day from across the border was the first casualty.

On a slight positive note from Pakistan's perspective, the outflow of greenback to

Afghanistan ranging USD 2-3 million a day also came to an end as banking operations stopped.

Afghanistan used to be rely on foreign assistance to meet its budgetary requirements in the US-backed Ghani administration and part of such supplies used to flow through Pakistan. However, major western powers suspended aid and blocked banking channels.

On the other hand, many Afghans residing in various parts of Pakistan used to buy foreign exchange from the market to feed their families back home, which has also been affected significantly. Pakistan was a net beneficiary in terms of forex flow but no more, at least for now.

According to Forex Association of Pakistan chair Malik Bostan, Afghans with dual nationality have been buying USD 1.5 to 2 million on a daily basis from the open market and taking it across the border to their country since the American currency is now in a short supply there. Dollar

inflows have stopped as Afghanistan's entire banking system collapsed.

According to his estimates, Pakistan used to receive USD 5-7 million from Afghanistan per day as currency was cheaper there and salaries were mostly paid in dollars. As the border situation gets back to normal overtime, there would be renewed pressure on commodities and greenback demand.

But these were relatively minor events. On the larger horizon, Islamabad's structural weaknesses are resurfacing – imports surging much faster than exports' growth, resulting in widening trade deficit. After running a current account surplus for more than two years built through a tight squeeze on imports and the resultant negative actual economic growth, current account deficit started to resurface with a bang as economic activities began after two and half years of slump.

The country posted a current account deficit of USD 775 million in August and USD 1.6 billion a month earlier which was

officially described as a seasonal one off event. But the key area of concern still remains the net food imports, particularly wheat, sugar; and energy imports, particularly expensive liquefied natural gas.

In August, trade deficit reached a highest ever USD 4.06 billion against the previous record of USD 3.77 billion in June 2018, ahead of formal takeover by the PTI government. This was because imports in August were recorded at USD 6.3 billion, also a record in itself. Obviously, a nascent recovery in economic indicators and international commodities prices were taking its toll.

This also had a salutary impact on domestic prices even though a blessing in disguise for the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) whose posted higher revenue collection figures based on higher imports but was celebrated officially as a great success.

While the authorities were celebrating on the fiscal front with higher revenues, such a high import bill that had also followed over USD 6 billion import two months earlier was sending jitters to the currency market, affecting the overall sentiment. No wonder then, the capital market has also seen nervous movements in recent weeks.

That is the stage now that authorities would feel pressure to curb imports. In recent weeks, Finance Minister Shaukat Tarin snubbed commerce authorities for their inability to see things coming as substantial foreign exchange is reported to have been lost to luxury imports – SUVs, luxury cars, and high-end mobile phone sets despite local assembling and production of cellular sets.

The central bank would equally be under stress to handle the current account deficit with care and along with it currency that so far has been allowed to move on its own – a positive first line of defense in the case of import momentum but then it brings home imported inflation.

The government has stood firm on its longstanding position to support the central bank not to burn forex reserves to cool off the exchange rate – a departure from the previous government's stance, which was accused of losing more than USD 10 billion in defending the indefensible exchange rate around PKR 100-105.

Surprisingly though, the government claims credit for more than 40 percent growth in revenue in August, backed by 63 percent increase in customs duties and 55 percent growth in sales tax as imports go up

by 70 percent in August year-on-year. At the same time, it defends in helplessness the imported inflation.

The central bank may have to think about increasing policy rate at a critical juncture when the economy is far behind take off stage. The government has so far been resisting increase in taxes on petroleum products, which have seen 12-15 percent growth during fiscal year 2020-21.

The government maintains that the exchange value of the rupee was maintained at an artificially high level in the past, which triggered the balance of payment crisis. Transition to a market-based exchange rate regime, being an unavoidable policy choice, resulted in a sharp exchange rate depreciation leading to high inflation, high interest rates, slower GDP growth and lower import-related tax revenues.

This exchange rate depreciation added around PKR 2.9 trillion (20 percent of the increase) in public debt and that increase in debt was not due to borrowing but due to re-valuation of external debt in terms of rupees after currency devaluation.



# The Long, Dark Shadow of Circular Debt

*As it squeezes households, besets businesses, and undermines the economy, power sector circular debt burns up PM Khan's political capital.*



By Meer Diam

Raising electricity tariffs seems to be the only way for Prime Minister Imran Khan's government to amortize power sector circular debt. Add to it the obligatory capacity charges payable to power producers and un-pluggable lines losses and you have a recipe for disaster: rising power tariffs that hurt households and businesses alike.

Electrical power is the major source to run Pakistan's industries and businesses and catering to the needs of households. Since 2017, when the country overcame the power shortage and the Chinese-built power plants came online, it is confronting huge capacity payments that are a huge drain on the national exchequer in the form of circular debt.

This debt has surged from PKR 315 billion (USD 2 billion) in 2015 to PKR 2.3 trillion (USD 12.7 billion) this fiscal year.

The previous government had confronted on average USD 5 billion circular debt due to capacity payments but it did not pass the

burden on to the consumers, paying it through subsidies. That, however, has not been the case with the incumbent regime, which has become under obligation from the international financial institutions to remove subsidies.

Not only did a 15 percent raise in electricity tariff this January draw criticism from the industry, it also dented the standing of the government that had once vowed to remove unjustified taxes and surcharges from the household consumer bills.

## Circular debt

High circular debt is suffocating companies in oil and gas sector. Data collected from different sources reveals that power producers owe PKR 1,557 billion to six companies. The overdue receivables of Sui Northern Gas total to PKR 357 billion; of OGDC to PKR 348 billion; of PPPL to PKR 278 billion; of SSGC to PKR 259 billion; of PSO to PKR 221 billion; and of K-Electric to PKR 94 billion.

In November 2014, the governments of Pakistan and China clinched an agreement under which 14 power projects were listed as "prioritized" and another seven as "actively promoted" and the same had to be undertaken following the "market-based principles of openness, equality and mutual benefit to develop related energy projects".

These power projects went online in 2017 ending the country's decades-long addiction to imported furnace oil as the main fuel for power generation. But the surplus production brought a new problem: the country had to pay the capacity charges if it wanted to save import bill on the fuel.

Over the last four years, circular debt has piled up waiting to be cleared off through budgetary measures, particularly the subsidies. Then the economy was struck by Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns. The slowing down of business activity cuts power demand further but, quite understandably, without alleviating the circular debt. And this phenomenon has proved the

proverbial last straw on the camel's back.

Meanwhile, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have become too insistent on cutting the size of subsidies, particularly the ones given to the energy sector and setting it their upfront demand to qualify for loaning facilities.

The government, failing to curb theft and other losses, finds refuge in the precedent the predecessor regimes have left and passes the burden of circular debt to the consumers.

Given the projected growth of capacity payments against surplus power, in the years to come the subsidy bill will rise even more sharply, forcing the government to further burden the consumers.

## Inflation

Power tariff hike is becoming another source of inflation after moderately high interest rates, currency devaluation, and levies on petroleum products. Since the pandemic has hit the country, inflation, mostly food based, has been on the rise despite visible administrative measures.

With the purchasing power on the wane, rising power tariffs further pommel businesses and household consumers alike. While industry becomes less competitive, the commoners also have to adjust their priorities anew.

In January this year, the government announced a 15 percent average increase in power tariffs across the board to make some

“compulsory payments” accompanying power generation capacity installed in recent years.

Going by this logic, the government could be readying itself to shift more and more burden to the consumers as more and more power plants come online.

The government paid more than PKR 470 billion (USD 2.99 billion) in power subsidies last year, making it one of the largest heads in current expenditures that have to be curtailed sharply under the terms of the IMF program that Pakistan is seeking to restart. Only two years ago this amount was closer to PKR 90 billion (USD 573 million).

A recent interaction of the Ministry of Power with the World Bank has revealed that the international lending institution has linked its USD 1 billion credit line for energy projects with an increase in power tariff as of 1 January 2022.

The IMF program of USD 6 billion is under suspension right now and its restoration is believed to be linked with the power tariff hike no later than January 2022, which means the government may possibly have to increase electricity charges by PKR 2.5-3.0 per unit in one go.

Of course, the government is reluctant to increase tariffs for fear of political backlash and may look to deflect the pressure from the IFIs through assurances regarding the efforts to bring down the circular debt, but given its track record, there is little likelihood it will be bale to hold the ground.

## A vicious cycle

Surplus power production is the real problem and its resolution constitute the panacea for the developmental woes of the country. These are not just the capacity charges the government pays to the IPPs but also for the theft and line losses. Punitive measures do not work and provinces are reluctant to take their responsibility regarding power losses.

Power tariffs can be curtailed by resolving legal, technical, and managerial issues but failure in these areas over the last three years has pushed the economy into a vicious cycle marked by economic slowdown, unemployment, and inflation.

The government's failure here is twofold. It has remained unable to resolve the issue of capacity charges, and it has passed the capacity charges on to the consumers amid economic slowdown and rising unemployment.

High power tariff raises the production cost of the industry on the one hand, making exports less competitive, and discourages foreign direct investment on the other due to high input cost.

Every raise in power tariff further fuels inflation at a time the purchasing power of the people is eroding with every passing day. This spiral of economic hardship takes its toll on the credibility of the government in providing relief to the masses in trying times.



# Snow Leopard Habitat Under-Studied

*100-year literature review by WWF accentuates the need for more research to underpin conservation actions.*



## TTI Report

**R**are and elusive, snow leopard has long been called the ghost of the mountains. A recent literature review covering over a century of snow leopard research shows precisely why.

Spatial research over this period covers less than 30 percent of the nearly 1.8 million square kilometres of snow leopard range, more than 70 percent of it still a black hole about which we know next to nothing.

Titled “Over 100 Years of Snow Leopard Research – A spatially explicit review of the state of knowledge in the snow leopard range”, the study looks at published research on snow leopard conducted over the 116 years from 1904 to 2020. The idea is to examine its temporal and spatial trends across an array of thematic areas.

Evolved to live in some of the world’s highest and harshest habitats, the elusive and rare snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) are undisputed icons of High Asia.

The snow leopard habitat spans diverse landscapes, with livestock herding being the

most dominant form of land use across its distributional range in Central and South Asia. Areas inhabited by snow leopards and people often overlap, creating challenges as well as opportunities for their conservation.

Snow leopard conservation has received increasing attention in the past two decades and global interest in protecting this unique high-mountain cat continues to rise.

However, effective and efficient snow leopard conservation initiatives require multi-dimensional research and collaboration among a diverse array of actors.

National governments in snow leopard range, for instance, have repeatedly pledged their support for the conservation of the animal and the breath-taking landscapes they inhabit. These landscapes house an array of unique high-altitude wildlife and provide homes and life-sustaining natural resources to hundreds of millions of people.

The mountains of High Asia also form the headwaters of 20 major river basins, an important water source for 22 countries.

More than 2 billion people live in these basins which overlap the snow leopard range.

“Given the growing interest in and commitment towards conservation of snow leopards and their habitats, it is crucial to examine the depth and breadth of knowledge currently available to inform conservation efforts and identify gaps in that knowledge”, says the WWF report.

Snow leopard research intensified in the 1970s and studies on snow leopards have continued to increase exponentially since then. However, just four hotspots of snow leopard research (sites with continued multiyear research) have emerged, with less than 23 percent of the snow leopard range being researched.

Nepal, India and China have contributed the most snow leopard research, followed by Mongolia and Pakistan.

Pakistan has an estimated 80,000 square kilometres of snow leopard habitat, or about 4.5 percent of this majestic animal’s global range.

Pakistan's contribution to the body of knowledge accumulated over the last 116 years comes to 11 studies – or 6 percent of the total 185 studies conducted over this period anywhere.

The total area covered by this research in Pakistan comes to 8,431 square kilometres or 11 percent of the snow leopard's habitat in the country.

The WWF review revealed that snow leopard research was highly focussed on ecological research followed by studies on human-wildlife conflict. Most ecological studies focused on estimating the number and distribution of snow leopards and prey species.

However, conservationists have surveyed less than 3 percent of the snow leopard range using rigorous and scientifically acceptable abundance estimation approaches.

The lack of attention to the human dimensions of conservation was particularly stark, especially given that the majority of the snow leopard range is inhabited by local communities dependent on livestock herding.

More importantly, very few studies evaluated the effectiveness of conservation actions. A lack of evidence demonstrating and quantifying the impacts of conservation interventions is a significant knowledge gap in snow leopard research.

The review identifies the high-priority research necessary for effective

conservation planning for snow leopards and their multiple-use habitat in High Asia.

The review suggests that despite an exponential increase in snow leopard research over the past two decades, several important areas remain poorly understood.

While research on snow leopard abundance and distribution received a major share of attention, we still do not have reliable estimates of snow leopard abundance across the larger part of the snow leopard range, nor has its distribution been mapped accurately.

The WWF says there is an urgent need to diversify the agenda for snow leopard research, with an enhanced focus on spatial ecology of snow leopards in multiple-use landscapes, disease ecology, impacts of climate change, its population dynamics.

Equally urgent is the need to study the relationships between people, livestock, wild ungulates, snow leopards and rangelands and the impacts of infrastructure development on snow leopard habitat selection and use.

The social dimension of research in snow leopard range requires a major impetus and should be one of the top priorities.

The review highlights the sobering lack of empirical evidence on a variety of conservation interventions that continue to be recommended and employed with limited evidence of their efficacy.

This is specifically true for interventions on mitigating human-wildlife conflict such as predator-proof corrals, improved livestock guarding practices, efforts to enhance wild ungulate prey to reduce livestock predation by snow leopards, recommendations to increase protected area coverage and incentives and/or conservation awareness programmes to enhance the tolerance of local communities towards snow leopards.

Finally, the reviewers recommend areas of snow leopard research that require increased investment and focus to ensure that snow leopard conservation is informed by adequate knowledge of a diverse array of conservation problems, is evidence-based, and can meet the challenges of reconciling the needs of people and wildlife in the high mountains of Central and South Asia.

The review only examined peer-reviewed English language journal publications and therefore excludes the potentially large body of non-English or unpublished knowledge.

For example, several authors in the snow leopard range countries, predominantly China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, publish in Chinese and Russian language journals not covered by the review.

The exclusion of this work is likely to have affected the results, specifically in the number of publications attributed to these countries as well as the assessment of the geographical coverage of snow leopard research.



# Slow-Burn Delta Variant Driving Surge in Hospitalisations

*New round of restrictions in 24 districts extended for another week as infection rates remain high.*

By Noor Aftab

Pakistan has been in pandemic mode for a year and a half. The virus continues to spread at a slow burn and intermittent lockdowns have become the new normal.

Scientists and medical experts are constructing short- and long-term projections but majority of them agree on two things: Covid-19 is here to stay, and the future depends on a lot of unknowns, including whether people develop lasting immunity to the virus and whether seasonality affects its spread.

It is important to note that the coronavirus pandemic is not playing out in the same way as countries such as China, New Zealand and Rwanda that implemented strict restrictions and have low level of cases.

But on the other hand the pandemic is still playing havoc with lives of the people in other countries where they lifted lockdowns quickly or never activated them nationwide.

Evidence suggests personal behavioural changes, such as hand-washing and wearing masks, are persisting beyond strict lockdown, helping to stem the tide of infections. The precautionary measures will be important in the coming months because in colder weather people will more likely to stay indoors, increasing the risk of virus transmission through droplets.

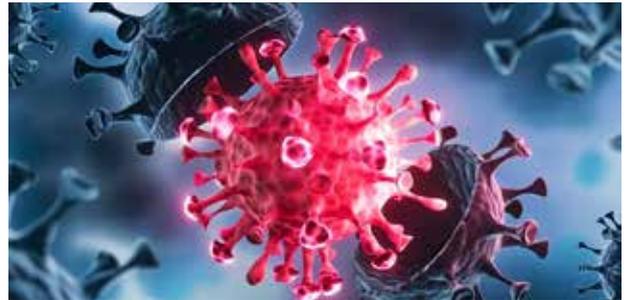
## Current statistics

The trajectory taken by the Delta variant in Pakistan has shown beyond a reasonable doubt this strain of the virus spreads faster and increases chances of hospitalisation. Currently, both hospital inflow and number of critical care patients are at the highest level since start of coronavirus pandemic.

The positivity rate of Covid-19 cases across the country dropped below seven percent in the second week of September. Total number of coronavirus cases in Pakistan is 1,194,198. As many as 26,497 patients have lost their lives while 1,076,112 have fully recovered from the disease.

Pakistan is reporting 3,885 new infections on average each day, 66 percent of the peak daily average reported on 17 June.

The country has administered at least 59,384,758 doses of Covid-19 vaccines so far. Assuming every person needs two doses, those are enough to have vaccinated about 13.7 percent of the country's population. Top five high alert cities in first week of September on the basis of positivity ratio were Mirpur (17 percent), Muzaffarabad (14 percent), Mardan (13 percent), Peshawar (11 percent), and Lahore (10 percent).



## New restrictions

On 9 September 2021, the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) extended for another week the restriction it had announced a week ago. The restrictions announced on 3 September concerned 24 districts—Punjab (15), Khyber-Pakhtoonkhawa (8) and Islamabad Capital Territory—where all private and public educational institutions were closed for a week as the ongoing fourth wave of coronavirus pandemic intensified.

Accordingly, all educational institutions remain closed until 15 September, inter-city transportation among the districts with high spread of coronavirus cases remains shut, while all kinds of indoor and outdoor functions are banned.

The government also decided that additional non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) would be implemented in specific districts from 4 to 12 September in order to decrease the spread of disease.

The NPIs had been imposed in the ICT, Sargodha, Khushab, Mianwali, Rahimyar Khan, Khanewal, Faisalabad, Bhakkar, Gujrat, Gujranwala, Multan, Bahawalpur, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Sialkot and Sheikhpura in Punjab, and Haripur, Malakand, Manshara, Swabi, Dera Ismail Khan, Swat, Abbottabad and Peshawar in the Khyber-Pakhtoonkhawa.

The restrictions in these districts were imposed on the basis of latest statistics that indicated fast spread of the virus among the people. The NCOC also announced that a single dose vaccination would be necessary for travelling on highways and motorways after 15 September, while after 15 October, no one would be allowed to use motorways without full vaccination.

## New coronavirus strain

A new coronavirus strain has been added to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) watch list. The Mu strain, also called B.1.621, has been listed as a 'variant of interest' as of 30 August 2021. There have been 48 reported cases of the Mu strain in the United Kingdom.

The strain shares mutations with other variants of concern including the Delta variant that is currently dominating in the UK and the United States. However, it is not yet known whether Mu will be able to evade the protection of coronavirus vaccines.

The Mu variant was first documented in Colombia, in January 2021. There, it has been responsible for 852 reported cases, according to the GISAID Covid-19 tracking initiative. According to data from GISAID, the strain has been detected in at least 40 countries and in 49 states across the United States.



## Vaccination targets

The federal government has set vaccination targets for 24 large cities by end September. The target for ‘Partial Vaccination’ is 60 percent while 40 percent of eligible population will be ‘Fully Vaccinated’.

According to the NCOC, 35 percent of eligible population in Pakistan has received at least one dose of coronavirus vaccine. The breakup show vaccination rate of Islamabad at 69 percent, of Azad Kashmir at 51 percent, of Gilgit-Baltistan at 39 percent, of Punjab at 37 percent, of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa at 35 percent, of Sindh at 32 percent, and of Balochistan at 12 percent.

The NCOC has revised its Covid-19 vaccination guidelines for citizens below the age of 18. The general public age group for vaccination has been lowered to 17 years. The Pfizer vaccine will be administered to those who are below 18 years of age.

The immunocompromised individuals between 12 to 17 years of age will also be vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine. However, they will currently need to show their medical documents as proof as the vaccination drive has only been opened to persons above 17 years of age for now.

The individuals over 17 years will have to get one dose by 15 September and be fully vaccinated by 15 October. Otherwise, they will not be allowed to enter educational institutions.

Diverse segments of public and private sectors would be involved in the vaccination process under the ‘whole of the nation approach’. The government officials said the mass vaccination drive strategy revolved around three objectives: motivation of public through effective media partnership, capacity building of existing vaccination infrastructure and uninterrupted supply of vaccine.

The federal government has asked the federating units to engage private sector including business community, media, religious scholars and other departments for close collaboration in this campaign to achieve the target to vaccinate 70 million people by the year-end.

## Islamabad leads in vaccination rate

The federal capital is likely to become the first city of Pakistan to achieve the status of ‘fully vaccinated’ in the face of ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The statistics show that when it comes to vaccination, Islamabad is far ahead of other cities of Pakistan and now only 31 percent of its population remains to be vaccinated.

If the vaccination process continues at same pace, all the eligible population of Islamabad will get the coronavirus vaccine in the coming months.

The positivity ratio in Islamabad is still high but the medical experts are of the view that once the city gets the herd immunity then the number of cases will come down by a considerable margin. The city had to face ‘smart lockdowns’ and ‘mini smart lockdowns’ in the past due to rising number of coronavirus cases.

## Why it matters

Climbing infection rates can overwhelm ill-equipped health systems and hinder economic recovery. It can push the country into the troubled waters where it can find it difficult to come out of the crisis. It is necessary to ‘flatten the curve’ with the help of implementation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and vaccination of the people.

The federal government should guide provinces on pandemic policy and help bolster their health systems and also permit them to devise their own local strategies guided by medical experts. It should work with the parliamentary opposition on its response, particularly on providing a safety net to vulnerable parts of the society.

## Endless battle

The fight is far from over, and the country continues to record new cases, so the nation has to show resilience against virus that has infected more than one million Pakistani people. Achieving herd immunity against the virus is still a far cry so till then strict observance of SOPs is one of the best ways to combat the pandemic.

Pakistan is experiencing fourth wave of the coronavirus pandemic and no one knows what is going to happen in the coming months and years. But one thing is certain: If we take the pandemic seriously, observe SOPs and follow the instructions given by the health experts, the situation will change in our favour.

## Learning is critical

Finding the right implementation approach requires the ability to quickly learn from both successes and failures and a willingness to change actions accordingly. Certainly, there are valuable lessons to be learned from the approaches of China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, which were able to contain the contagion fairly early.

# Delightful Cricketing Times Ahead

*With New Zealand tour starting mid-September and T20 World Cup due to kick off mid-October, cricket fever is set to well and truly grip Pakistan*

By Ali Abdullah

New Zealand cricket board announced earlier this year that their team will be touring Pakistan in September. The tour was finalized last month when their security team visited Pakistan to make sure the security is satisfactory.

The two sides will play three One Day Internationals and five Twenty-20 Internationals. The ODI's will be played in Rawalpindi cricket stadium, where's Gaddafi Stadium Lahore will host the five T20 Internationals.

The Blackcaps will be touring Pakistan after 18 long years. In 2002, there was a bomb blast outside the hotel where the Blackcaps were staying. However, they visited again in 2003. That was the last time New Zealand visited Pakistan.

After the deadly attack on the Sri Lankan team in 2009, Pakistan moved all their home series to the UAE due to security reasons.

In 2015, Zimbabwe visited Pakistan and became the first international team to tour Pakistan after the 2009 attack. After Zimbabwe, international tours started again and cricket came back to Pakistan. Sri Lanka, South Africa and West Indies toured Pakistan as well. Last but not least, Pakistan Super League eventually came to Pakistan as well.

The last time blackcaps toured Pakistan, they played five ODI's with Pakistan winning the series 5-0. Yasir Hameed scored the most runs whereas Muhammad Sami took the most wickets.

Blackcaps arrived on 12 September. They Quarantined and will play their first match on 17 September in Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium.

Cricket fans all around the world missed most of the action in stadiums over the last one year due to Covid-19 restrictions. The good news for the fans is that during this tour, stadiums will be allowed 45 percent occupancy.

## T20 World Cup Prep

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has on-screened the Pakistan T20 World Cup squad as the mega-event is set to begin in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman stadiums from 17 October.

The PCB management has drawn flak from all quarters for selecting 'unjustified' and 'poor' World Cup squad, leaving out several anticipated star players. The names of Asif Ali, Azam Khan, and Khushdil Shah have shocked everyone making it to the big event despite dull performances latterly.

Fans are surprised to see the unexpected inclusions and exclusions as multiple veterans they expected to don jerseys ahead of the World Cup have been dropped.

Shoaib Malik, the most anticipated candidate, has not been considered. Also, Sarfaraz Ahmed, who was set to be named as 'the second-choice wicket-keeping batter' has been dropped. In his place, the board has named an inexperienced Azam Khan.

Also out is the veteran bowling duo of Wahab Riaz and Mohammad Amir. On the other hand, to tackle middle-order woes, the board has brought back Khushdil Shah and Asif Ali.

The fifteen-member crew includes five batsmen, two wicket-keeping batsmen, four all-rounders, and four fast bowlers. Fakhar Zaman, Usman Qadir, and Shahnawaz Dahani have been named among the reserves.

Of the 19 players who were part of the Pakistan squad for the T20I series in England and the West Indies, Arshad Iqbal, Faheem Ashraf, Sarfaraz Ahmed, Sharjeel Khan have been left out.

Notably, the same side will feature in the upcoming home series against New



Zealand and England respectively just before the T20 World Cup 2021.

There's more drama in Pakistan cricket team as well. Pakistan's bowling coach, Waqar Younis, and head coach, Misbah ul Haq have stepped down from their respective roles. The shocking piece of news went viral straight after the T20 World Cup squad announcement for the men in green.

There was some speculation the duo have been sacked but there was no official confirmation. However, it is a big blow to say goodbye to these coaches just a few months before the big event. As team Pakistan is already without their batting coach, Younis Khan, people believe the crew will barely survive the tournament.

Misbah, who tested positive for Covid-19, was quarantined in Jamaica for the mandatory 14 days. After his return to Pakistan, his participation in the upcoming New Zealand series was already in jeopardy but he himself seems to have shied away from the responsibility. This leaves Pakistan without the batting, bowling, and head coach.

For the home series versus New Zealand, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has decided to induce Abdul Razaq and Saqlain Mushtaq as interim coaches. However, there is no say if they will continue until the World Cup.

## Ramiz Raja in the Hot Seat

*He's played cricket, he's captained, he's commentated; now's his turn to manage cricket at the national level.*



As former test cricketer and commentator Ramiz Raja takes up the reins of Pakistan's premier cricket authority, he has his job cut out for him. He has to measure up to the high standards set by his two illustrious predecessors, Ehsan Mani and Najam Sethi.

Najam Sethi had a ton of achievements under his belt. His most important contribution to Pakistan cricket has been the inauguration of the lucrative Pakistan Super League (PSL). The world-class T20 league has immediately done wonders to the state of Pakistan cricket, by introducing young quality talent.

This allowed Pakistan's limited overs side to excel. Pakistan became the number one Twenty-20 International side and won the Champions Trophy during his tenure as well. Sethi resigned from his post in 2018 after which Ehsan Mani was named the Chairman PCB.

Ehsan Mani was selected as chairman Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) in 2018 after Najam Sethi, who left a lot of expectations from the PCB as he did a lot in his time.

Ehsan Mani came when Pakistan team was at the top. It was not going to be an easy job to maintain the same level of success. No doubt Ehsan Mani and his team were able to host international cricket in Pakistan, with Bangladesh, South Africa, and West Indies touring Pakistan in his tenure.

Also under Mani, Pakistan Super League's venues in Pakistan were increased from two to four, giving Multan and Rawalpindi

the chance to host Pakistan's biggest cricketing tournament.

It seemed like Mani is doing an excellent job but overall performances by the Pakistan team were declining, although the same squad won the Champions Trophy recently. Multiple coaches were changed, chief selectors were removed, and even the captain of Pakistan Cricket Team was changed.

Sarfraz Ahmed did not play many matches after he was removed from captaincy though he was a part of 15-member squad. Once again grouping was to be seen among the officials and players.

Some of the key projects that Mani has spearheaded during his time as the PCB Chairman include submission of bids for ICC Events from 2024-2031, finalization of PCB's Future Tours Program 2024-2027, review of the HBL PSL business and financial model, and the sell PCB's commercial and domestic media broadcast rights.

Ehsan Mani's tenure ended on 25 August 2021 and he did not ask for any extension. Before leaving the office, he thanked the PSL franchise owners even though PSL franchise owners are not satisfied with the board.

After Mani's exit, Ramiz Raja and Asad Ali emerged as contenders for PCB Chairmanship. They met Prime Minister Imran Khan and Ramiz Raja was selected as the new chairman. Ramiz Raja presented his plans to the Prime Minister for the Pakistan Cricket Team and is hopeful that the team will do wonders in his tenure.

Raja's first upcoming event will be ICC World T20 and he'll definitely have his eyes on it. Though there are teams stronger than Pakistan but the tournament is like a home tournament for Pakistan as we've hosted our home series in the UAE for ten years.

The second major task for Ramiz Raja will be to build a team for PSL management as there is none at the moment. The team he puts together will have an impact on Pakistan Super League itself.

PSL is a successful tournament but the league does not have a sponsor as contract with HBL ended this year. The responsibility of signing up a new sponsor rests with the new chairman.

As Ramiz Raja is appointed the new chairman PCB the fans are delighted. They wanted a cricketer as they have seen people who had no connection with cricket were appointed as Chairman PCB. Fans believe that a mindset of a cricketer as a head of board will help Pakistan cricket to ascend in the coming future. Fans and players congratulated Ramiz Raja and wished him good luck for this innings of his life.

To the sheer delight of cricket fans, Raja has announced that skipper Babar Azam will have the power of choosing the team all by himself for ICC Men's T20 World Cup, slated to be played in October.

**By Ali Abdullah**

# Shooting Starts for Lt-Gen Nigar Jauhar Biopic Starring Mahira Khan

*A round up of what's up and what's going down in the Pakistani showbiz.*



**By Khalid Farshori**

**S**hooting has started for ISPR's Lt-Gen Nigar Jauhar biopic starring Mahira Khan and Bilal Ashraf. The movie heralds the life and career of Pakistan's first female three-star general. It will be a telefilm that will air on ARY Digital.

Mahira Khan has started shooting at Army Medical College in Rawalpindi.

Mahira posted a short teaser, rather a first look of this high-profile telefilm with a note saying, "Honoured to be able to play a woman I admire so much. Pakistan Army's first female three-star General. 'Aik Hai Nigar' traces the life and career of Lieutenant General Nigar Johar."

The telefilm is being made for ARY Digital. It has been written by Umera Ahmed and directed by Adnan Sarwar. Mahira Khan and Nina Kashif are producing the film under the banner of

their production house Soul Fry Films.

Apart from Mahira Khan and Bilal Ashraf, the telefilm also stars Khushal Khan, Sohail Sameer, Sara, and Iman Shahid.

Hailing from Swat, Nigar Johar is the first and the only woman in the Pakistan Army to have become a three-star general (Lieutenant-General).

Although, starring in such an important and touchy biopic Mahira must have grasped and rehearsed the character at her best but sources close to the "Raees" star disclosed that she is enthusiastic enough, and eagerly waiting for the completion of this project,

## Sajjad Ali's homecoming

From the mischievous 'Chief Saab' to 'Sahil Per Khare ho', Sajjad Ali is all

time favourite of music lovers. He moved from Pakistan to UAE at his carrier peak and after spending almost two decades there. The news is that Sajjad Ali has moved back to his homeland but this time he is settling down at Lahore instead of Karachi.

The credit for this development goes to Sajjad's lovely daughter Zaw Aly who was responsible of bringing her parents over.

Sajjad is not only planning new musical projects but the doors of his Lahore residence are wide open to his friends from Karachi. Nadeem Jafri and Tehmeena Khaled recently enjoyed Sajjad's hospitality in Lahore. A warm welcome with wide open arms and delicious food might not be a big deal for guests but melodious company of Sajjad Ali must be a treat to remember.

Sajjad is an ocean of knowledge and



talent, combining a noncontroversial celebrity but rumours are rumours, and those who trade in this commodity did not spare even someone like Sajjad Ali. An unconfirmed news was circulating on social media last year that he is going marry leading actress and host of Pakistan TV industry Fiza Ali.

Fiza could not remain silent on the rumours and shared a video on her Instagram account in which she openly expressed anger over the mischievous item, saying, "Sajjad Ali is like my brothers, he is my teacher, he is the capital of Pakistan."

Rumours apart, news is also that Sajjad is all set to launch some amazing music projects not only in Lahore but also in Karachi where an entertainment channel is planning something big with the maestro. Best of luck Sajjad Ali and welcome back home!

### Omar Sharif's health and marriage issue

Renowned comedian producer, director, host, and theatre celebrity par excellence Umar Sharif is facing serious health issues these days. To make matters worse, his third wife (actress) Zareen Ghazal is said to be giving him a tough time. She is allegedly all set to sell his Karachi apartment worth PKR 110 million, according to claims from his lawyer.

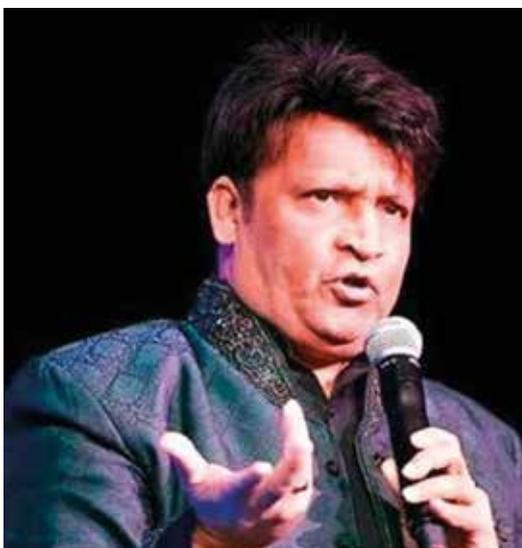
Omar Sharif is said to be amnesiac. The apartment in question was a personal investment the actor made via bank loan back in 2016. According to claims his wife made an official gift deed, following his diagnosis in 2020, and decided to move forward with the selling process without his consent.

Omar Sharif recently took to the Sindh high court in a bid to stop his third wife

from selling his personal property. Although the court issued a temporary restriction on the sale of this property until further proceedings, social and showbiz circles close to the couple are astonished to hear this surprising conflict.

Sources close to Omar Sharif are of the view that his first wife and sons are seriously concerned of his deteriorating health condition and want to resolve all his property related issues as early as possible.

Omar Sharif was born in Karachi on 19 April 1955. His first marriage was arranged his first wife lives in Lahore. Sharif then got married to actress Shakila Quraishi but unfortunately this did not last long. Omar Sharif then married popular stage dancer and actress Zareen Ghazal. She is still his wife but this property conflict between them is threatening to rock the couple's married life.



# ‘We Are No More a Filmmaking Country’

*Getting up close and personal with, Zhalay Sarhadi, actress with a heritage*



**By Kaukab Jahan**

Zhalay Sarhadi is a well-known name in the Pakistani drama and film industry. She has to her credit several hit serials like Uraan (2010), Madiha Maliha (2012), Aks (2012), Digest Writer (2014), and Rang Laaga (2015).

Starting her career as a television host in the matchmaking show Shadi Online, Zhalay rose to national fame which entices her to do more and she came into modelling and acting with full force.

Holder of a masters degree in Psychology, Zhalay keeps a solid stance on several political and social issues. She is the niece of television actor Khayyam Sarhadi and granddaughter of Zia Sarhadi, a prominent screenwriter and film director of Golden Age Of India.

The Truth International (TTI) talked to Zhalay about her recent work, future plans and her thoughts on many socio-political issues.

**TTI: You work very little in dramas these days but your recently ended drama ‘Yaar Na Bichray’ was a sleeper hit. What did you find unique in that script?**

**ZS:** It was a different script. Every character was diverse and well placed. I give this credit to my director Mohsin Talat and the whole production team of Momal Entertainment. My character, Fiza, was taken as a negative one, but it had many shades. She is a protagonist, antagonist, and victim at the same time. Most of all YNB had a very good response from the audience.

**TTI: You belong to a family of filmmakers but seem very selective in doing films. Why?**

**ZS:** At the moment, we are no more a filmmaking country. We have lost that trend. Our most successful film actress has only five to six films on her credit. Moreover, our writers don't know how to write a film nor can our directors make it in a cinematic way.

A very few directors in Pakistan like Nadeem Baig and the duo of Nabeel Qureshi & Fizza Ali Meerza know how to create a proper film. If we get more of like them and our cinemas are reopened with more screens, there is a hope. So, let the operations resume, you will see me there as well. My first love is being on the big screen.

**TTI: Does the new trend of web series on digital platforms provide one with working on a variety of issues?**

**ZS:** Yes, It does. In television, we are bound and stick to limited topics. Moreover, because of TRPs, channels are repeating the same stories and characters. So things have become stagnant for an actor. The web series has not only increased the amount of content but also given a choice to explore a variety of issues and other new things with less restriction. There, actors, directors, writers and producers all have access to extend the margin. I firmly believe that the next thing is digital and we must work on that more seriously.

**TTI: Do you think we would face some restrictions even in this open world of digital media?**

**ZS:** Yes it is true that we would be more open in that medium but what do we mean by openness is yet to be decided. Some people think that liberty and boldness means women are drinking alcohol in short clothes but I think there are many other things which we can express on digital media. We can't compare ourselves with India. That society has different thoughts and patterns.

**TTI: Your looks and height are perfect for modelling. Why didn't you continue that?**

**ZS:** I have always loved acting but also do modelling in fashion shows and campaigns. I feel that modelling has an age limit whereas an actor is not restricted to any particular age.

**TTI: Is age really a factor for a heroine of a film?**

**ZS:** Not really. It is only in the subcontinent. Our content doesn't support a female actor as heroine after crossing her 30s. Our heroine is someone who is singing and dancing around, or a college girl who is going to marry soon or a confined and dependent girl. These characters can only be in their teens or early 20s. So here comes the limitation of age. To me, the heroine is a central character of a film or a drama or a story. I think right now to get good characters is almost next to Impossible.

**TTI: In Hollywood, Meryl Streep does a lead role at 62 and even gets an Oscar. So what do you think we should do to take out industry on that path?**

**ZS:** I think we should write stories of every age bracket. We are just limited to the stories of young girls, who are mostly troubled by another girl and a young man comes to save the troubled one. Actually, male actors are just fillers in our dramas. We stick to this formula because it was a hit.

In the West, the canvas of stories is very vast. Their catharsis is a woman from every walk of life. They show a working woman and a mother as central characters. I am sure we would start doing the same. The current example is the web series, Churails, in which the leads were four different women of different ages with different stories. So we need to explore that a little more.

**TTI: You belong to a family with a political thought. You also seem to inherit that trait on various occasions. Would you like to make a drama or series on any social or political issue?**

**ZS:** Yes, why not. People generally think art is all about entertainment but to me, art is always thought provoking. Art, whether in the form of painting, a book, or any audio or visual piece, is always something, which incites you to actually think about life itself.

So whatever the topic is, political or social, as an artist it is our responsibility that instead of showing them what is good and bad tell them what is happening and let them think about how they reach to solve these issues by letting little changes in thought and actions. So raising questions is necessary.

I am not one of those who keep standing quietly on the side line to show myself as naive. God has given me a brain. I have my education behind whatever I do. So if I have an awareness of right or wrong, I would definitely talk about it.

**TTI: Do you have any particular ideas for a film or series?**

**ZS:** There are many. The list is endless. We just talked about ageism. We can work on that issue as well. In our society ageism is not only restricted to the entertainment industry. It is everywhere in every house. A girl when reach to the age of 25 is considered old if not being married. We all resonate with these issues but don't talk about them.

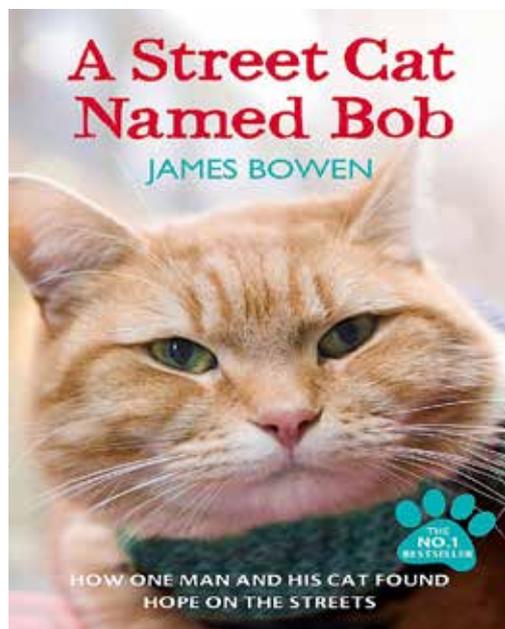
**TTI: What would Zhalay be doing in the next five years?**

**ZS:** I have no idea. I don't plan for the long term. I go with short term goals. My focus is always on whatever I am doing should give me inner satisfaction. I am a workaholic and love creating things. I might not be doing acting or singing, but whatever it would be, keeps me and people around me happy and content. So, I really don't know where I will be in the next five years. Maybe I would still be acting!



## A Street Cat Named Bob

**Author:** James Bowen  
**Reviewed by:** Alizay Ashraf  
**ISBN:** 978-1-444-73711-0  
**Publisher:** Macmillan  
**Pages:** 279



James is a recovering drug junkie who is attempting to sort his life out, filling in as a road artist in London. Bob is a ginger stray cat who one day shows up on the doorstep of James' apartment complex needing food and TLC and with a character that gets the hearts of everybody around him. These two interesting spirits from that point on structure a common friendship. James hardly makes a decent living by playing his guitar in the city of London, generally overlooked by the occupied bystanders. At some point, Bob follows him on the transport into town, serenely rides on his shoulders as they explore the roads to discover their corner, and afterward subsides into his guitar case as James begins to play. The pair continues on to selling *The Big Issue*, a magazine distributed in the interest of and sold by destitute or weakly housed individuals.

I don't peruse books about animals, however this sure pulled at my heart strings and caused me to acknowledge everyone should meet the affection for

a pet in some measure once in their lives.

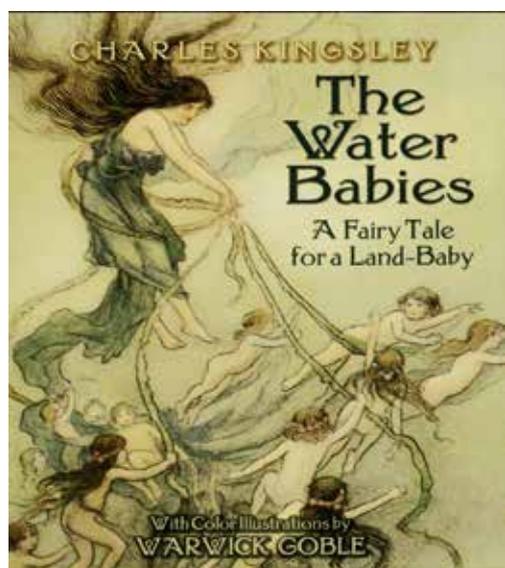
This is an story of adoration and commitment and how some of the time we are sent little indications of help and support we simply need to figure out how to remember them. James was glad to the point that he focused on hanging out with the cat.

It is such a simple, sweet and a heart-warming story. Some themes the novel are devotion, trustworthiness, and friendship. James had to persevere through all the demotivating things said about him. Bob and James were both loyal to each other and trusted one another. Apart from the themes, justice does play a part in this story.

I really liked reading, because it was such a hearty story, one of the books that makes u obsessed. *A Street Cat Named Bob* would speak to all ages I believe, it's written in extremely basic language, it is simply a decent tale about a man and his cat.

## The Water Babies

**Author:** Charles Kingsley  
**Reviewed by:** Alizay Ashraf  
**ISBN:** 1-85813-537-0  
**Publisher:** Children's Classics  
**Pages:** 157



Tom, a helpless orphan, is utilized by the hateful fireplace clear, Grimes, to come up inside vents to gather up the residue. While occupied with this awful job, he becomes lost in the room of Ellie, the youthful girl of the house who damages him for a cheat. He ran off, and worked up, he slips into a cooling stream, falls sleeping soundly, and turns into a water child. In this new life, he meets a wide range of oceanic animals, including a drawing in old lobster, other water children, and finally arrives at St Branden's Isle where he experiences the wild Mrs Bedonbyasyoudid and Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby. After a long and exhausting journey to the nowhere, youthful Tom accomplishes his deep wish.

The book began quite well, yet by the end it was a bit too much. There were such a large number of examples attempting to be instructed, and the actual story began getting incredibly

senseless with the Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Doasyouwouldbedoneby. It was somewhat extra.

This book is very well written. It gets quite interesting and full of underwater adventures. However, there was also a lot of racism in the book. At one point, Tom, the water baby is talking to some salmon, which are big, well-bred fish in this novel, and they're talking about how the trout are inferior to them, so "ugly and brown" and so degraded in their tastes that they will eat salmon children.

In any case, I loved the story, and the book wasn't horrible. It got more careful to ignore as the novel went on. I imagine that while reading *The Water Babies* one should recollect what the writer says twice in the book, which isn't to accept an expression of it, regardless of whether it is true or not. I would recommend this book for children above the age of 10.

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