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15th - 28th February 2022

PDM Meeting

No-trust motion and Long March announced

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March is coming!

By Hammad Ghaznavi

The month of March is approaching and political pundits agree it's going to decide the future course of Pakistani politics. If the government survives the next two months, Imran Khan is likely to be the first Prime Minister of Pakistan completing his five years' term. In the past three and a half years, the Opposition has been sporadically making efforts, mostly half-baked, to oust the government, and failing. Once again, the Opposition is active, smelling a chance to send the government packing. Is there actually a 'chance' on the horizon or the opposition is chasing a wild goose?

First, look at the bridges being built among the hitherto fractured opposition. There is a scurry of meetings between the key political players, with PPP co-chairperson Asif Ali Zardari, after a long political hibernation, visiting PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif, and then seeing the Chaudhries of Gujrat; and the MQM delegation visiting Shehbaz Sharif to discuss issues of 'mutual interest'. Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), considered a handmaiden of the powers-that-be, has also suddenly voiced dissatisfaction with the federal government. Most importantly, the Jahangir Tareen group, comprising a sizable chunk of legislators, is coming out of its political slumber as well.

The opposition is not hiding the reason behind its supercharged mode. "We are going for the no-confidence motion in the National Assembly against the prime minister," the opposition leaders are repeating in unison. The IK government enjoys the support of 182 NA members while the opposition's numerical strength is 162. The government will lose majority if some of its allies decide to leave the

treasury benches, or the Jahangir Tareen group chooses to desert the party. Those fully aware of the backdoor communications insist the Jahangir Tareen group is going to play the key role in the upcoming political episode.

When asked about the reason for their optimism as for the success of the no-confidence move against the government, the opposition top cats have one 'decisive' thing to say – the powerful people have gone neutral. This one-liner seems the primary reason for all political hullabaloo in the capital. It was no secret that Imran Khan, to put it mildly, was helped by the powerful quarters to enter the prime minister's office. The Establishment, time and again, openly indicated, come what may, it was in full support of the IK government. Likewise, from Imran Khan and Fawad Chaudhry to Sheikh Rashid, the PTI leadership never let go an opportunity to repeat the 'same page' mantra, as a proof of its strength and a guarantee of the completion of its 5-years term. The opposition believes, finally, this all has changed; the 'same page' is binned, and the establishment has committed to the opposition to be neutral.

PDM chief Maulana Fazalur Rehman is convinced that the establishment proved its neutrality in the KPK local bodies' polls, and the results of the first phase of LB polls only reconfirm it. The disqualification of Faisal Vowda, a blue eyed boy of the establishment, is presented as another proof of the now non-partisan establishment. "It was not easy to convince PML-N supremo Mian Nawaz Sharif of this claim of neutrality because of the past betrayals. But after solemn guarantees, he is ready to give it a try," says a Lahore-based PML-N stalwart.



Earlier, Nawaz Sharif was not in favour of a no-confidence move against Mr. Khan, knowing that no such move could succeed without the Establishment's neutrality. Now he is openly supporting the move, many argue, having received the relevant guarantees; which is why Maryam was present in the Zardari-Shehbaz meeting in Lahore.

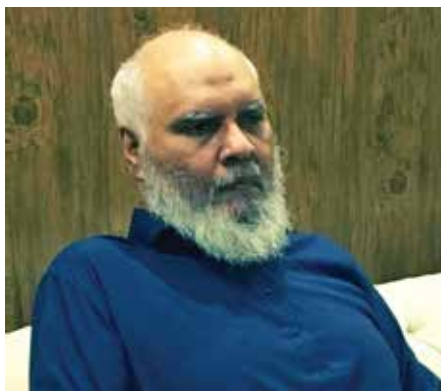
What has forced the powers-that-be to go neutral? It is the failure, the critics of the hybrid regime argue, of the government on literally all counts including accountability and economy. Above all, it is the inflation that has broken the back of the man in the street, causing widespread anger against the government and its backers. Hence, the institutional decision to step back to avoid more flak. Besides, senior analysts cite a key appointment/extension in the next couple of months as the real cause of friction between signatories of the 'same page' leading to the rising political temperature.

Can the neutrality of powerful players ensure the success of no-confidence move against Imran Khan? Not necessarily. In 1989, the no-confidence move against Benazir failed despite full support of the Establishment. The IK government has a lot at its disposal, from the FIA to NAB, to counter the opposition onslaught – even if it is left alone to defend itself. IK has already asked its party legislators to start a vigorous mass contact campaign. IK has the reputation to fight till the last ball is bowled.

Anyway, March is approaching to decide the future course of Pakistani politics not only for the remaining term of Imran Khan but for the next few years.

Another doctor makes a diagnosis

By M A Niazi



It was good to know that Imran Khan is not alone. We were all introduced to his medical expertise by the diagnosis of Mian Nawaz Sharif that he made when Mian Nawaz left the country, when he took one look at the back of his head in a photograph and pronounced him fit. Dr Shahbaz Gill is doing the same thing, and has diagnosed the fraudulence of the medical reports that Mian Nawaz submitted. Shahbaz Gill has done his doctorate in business administration, and returned from the USA after there was a sexual harassment accusation against him. His medical skills have remained unknown until now.

Meanwhile, Mian Nawaz's doctor, an interventional cardiologist, was revealed to be an Indian. There was an angry squawk from that he was A Valley Kashmiri, and didn't like being identified as an Indian.

Well, then, how did he get from Kashmir to the UK? On a Bolivian passport? Or a

Malawian? I presume he is in the UK legally. Besides, what if Mian Nawaz did consult an Indian doctor? The prohibition is something I would expect from the BJP. Like Modi going to a Muslim Doctor.

Besides, if you don't see anything wrong in Imran inviting Indian film stars to perform at his fundraisers for the Shaukat Khanum, why object to Mian Nawaz seeing an Indian doctor?

Besides, this is a doctor who self-identifies as Kashmiri. Was his Kashmiri-ness why Mian Nawaz consulted him? I am reminded of the saying about Greek meeting Greek. Here we have a Kashmiri meeting a Kashmiri. Though I presume the discussion didn't centre about the woes of the Kashmiri people.

I'm not sure that the two met on Saturday, which was Kashmir Solidarity Day. Even if they did, I don't know how much they talked about the oppression there being committed by the Indian forces. When Greek meets Greek, they say, then comes the tug of war, which means that so united the Greeks in defence of their country that, when all stood shoulder-to-shoulder, nothing could defeat them. Does the tug of war come after Kashmiri meets Kashmiri?

Here was one Kashmiri doctor who didn't identify as an Indian. But then, what about Dr Farooq Abdullah, who was the puppet CM of Indian-Held Kashmir? He studied in the UK. Did he identify as an Indian?

Imran Khan has moved to greater heights of the medical profession, and has left the diagnosis of ruffraff to Shehbaz Gill. He has gone to China, where he will take one look at President Xi Jinping and diagnose him with a deadly disease, which he will then disclose can only be cured if Pakistan is given \$3 billion. Given, mind you, not lent. Any fool can ask for a loan, but only a doctor can get money. Xi might have heard another saying, that a fool and his money are soon parted.

Maybe that's why the IMF has only lent Pakistan the money, not given it. Besides, it knows that while Pakistan is likely to complete the current programme, it'll be back. So we shouldn't be too puzzled by the conditionalities like an income tax hike and an increase yet again in the power tariff. Those are the preconditions of the next programme, which will be needed to pay off these loans.

Of course, if China was to give us the money, we might be able to avoid going to the IMF. Well, let's see if Xi laughs in Imran's face, or waits for him to leave. But he should pay. The IMF asks funny questions about CPEC funding. And it doesn't want the money it puts up used for repaying Chinese loans. So if there is any reason why China doesn't want its dealings examined, it should put up the money. As they say, no pain, no gain.



Curtains for Kaptan - or For His Detractors?

If the opposition's purported no-trust motion fails, Prime Minister Imran Khan will emerge stronger than ever



By Khalid Wasim

Amid rising political temperatures in the country, the opposition parties, which had already given separate calls for holding anti-government long marches next month, have now decided to bring a no-confidence motion in any of the legislatures to oust Prime Minister Imran Khan's ruling coalition from power.

However, it seems they have made the announcement without doing proper home-work, as was acknowledged by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the President of opposition Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), during his brief media chat after presiding over a meeting of the heads of the component parties of the alliance in Lahore on 11 February.

Responding to a volley of questions about the timing of the move and the opposition's future strategy after its success or otherwise, the Maulana categorically stated that he could not provide any timeframe as the coalition needed to do "home-work" before executing their plan.

He also confirmed that the opposition did not have the required numbers for such a move for the time being.

Fazl also announced that the opposition had decided to constitute a committee to approach the government allies in an effort to seek their support. The Maulana, who is also the head of his own faction of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F), rightly declared that the opposition's move could never succeed without depriving the ruling PTI of the support of any of its allies.

Political experts see the PDM's decision regarding the no confidence

motion as a U-turn as previously the two major component parties of the alliance – the PML-N and the JUI-F – were sternly opposed to the idea, originally floated by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) last year.

Surprisingly, this time around, the PML-N now seems more keen and active about the undertaking than the PPP.

It is not clear if the PML-N is doing all this after getting some signals from the real power players or it is just a move to put pressure on the government ahead of their planned long marches to unnerve the cricketer-turned-politician and to force him to commit some political blunder.

Some political observers believe that the neutrality of the "umpire" in the recently-held first phase of the local government elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the cantonment boards' elections in Punjab has encouraged the PML-N and the JUI-F to embark on the no-confidence expedition.

Over the last few days, the top leadership of leading opposition parties converged in Lahore and discussed the possibility of closer cooperation among them in and outside the parliament.

It was after almost a year of strained relations that the top PPP and PML-N leadership met in Lahore and agreed to put their differences aside for the common cause of sending the Kaptan packing.

Former president Asif Zardari and his son PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari met PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif and vice-president Maryam Nawaz

Sharif over lunch in Model Town and then they met the Chaudhrys of Gujrat, one of the major allies of the PTI in Punjab, thus showing that this time the opposition means business.

During the Model Town meeting, Maryam Nawaz reportedly connected Asif Zardari with her self-exiled father Nawaz Sharif over the phone and the two talked about moving together for a common cause.

After the meeting, Shahbaz Sharif confirmed to journalists that there was a "difference of opinion" within his party over the issue of a no-confidence motion against the PTI government, which had pretty much been cleared now.

Both the PPP and PML-N have announced separate long marches on Islamabad with the former's set to start on 27 February and the latter's on 23 March. According to Shahbaz Sharif, the option of a joint long march was also discussed in the meeting.

"We have gathered on a single-point agenda: To save Pakistan from further destruction, sending the PTI government home is inevitable," the PML-N leader had remarked. "If we do not go for its ouster the nation will never forgive us. This crisis situation has forced us to join hands".

On this occasion, Bilawal with his signature smile said the PML-N leadership had taken his party's suggestions very seriously.

During the meeting, the PPP leadership reportedly talked about its original proposal of bringing a no-confidence motion against Punjab Chief Minister



Usman Buzdar to test the waters before taking up the bigger challenge to topple the federal government.

Mr Buzdar was elected the Punjab chief minister with a margin of just three votes against the PML-N candidate.

The PPP is of the view that the PML-Q can support the move, if it is given the option of forming the government in Punjab. Besides the PML-Q, the opposition also thinks that a group of about 30 Punjab MPAs and eight MNAs headed by PTI dissident Jahangir Tareen can also be approached for making their move success.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Muttehida Qaumi Movement (MQM) also reached Lahore to meet the PML-N and the PML-Q leadership, fuelling even more speculation about the future of the existing setup.

The leaders of both the PML-Q and the MQM handled the reporters' questions after their respective huddles quite intelligently and did not directly comment on the opposition's no confidence move and kept their stance ambiguous.

Commenting on the development, one of the political commentators said these two parties were considered barometers for the establishment's mood and it seemed the two parties had adopted a wait-and-see policy and would determine their course of action only after getting a green signal.

In an apparent move to counter the opposition's plan, Prime Minister Imran Khan has decided to hold public meetings across the country. His party colleagues, however, are adamant the PM's mass contact campaign has nothing to do with the opposition's protests.

They insist it is being launched solely in connection with the upcoming second phase of LG elections in KP and Punjab.

The timing of the PM's public mobilisation campaign is significant after the PTI's defeat in the first phase of LG polls in KP. It is believed that it was after a harsh reaction by the Prime Minister over the previous results that the lower cadres of the party have now asked Imran Khan to himself lead the campaign and tell the people about the causes of the prevailing unprecedented inflation in the country.

Minister of State for Information Farrukh

Habib has already stated that Imran Khan will himself lead the mass-contact campaign on the desire of PTI parliamentarians who wanted him to 'directly inform the masses' about mega initiatives and priorities of the party.

Daily Dawn in its 9 February editorial titled "Desperate strategy" wrote: "The ruling PTI has decided to launch a major public relations effort using 'Brand Imran' to lift its sinking political fortunes as the opposition ramps up its efforts, both inside and outside parliament, to oust the government."

The party leadership thinks it can sway the voters, who have been heavily impacted by the dire economic conditions under the PTI's rule, through their direct interaction with the PM.

The very fact that PTI leaders want Mr Khan to lead the campaign even for LG polls betrays their nervousness about their party's electoral prospects in view of the public's frustration.

Admittedly, Mr Khan is the face of the ruling PTI, says Dawn, adding: "However, the trouble is that he has little to offer after more than three and a half years in power. It has been a period marked by poor governance, rising cost of living and surging unemployment.

"A fixation with the so-called accountability of political rivals and empty anti-corruption slogans won't be enough to resurrect his party's popularity. That the man on the street isn't happy with the economic performance of his government is a reality and, under these circumstances, anti-opposition campaigns cannot win over public support."

"The PTI is also facing another problem. The events of the last few months — such as its tensions with the military leadership over the appointment of the ISI chief and losses in the cantonment board elections and the local polls in KP— have cast the government in a vulnerable light. Sensing an opportunity, the major opposition parties are again coming closer to join forces in order to send the government home".

The opposition's narrative is also getting some strength from the dissenting voices coming from within the PTI. Former special assistant to the PM Zulfi Bukhari while commenting on the resignation of

Shahzad Akbar demanded that those showering praises on Shahzad Akbar's 'excellent work' for years must also be exposed and sacked, stating that it is highly wrong to throw him under the bus alone.

Former information secretary of the PTI Ahmed Jawad is openly lambasting Imran Khan in talk shows on mainstream media. The disqualification of Faisal Vawda by the Election Commission of Pakistan is also said to be a major setback for the PTI, and it also carries a signal for Mr Khan.

In another shocking development for the PTI, Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) senators staged a walkout from the Senate on 11 February as a mark of protest against their party's demands being ignored.

Perhaps sensing that it is an appropriate time to drive a better bargain, BAP is now complaining that it has not been given due representation at the federal level in three and a half years of coalition rule.

Amid all these happenings, the most damaging step for the government was taken by none other than by Imran Khan himself when in an unprecedented move, he distributed certificates among 10 ministers for showing excellent performance.

Key federal ministries that could not make the list were foreign affairs, finance and information. A number of disgruntled ministers were found openly expressing their reservations over the development.

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who is also the vice-chairman of the PTI, came up more openly and shot a letter of protest to SAPM on Establishment Arbab Shahzad, expressing serious reservations over his ministry's exclusion.

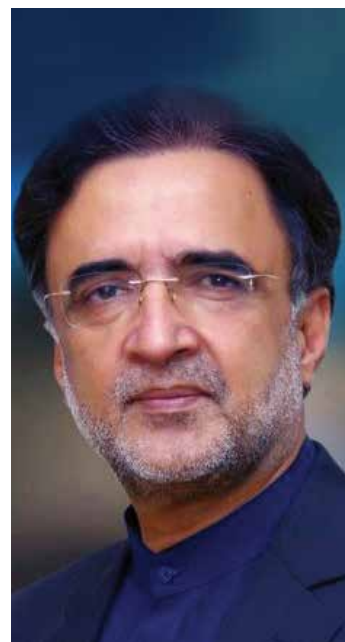
Political experts believe that it was an ill-timed move by the Prime Minister in the prevailing political scenario and that Imran Khan needs to avoid committing such political mistakes if he wants to see the opposition failing in its objectives.

On balance, it is still difficult to say whether the opposition's no-trust motion will materialise, and if does, whether it will succeed. One thing, however, is certain: If Imran Khan survives this last ditch attempt at ousting him from power, he will emerge from the melee stronger than ever.



PML-N-PPP Marriage of Convenience

Can the two heavyweights make the relationship work despite their deep-seated mutual mistrust?



By Sarfraz Raja

Call it a love-hate relationship if you will, but the two heavyweights of Pakistan's politics can neither stay apart nor together. The relations between Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have a history of ups and downs and it has been a roller-coaster ride for both.

The two parties were seen trading barbs a few weeks back when the opposition majority suffered a defeat in Senate with one vote on the controversial State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) amendment bill. Tongues got wagging especially over the mysterious absence of about a half dozen opposition senators including the leader of Opposition Yusuf Raza Gillani.

And yet, a few days down the line, everyone witnessed exchange of smiles, positive gestures and commitments of a joint struggle against Imran Khan government by top leadership of both sides on a surprise invitation and lunch hosted by the Leader of Opposition in the National Assembly, PML-N President Shahbaz Sharif.

This now on, now off relationship has a history of decades. Nobody has forgotten the politics of 90s still used for references.

That was the time when PML and PPP were arch political rivals, two major parties to replace each other in power. They used to go any extent to topple other's government.

Severely harsh statements, use of non-parliamentary language, and activities of that era are considered a dark chapter of the country's political history which continued for more than a decade.

Things started to change after the military takeover of 12 October 1999 toppling Nawaz Sharif Government. Although the PPP leadership initially supported Gen Pervez Musharraf's coup, the exiled leadership of both parties soon realized that they were victims of Pervez Musharraf's accountability slogan and their politics and parties were being curtailed.

They joined hands for a reconciliation pact called Charter of Democracy (COD) in which both sides confessing their previous mistakes agreed on a joint charter for the future. Later with a National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), PPP leader Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan and PML-N leadership including Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif as well.

Both parties started their election campaign for 2008 general election and that was the time a political maturity promised in CoD was witnessed in their election campaign but then came the dark day of 27 December 2007 when PPP Chairperson Mohtarama Benazir Bhutto was murdered in Rawalpindi after her successful election gathering in historic Liaquat Bagh.

After losing Benazir Bhutto, PPP participated in elections under the vision of their new leader Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of the late Benazir Bhutto, and emerged victorious with a majority seats in National Assembly and province of Sindh while PML N was second largest party in center and single largest in Punjab.

Initially PPP and PML-N jointly formed government in the center and Punjab but a few months later, PML-N left federal government for their differences regarding restoration of judges ousted by Gen Pervez Musharraf for not taking oath under his provisional constitutional order PCO. So love of few moths again comes to an end.

Soon afterwards, PML-N led a successful march against PPP government to seek restoration of the judges and we also



witnessed an extreme step of imposition of governor rule in Punjab by PPP's federal government against PML-N's provincial government. That hatred continued into general elections 2013 when both parties contested elections against each other.

But then they found a challenger in Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which emerged as the third political force in the 2013 general election. After the election, in which PML-N swept to power in center and Punjab, PTI raised allegations of rigging and PPP leadership endorsed these allegations.

In 2014, when Imran Khan started his protest March against rigging and sit-in in front of parliament targeting not only Ruling PML-N but PPP and other parties who were part of parliament including Maulana Fazalur Rehman's JUI. Love age began again where PPP along with other parliamentary parties backed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif against the protesting PTI and its demand of PM's resignation in a joint sitting of both houses of parliament that continued for days.

But after Senate elections of March 2018, PPP and PTI joined hands against PML-N and successfully supported Sadiq Sanjrani, a third party candidate for chairmanship, against PML-N candidate Raja Zafar ul Haq.

Although PML-N before nominating him as candidate had offered PPP to nominate former Chairman Raza Rabbani as joint candidate of Chairman Senate, this offer was rejected by Asif Ali Zardari. During the campaign of general elections 2018, again both sides targeted each other in their election gatherings, and PML-N leaders termed PPP and PTI as two sides of same coin.

After 2018 when Imran Khan government was formed, both PPP and PML-N came closer and another love age began. Both parties decided for a no confidence move against chairman Senate as they had nearly two third majority collectively, much more than required for removal of chairman but at the end surprisingly they could not prove it in a secret poll, leading to a fresh rift and distrust between the two parties.

In September 2020, both parties again joined hands against PTI in an all-parties

conference hosted by PPP, and established a new opposition alliance Pakistan Democratic Movement, but this age of love remained limited to just under six months.

In the March 2021 Senate election, the two parties' closeness led to a major success on Islamabad seat where they successfully elected their joint candidate, Yusuf Raza Gillani of PPP despite government alliance's majority in National Assembly.

However, the alliance stumbled a few later when they lost their joint candidate for Chairman despite majority in Senate, again leading to some severe criticism from within parties and around political circles.



But when PPP nominated their candidate as leader of opposition without consultation that move again begins hatred and both sides start criticizing each other openly ultimately leading to a breakup in PDM as well.

Although after that, both sides politically parted their ways but inside Parliament, their cooperation continues. In January 2022, when the government presented controversial state bank bill, it passed the floor by just one vote (43/42) where few of opposition senators remained absent including leader of opposition. This again led to criticism not only from PML-N but also from PPP's benches.

A few days later, as Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari accepted invitation

of lunch by PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif and join them on that event, both sides again come closer and expressed their determination for a joint struggle against the government.

Asked about all these ups and downs in PPP-PML-N relationship, a senior PPP leader says that both sides have different ideologies and political narratives, and they could only join hands when they have a common objective. He says it is not something unusual as history shows that parties with opposite ideologies come together for a common cause.

On the other hand, PML-N senior leader Khawaja Asif is on the record saying Asif Ali Zardari is not to be trusted. Another senior PML-N leader in an off-the-record chat termed PPP and PML-N relations as a marriage of convenience but for him both sides have some hash memories of past and in fact they are political rivals of past and future as well.

So love and hate would continue as politics goes on. Sources say that PPP trying to bring other parties to their page for a no confidence move in Punjab and center but the mistrust between PML-N and PPP specially due to successive defeats in the Upper House despite majority is a hurdle.



The Always Imminent Return of Nawaz Sharif

Irrespective of his party's posturing about his imminent return, the elder politician is clearly biding his time



By Ahmad Waleed

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has remained centre stage in Pakistan's politics for the last three decades, and especially since he was disqualified and later allowed to leave for the UK to seek medical treatment.

The leader of his own Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Sharif has a history. He rises to power and is dethroned, and then he returns to power again. He is sent into exile by the powers that be and comes back again to play his part in the tumultuous political history of Pakistan.

Now he has gone to the UK, ostensibly to seek medical treatment. But he is in no mood to sit silent. Every now and then, a simple photo of him walking in London is released to stir a social media uproar back home. On other days, he just launches a blistering attack on his rivals or the players behind the political scene. This has become his signature style of politics.

Lately, he is again in the limelight as there are rumours of his imminent return to

Pakistan. Do these rumours have substance or is Nawaz Sharif waiting for the right time to stage his comeback?

Although he travelled to the UK for his treatment with the approval of the government, the amount of criticism he faces at the hands of PTI leaders is enormous. No doubt, they have managed to gain mileage from the narrative they try to build on his prolonged stay in the UK while no treatment has been done so far.

"Nawaz Sharif should return home and face the cases against him" is the hackneyed refrain Imran Khan's cabinet ministers and his gaggle of spokespersons are sworn to repeat ad infinitum.

He has still not got the treatment he was supposed to have while he is enjoying a luxurious life in London apartments, they insinuate. He is a convict and he must return and complete his jail term, they foam and froth.

The rumours of Sharif's imminent return have electrified the political climate in

Pakistan. Many believe he should come back and fight for his cause of 'Respect the Vote'. On the other hand the PTI government claimed that Nawaz Sharif is not returning on his own rather he is being brought back by the government. The former czar of anti-graft body Shahzad Akbar was assigned the task to bring him back, but he failed and lost his job in return.

The UK Home Office has rejected his application of extension in his visa on medication grounds while an appeal has also been filed with the British Immigration Tribunal challenging the rejection by the Home Office.

According to immigration experts, Nawaz Sharif can prolong his stay in UK as the Immigration Tribunal takes years to decide about his appeal. Moreover, his sons are British national and they can also sponsor him for being dependent of the family. Thus he has many options available for him to extend his stay as long as he wants.

Whereas in Pakistan, the federal govern-



ment recently instructed the office of attorney general to ask the Punjab government to initiate proceedings of apparent violation of the undertaking given before the Lahore High Court by his younger brother Shahbaz Sharif to constitute a medical board to examine the medical reports submitted by Shahbaz Sharif and Nawaz Sharif. The Punjab government has been informed that Nawaz Sharif may be fit to travel back to Pakistan as per the solemn and binding undertakings and commitment made before the Lahore High Court.

The opposition leader in National Assembly, Shahbaz Sharif, replied that the letter seeking fresh reports on the medical condition of Nawaz Sharif is driven by 'political motivation' and is tantamount to 'contempt of court' since the matter was already pending with the Lahore High Court.

Prior to the departure of PML-N supremo to London, Shahbaz Sharif had submitted an undertaking to the LHC that he would ensure return of his brother 'within four weeks or on certification by doctors that he has regained his health and is fit to return to Pakistan'. Shahbaz Sharif lamented that the attorney general has not read this very paragraph of the undertaking.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court Bar Association has filed a petition in the apex court to seek cancellation of the lifetime ban slapped on Nawaz Sharif and others. The petition raises the question if a lifetime bar can be read into Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution when its plain language does not stipulate as much?

If the apex court invalidates the lifetime ban, several politicians will benefit besides Sharif, including PTI leader Jahangir Tareen and former President Pervez Musharraf.

In other developments, the fresh medical report of Nawaz Sharif submitted to the Lahore High Court has stirred a political storm in the country. It says Nawaz Sharif should stay in London 'until his angiography is performed as travel could worsen his condition'.

Issued by Sharif's cardiologist Dr Fayaz Shawl, the report said that the thrice prime minister of Pakistan should continue his 'medication and walk in the fresh air'.

It also recommended him to 'take precautionary measures to protect himself from Covid-19 and refrain from travelling or visiting crowded places as the virus can have severe effect on him due to his heart condition'.

The report has specifically mentioned that the patient is under 'severe stress after the death of his wife Kulsoom Nawaz' and he was advised to continue activities without any mental stress.

"Nawaz Sharif had started taking Empagliflozin 10mg to control his diabetes which has affected his kidneys; therefore, his condition is to be taken seriously," the report warned. Dr Shawl said that he could be contacted in case any questions arise about the report.

On the other hand, it is not exactly a secret that his senior party colleagues do not wish him to return just yet.

The PML-N Punjab President Rana Sanaullah has categorically stated that the party is unanimous on the point that their leader Nawaz Sharif should not come back as the current regime has resorted to political victimisation of its rivals.

Similar views have been expressed by another senior leader, Pervez Rashid, who said Nawaz Sharif should stay there until his full recovery and unless the party is given an 'assurance'.

It is believed that the rumours of his return are aimed at keeping the spirits of party workers and voters high. Several people who met the PML-N supremo in London in recent weeks, including senior journalist Suhail Warraich, have offered some glimpses into the thinking of Nawaz Sharif.

According to Warraich, Sharif told him that he would first have his treatment when the pandemic subsides and would only think about returning to the homeland afterwards. This clearly means he is in no hurry to return.

All things considered, there is little doubt that the PML-N supremo is biding his time until he sees an opportunity to stage a comeback.





Will Vawda Face Criminal Proceedings for Perjury?

Disqualification from Senate is the beginning, not the end of the consequences for his false affidavit



By Asadullah

Faisal Vawda's case has proven yet again that while the mills of the Pakistan's legal system may grind slowly, they grind exceedingly fine.

After about a couple of years of meandering through hearings and adjournments in a case of lying on oath, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has finally disqualified the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) leader from holding parliamentary office for life.

But this is only the beginning, not the end of consequences for the errant politician's submittal of a false affidavit along with his nomination papers for the 2018 general election. The executors of the law of the land may be knocking on his door over the matter sooner rather than later in the coming days.

Mr Vawda has become victim of the judgment authored by former Chief Justice Saqib Nisar on the petition filed by journalist Habib Akram.

Just before July 2018 General Elections, Akram invoked the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court against the Elections Act saying that the lawmakers had relaxed the condition of disclosing their information in the nomination papers.

Subsequently, the apex court with the assistance of the ECP prepared a detailed pro forma affidavit related to the nationality, assets and other details of the candidate to be used for mandatory disclosure.

The Supreme Court order said: "failure to file such affidavit before the Returning Officer would render the nomination papers incomplete and liable to rejection. If the affidavit or any part thereof is found false then it shall have consequences, as contemplated by the constitution and the law.

"Since affidavit is required to be filed in pursuance of the order of this court, therefore, if any false statement is made therein, it would also entail such penalty as is of filing a false affidavit before this [Supreme] Court."

The ECP bench headed by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) disqualified Senator Faisal Vawda for concealing his US citizenship and also directed Mr Vawda to return within two months the salary and other benefits he had received as a minister and a member of the National Assembly. It also de-notified him as a Senator.

However, the last paragraph of the said order stated that Mr Vawda will have to face consequences.

It says: "We unanimously hold that notification dated March 10, 2021 to the extent of respondent as a Senator be withdrawn forthwith on account of filing false affidavit, misstatement/false declaration on oath which bear consequences."

Vawda secured National Assembly seat of NA-249 in the July 2018 General Election by narrowly defeating Mian Shahbaz Sharif, the President of Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N).



However, a complaint against him was filed in 2020 before the ECP that at the cut-off date for the filing of nomination papers, he was holding dual nationality. Subsequently, a petition seeking his disqualification was filed in the Islamabad High Court (IHC).

Mr Vawda frequently sought adjournments from the ECP and IHC on one pretext or another. He finally resigned from the National Assembly's seat in 2021 to get rid of the disqualification case and was elected as Senator. Although the IHC did not disqualify him as he had already resigned, the court warned of consequences for submitting false affidavit.

It may be mentioned that previously, in 2016 a Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) MNA retired Justice Iftikhar Cheema survived while adopting similar strategy. He was facing a disqualification case for concealing the assets of his ex-wife whom he had divorced decades ago but could not execute the divorce deed from the Arbitration Council.

Realizing his fault, Justice Cheema resigned from the National Assembly and contested the election again after making correction in the record.

The legal team of Mr Vawda was relying upon the case of Justice Cheema besides other legal precedents. However, this turned out to be a miscalculation as they had failed to keep in mind the precedent of the 2018 Habib Akram case.

When Mr Vawda was elected as Senator, he faced another complaint of concealing his dual nationality in 2018. He challenged the ECP's proceeding before the Islamabad High Court (IHC) where Chief Justice Athar Minallah heard Vawda's petition. Justice Minallah dismissed his petition and allowed ECP to proceed against Senator Vawda.

On 12 November 2021, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah disposed of Vawda's petition with a direction to the ECP to conclude the proceedings on the application to ascertain as to whether the lawmaker was a dual national at the time of filing of nomination papers for National Assembly.

IHC Chief Justice observed that in case the ECP found anomalies in Vawda's declara-

tion, he might be proceeded against for contempt of court since the five-member bench of the Supreme Court had declared that filing a fake affidavit before the returning officer would be contemptuous and besides disqualification it would entail penal consequences.

Since the ECP cited both Supreme Court and IHC's order in its verdict, a senior official of the commission confided that Mr Vawda will soon face criminal cases for filing false declaration.

He said that since the Supreme Court has given the direction that filing false declaration before Returning Officer will be treated as making false declaration before the Supreme Court, therefore, the consequences for Vawad will be severe.



According to him, a District and Sessions Judge can initiate criminal proceeding against Vawda.

The three member bench of ECP declared: "In exercise of powers under Article 218(3) of the Constitution, read with Section 8(c) of the Elections Act 2017, we conclude and hold that the respondent at the time of filing of his nomination papers for the constituency was not an eligible/qualified person in terms of Article 63(1) (C) of the Constitution and has submitted false affidavit and declaration to this effect which squarely falls within the ambit of Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution."

Resultantly, "the respondent, who has since resigned from the membership of National Assembly, is directed to refund all monetary benefits drawn by him for the period during which he occupied the seat of National Assembly and held the public office and drawn his emoluments from the public

exchequer including monthly remunerations, TA/DA, facilities of accommodation along with other perks which shall be deposited with the secretary, National Assembly, within a period a two months".

The order also said that it was a matter of record that the respondent had filed a false affidavit along with his nomination papers before the returning officer on 7 June 2018, on the basis of which he contested election for the seat of National Assembly and thereafter became a federal minister.

"Admittedly, he tendered his resignation from the seat of National Assembly on 03.03.2021 [polling day for Senate elections] when the case was being argued before the Hon'ble Islamabad High Court, which makes his conduct doubtful as he in order to cover his guilt resigned from the seat of National Assembly after casting vote as MNA for Senate elections and presented himself for the seat of Senate. Such an act further makes the issue doubtful.

"Therefore, we unanimously hold that notification dated 10.03.2021 to the extent of respondent as a Senator be withdrawn forthwith on account of filing false affidavit, misstatement/false declaration on oath which bear consequences," read the order.

The vote Mr Vawda had cast in the Senate polls held on 10 March 2021 as a member of the National Assembly was also invalid, said the written order announced by the CEC.

In the order, the commission observed that a person holding a nationality or citizenship of another country was required to obtain a declaration form from the country in question regarding the renunciation of his nationality to qualify as a citizen of Pakistan.

The ECP noted that during this case, Mr Vawda accepted that he did not hold any kind of declaration regarding the renunciation of his US nationality at the time of filing his nomination papers in 2018. This, the ECP said, meant that the declaration he submitted as part of his nomination was false.

The ECP had on 24 December last year reserved its verdict on petitions seeking disqualification of Mr Vawda over concealment of his US citizenship.



The Sindh Showdown Over Local Governments

The parties' views of the eventual shape of the third tier of government remain divergent



By Azfar Ashfaq

Despite cold weather, political temperature is running high in Sindh and particularly in its capital Karachi over the recent passage of a local government law by the provincial government. All parties in the opposition, irrespective of Sindh's infamous rural-urban divide, are up in arms against the move by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government, which they see as an attempt to further snatch the powers and functions of local governments by bulldozing in the provincial assembly in December 2021.

Three major opposition parties in the Sindh Assembly — the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) and Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) — opposed the Sindh Local Government (Amendment) Bill tooth and nail in the assembly. However, they were left with no option but to boycott the proceedings when the ruling PPP declined to incorporate any of their proposals or even hold a debate on the new law.

While the three parties having combined strength of 65 in the 168-strong Sindh Assembly formed a steering committee to formulate a joint strategy to mobilise the public against the PPP, it was the Jamaat-i-Islami — which has only one

lawmaker in the house — that took the lead and launched a protest sit-in that many believe forced the PPP to retreat from its tough stance.

And the Supreme Court of Pakistan's decision that came on 1 February on a petition filed by the MQM-P in 2017 against the Sindh Local Government Act (SLGA) of 2013 vindicated the opposition's stance about an empowered local government system.

The development apparently obliged Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah to form a five-minister body to finalise amendments to the LG law so that these could be tabled in the upcoming session of the Sindh Assembly in mid-February.

JI's 28-day sit-in

On 31 December 2021, a large number of workers and supporters of the JI, led by its energetic city chief Hafiz Naeemur Rehman, converged outside the Sindh Assembly building in protest over the new local government law. The protest turned into a sit-in and Hafiz Naeem announced that it would not be ended until the party's demands i.e. withdrawal of the law, are met.

Initially, the PPP government was dismissive

of the protest. Its hawkish ministers issued a statement against the JI refusing to hold talks with a party that according to them did not represent masses or have significant presence in the provincial assembly.

Sindh Information Minister Saeed Ghani who on 17 January mocked the JI when he told reporters that “a party with just one member in the Sindh Assembly is dictating the majority party having 100 MPAs to adopt the local government law of its own choice” and that JI's demands were “not practicable”.

But when the sit-in continued despite harsh weather conditions, strong winds and intermittent rains, the PPP moved forward its dovish Local Government Minister Syed Nasir Shah. He met the JI leadership, held several rounds of talks in a bid to convince the JI to end its sit-in as the Sindh government will accept the party's not all but main demands. The talks were deadlocked until 26 January when the MQM-P staged a protest rally.

Police crackdown on MQM-P rally

The MQM-P had announced a rally in protest against the LG law from



Shahrah-e-Faisal to the Karachi Press Club (KPC). But instead of going to KPC the rally entered the so-called Red Zone and staged a sit-in in front of the Chief Minister House.

A large number of protesters, including women and children, were present there and they were joined by party's central leadership. They believed no action would be taken against their peaceful protest as JI's sit-in going on in the Red Zone was not very far from the CM House.

To their utter surprise, a heavy contingent of police resorted to a brutal use of force against unarmed protesters in a bid to disperse them. Video clips showing policemen lobbing tear gas shells, beating up women with small children and smashing windshields and windowpanes of vehicles went viral on social media and mainstream media sparking widespread anger against the PPP-led Sindh government.

The chief minister distanced himself from the police action and ordered an inquiry, but this did not improve the image of his government and the whole issue was being seen in the context of the ethnic divide in the province. With public sympathies with the MQM-P, questions were being asked as to why a similar action was not taken against the JI, which was also present in the Red Zone.

Against this backdrop, the PPP and JI met each other again on 27 January and finalised their agreement, which many believe amounts to little beyond mutual face-saving. Under the accord, the PPP agreed to amend the LG law to give back control of major administrative affairs, including health, education, water supply and sewerage system, to the local administration and the JI agreed to end its sit-in.

Sindh LG Minister Nasir Shah reached the JI sit-in and announced from the stage that the next mayor of Karachi would be the chairman of the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board, and that the government would set up the provincial finance commission (PFC) within 30 days after the LG elections and devolve motor vehicles tax to the local governments.

Hafiz Naeem announced ending the sit-in but warned of more protests in case the promises were not fulfilled.

However, there was no dearth of those who took a dim view of the deal. MQM-P's Faisal Subzwari told participants of a protest rally that the JI had actually helped the Sindh government and its agreement provided face-saving to the PPP that had been facing the backlash of police torture on peaceful protesters.

The PTI also termed the agreement an outcome of match-fixing and said the JI had completely neglected the genuine concerns and agreed on provisions already part of the 'black' LG law.



While the PPP has not yet started talking to the three-party opposition alliance, Leader of the Opposition in the Sindh Assembly Haleem Adil Sheikh in a thinly veiled reference to the JI said that the Sindh government talked to a political party that did not represent the masses while the opposition alliance having the public mandate was not being consulted.

PSP sit-in ends in six days

As soon as the JI wound up its protest, Mustafa Kamal-led Pak Sarzameen Party (PSP) staged a rally on 30 January that turned into a sit-in on a main thoroughfare of Karachi.

Earlier, a PPP delegation led by Nasir Shah had visited PSP headquarters informing Mr Kamal that the Sindh government was ready to talk and that there was no reason to imitate the JI.

But as the famous saying goes, perception is stronger than reality, the party chose to stage a sit-in by blocking Deen Muhammad

Wafai Road for six days in an apparent show of street power.

The PSP ended its protest after signing an agreement with the Sindh government on the night between 4 and 5 February. The 10-point agreement between the PSP and Sindh government is quite similar to what the PPP had agreed with the JI.

Under the accord, the government of Sindh has agreed to implement Local Government system in the entire province "as envisaged under Article 140-A of the

Constitution in letter and spirit" to devolve political administrative and financial powers to the elected representatives of the local governments "by amending prevailing laws enacted in the province of Sindh".

Other points include activating the PFC and creation of divisible pool and that the Octroi Zila Tax (OZT) will not be treated as part of divisible pool.

However, the Sindh government did not accept a PSP demand through which it wanted all development authorities in the province, particularly Karachi, to be devolved to local governments.

Instead, the government merely agreed to allow the respective local government heads "a leading role" in all development authorities of the province including KDA, MDA, LDA, HDA, SDA, water & sewerage boards, solid waste management, building control authority and master plan department.

The Sindh government did not accept PSP demands to change the status of Karachi from Metropolitan Corporation to Metro-



politan Government, holding of direct election for mayor and devolution of food authority, mass transit, labour welfare and district registrar to local government.

The Supreme Court verdict

On his last day in office, Chief Justice of Pakistan Gulzar Ahmed pronounced a verdict reserved in 2020 on a petition of MQM-P filed in 2017 seeking an empowered local government system. The court maintained that Article 140A of the Constitution obligates provinces to establish local governments possessing meaningful authority and responsibility in the political arena, and administrative and financial matters.

The landmark judgement declared that local government is the “third tier of the government as provided by the Constitution and, being government at grassroots level, has direct impact on the citizens in their day-to-day living”.

But the part of the verdict pertaining to the functions of the local government was more worrisome for the Sindh government that has over the years deprived the local governments of almost all their important functions.

The SC ruled against Sections 74 and 75(1) of the Sindh Local Government Act 2013 and declared them ultra vires of the Constitution. These sections provide excessive delegation of powers to the provincial government in matters relating to management and control of LG institutions. The PPP-led provincial government used these

provisions over the years to take over various local government functions and made laws to create new organisations under provincial control.

The SC ordered the provincial government to bring all the provincial laws about water board, Lyari and Malir development authorities, Sindh food authority, solid waste management board, master plan authority, etc., in accord with the mandate of Article 140A of the Constitution.

Following the SC order, Sindh Information Minister Saeed Ghani said the petition was filed before the enactment of the Sindh Local Government Act 2021 through which the Sindh government had already taken into account various things ordered by the apex court.

He said except striking down Sections 74 and 75 of the Sindh Local Government Act of 2013 the SC did not say anything in its order against the existing provincial local government system.

He said the Sindh cabinet had formed a five-member committee to do further work to improve the law in view of the talks with the opposition parties and the recent SC order and in the meantime formation of town municipal administrations in Karachi had been deferred until the next local government elections.

However, many MQM-P leaders believe that the judgement has left PPP with no choice but to make an entirely new LG law, which it did not want to do. To avoid this, they say, it is making deals with parties like JI and PSP to retain the basic structure of the flawed Local Government Act of 2013

with some inconsequential amendments.

This was evident with the agreement it signed with the PSP as the Sindh government refused to accept those demands which had already been ordered by the apex court in its landmark judgement.

Opposition parties, on the other hand, seem intent on upping the ante following the SC ruling.

“The agreements between Sindh government and different parties have become irrelevant following the decision of the Supreme Court on our petition,” says MQM-P convener Dr Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui.

“We will launch a strong movement across the province if the SC decision about local government system in Sindh is not implemented in letter and spirit by the provincial government.”

While the PPP has not yet decided to challenge the Supreme Court verdict, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah already hints at delaying the LG election during a visit to JI head office.

“We are in February right now and if we complete the process of amendments and the Election Commission completes the delimitation, then we think it may take another month or two. But we all know that there would be Ramazan in April. So let’s see,” he had said.

While the PPP is set to present an amended LG bill in the upcoming session of the Sindh Assembly next week, the joint opposition comprising PTI, MQM-P, and GDA are gearing up for giving it a tough time. Clearly, the battle is far from over.





A Watershed Moment for JUI-F in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Come the second phase of KP LG polls, JUI-F looks set take the majority of KP's local governments, all by itself



By Ghulam Dastageer

The first phase of the local government elections held on 19 December 2021 in 17 districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has literally forced the political analyst to re-consider their drawn political conclusion: Seeing Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) as the major political force of the north-western province of the country.

After emerging as the largest party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the 2013 general election, Imran Khan's PTI had to form a coalition government to rule the province until 2018, but it could not complete a single mega project in the province during this period.

However, despite its failure to deliver, PTI clinched a two-thirds majority in the province come general election 2018. This resounding victory was in line with its performance in the May 2015 local bodies' polls, when it had emerged as the strongest political force of the province.

With this track record in mind, most of the political analysts reached the conclusion that, like Pakistan People Party (PPP) having strong roots in Sindh and Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) in Punjab, PTI has also succeeded to establish itself as a regional political force of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Moreover, it was believed that despite the fact PTI did not come up to the expectations of the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the people of KP see no other option because other parties have likewise failed them earlier, so none qualified as a viable option to rid them of the inefficient rule by PTI.

The results of the local bodies elections held on 19 December 2021 in 17 districts of KP have demolished all these assumptions.

Beside other factors, the ever-increasing inflation in the country, since August 2018

when the PTI took the reins of power, was the major reason behind the PTI's poor showing on the ballot box.

The two-phased elections started with balloting in 17 districts—Bajaur, Bannu, Buner, Charsadda, DI Khan, Hangu, Haripur, Karak, Khyber, Kohat, Lakki Marwat, Mardan, Mohmand, Nowshera, Peshawar, Swabi, and Tank—having 66 tehsils.

The electorate had to elect, besides their representatives to village and neighbourhood councils, chairs for tehsil councils and mayors for the city tehsils of the districts—having the status of the divisional headquarters.

As per the results of the 41 tehsils announced by the Election Commission of Pakistan, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam - Fazl (JUI-F) has emerged as the leading party securing seven tehsil chairmen slots,



followed by PTI with six seats. Results for 23 tehsils councils are pending, as the ECP announced re-polling on 221 polling stations in these constituencies after receiving complaints of grave violations of election rules.

In addition to these 23 tehsil councils, fresh elections would also be held on 13 February in Baka Khel tehsil of Bannu district—where the elections were postponed owing to the security concerns—and city tehsil of Dera Ismail Khan district due to the assassination of a candidate hailing from Awami National Party.

The incomplete results of these 23 tehsil councils show that JUI-F has a clear majority in Peshawar city tehsil, Haleemzai tehsil (Mohmand), Lachi tehsil (Kohat), Domel tehsil (Bannu) and Khar tehsil (Bajaur). PTI is leading only in Takht Nasrati (Karak) and Nawagai (Bajaur) tehsils. If JUI-F maintains its lead, the number of its tehsil chairs and mayors would jump to 12, while PTI to eight.

Despite the fact that the PTI had an edge to have its governments in the province and

Centre, which usually have a remarkable influence on the local bodies' elections, it badly failed. The debacle has promoted PTI chair Imran Khan to dissolve the party organization.

The second phase of the local government polls—to be held in Hazara division excluding Haripur district, Malakand Division excluding Bajaur district and tribal districts of Orakzai, Kurram, North and South Waziristan—may prove even more disastrous for the PTI.

It can perhaps record some gains in Malakand Division, but it would be an uphill task for it to secure seats in Hazara Division, widely-considered to be a bastion of PML-N and tribal districts where JUI-F has strong roots.

Thus, the next phase of the local government elections looks set to further undermine the ruling party.

But as PTI has seen its fortunes dwindle, Maulana Fazl-ur-Rahman's JUI-F looks set to tighten its hold on KP. This will go down as a watershed moment in the party's history as it is about to accomplish the feat

as a single party and not as part of a coalition.

People in various districts of the province have started joining JUI-F by parting ways with their respective parties, especially with PTI. For instance, Engr. Ehteshamul Haq, the son of the PTI Senator from Dargai Fida Muhammad, has recently joined JUI-F. He may be pitched as the candidate of JUI-F for Dargai tehsil nazim slot in the second phase of local government election.

However, it is heartening for PTI to have bagged highest votes in the local bodies' election. It got a total of 639,000 votes, followed by JUI-F with 634,000 votes, ANP with 404,000 votes, PML-N with 238,000 votes and Jamaat-i-Islami with 164,000 votes.

But despite that PTI would be facing a daunting challenge in the next general elections, because in local government elections some electorate opt to vote to the candidates of the ruling party, hoping that they can resolve their problems easily. PTI will have no such advantage in the next general election.





Punjab Local Government's Law Stonewalled?

It seems Prime Minister Khan's party is looking to hold Punjab LG polls under an ordinance – if at all

By Ali Raza

After how the local government elections in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa turned out for it, it seems Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party is jittery about local government elections in Punjab.

No surprise there, but what can it do about it? Well, this is exactly where things get interesting. Perhaps it can delay the election until a later time; or, it can hold the election under a law decreed by its own governor, without any discussion.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the opposition Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) have so far failed to reach a consensus over a proposed local government law, which may delay the local bodies' elections in the country's most populous province.

The Punjab government has promulgated the Punjab Local Government Ordinance 2021. The draft, approved by the cabinet, was later sent to the standing committee where it was under discussion for enactment through the assembly.

But PMLN's member of the standing committee Awais Ahmed Khan Legari says the government and the opposition are at a standstill over this bill.

The standard practice of discussion over draft laws involves the treasury and opposition members discussing its sections one by one. Leghari said two weeks back, the government members stopped reading the sections and called off the meeting.

The discussion over this draft, which has a total 222 sections, had reached section 82 at that point, and opposition members had proposed over 50 amendments in 30 to 35 of the sections read.

Leghari says said no meeting has since been called.

"We told the government to read the bill by section to section but they wanted us to have a presentation," he said.

The opposition has serious concerns over municipal committees and town commit-

tees, the senior politician from South Punjab said adding in the bill the districts were not given enough financial powers.

To a question about the way of conducting local bodies' elections, he said that was also confusing. He said the government said it has to purchase 66,000 Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) for the first phase and around 200,000 technical staff will be needed to operate these machines.

"So far we don't have any timeframe for purchasing EVMs and training of staff," he said and maintained that on the other hand Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had started the process of delimitation.

"Having elections of the third tier of the government through an ordinance is a joke," he said adding Lahore High Court has already decided that no retrospective changes could be made in any law and the present Local Government Ordinance was also against the decisions of the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

Recently, Speaker Punjab Assembly Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, who is an ally of the PTI government, also held meetings with government's team and discussed the law draft.

Sources with the knowledge of the discussion said Elahi expressed his reservations over several clauses of the proposed bill. Observers say following the results of the first phase of local bodies elections in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, the PTI government in Punjab was feeling threatened and using delaying tactics.

Under the Punjab Local Government Ordinance, very small functions were granted to local bodies especially in urban areas, which included town planning, land regulation, tax collection and maintenance of infrastructure

Another point of disagreement in the ordinance was that it stated that reserved seats to the council will be elected on a joint ticket with the head of the local government, through a simple majority.



stated that in case of Lahore this means that citizens of Lahore will cast one vote each for a mayoral candidate, who will bring along 42 other council members in tow, which means that the winning party automatically gets a two-thirds majority in the city council.

In addition to this, if for example, citizens of Lahore vote for the remaining 28 general councilors in the same party proportionate way as for the mayor, the winning party will also get an additional minimum of 14 seats, ending with 56 out of the 70, well above the two-thirds they already had.

The officer said that these injunctions remain open to criticism by the opposition and they may approach the courts against this large-scale reservation in district or metropolitan councils.

Sources said the final PLGA 2021 manuscript under discussion proposes creation of 11 metropolitan corporations, nine at divisional headquarters and one each in Sialkot and Gujrat. It has also identified 15 municipal corporations and proposed a municipal corporation status for Murree. Each municipal corporation will have population less than 250,000 people.

Similarly, 109 municipal committees and 125 town committees will be created in the urban local governments having more than 50,000 and 25,000 population, respectively.

A Wish List Is Not a Strategy

The NSP's push for breaking free of the IMF is laudable, but it has nothing on how to get there



By Mehtab Haider

Pakistan's National Security Policy unveiled through some of its excerpts envisages that Islamabad will make all-out efforts to refrain from getting external loans from the multilateral lenders including the IMF, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank. But given the situation of Pakistan's economy, this amounts to little more than wishful thinking.

The question to ask at this juncture of our history is where is the alternative based on which we can say goodbye to the IMF on a permanent basis. Without having broad-based consensus and a medium- to long-term plan, there is no way this dream can be realised.

The existing cycle of IMF sponsored program is linked with the political cycle of the government's tenure. The IMF's current USD 6 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) will complete its life in September 2022-23, about a month after the completion of the incumbent government's five-year term and a couple of months after it presents its last annual budget.

Unfortunately, the macroeconomic projections drawn by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff for the Fund's recent staff report on the

occasion of completion of the sixth review and release of USD 1 billion tranche under EFF program are far from rosy.

The IMF has projected Pakistan's GDP growth at 4.5 percent in the next fiscal year 2022-23 while inflation was expected to remain on the higher side.

Pakistan's Gross Financing Needs (GFN) on the external front will peak at USD 41.8 billion at the end of five-year term of the PTI-led regime in the fiscal year 2023-24. The external financing needs for the current fiscal year 2021-22 ending on June 30, 2022 have also been revised upward by the IMF to USD 30 billion. It is projected to go up further go up to USD 35.06 billion in the next fiscal year 2022-23 and will witness a peak of touching levels of USD 41.88 billion in the fiscal year 2023-24.

Pakistani authorities, according to the IMF, have remained engaged with external creditors to secure financing to meet the program debt sustainability objectives. China has maintained its exposure by renewing (and augmenting) the USD 4.6 billion swap (USD 3 billion at the time of EFF approval), as well as by renewing maturing commercial loans, though some at shorter maturity.

China also provided an additional USD 1 billion loans in July 2020 through the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, raising its deposits to USD 4 billion. Recently, the authorities have also secured a USD 3 billion deposit at the central bank and a deferred oil financing facility from Saudi Arabia.

The G-20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI)—recently extended by a third-round until December 2021—has helped reduce short-term financing risks and provided around USD 3.8 billion in total (1.3 percent of FY 2021 GDP) of debt service suspension and rescheduling to outer years. Nonetheless, near-term financing risks remain elevated, reflecting the large size of public sector amortization needs.

On Debt Sustainability Analysis (DSA), the IMF states that Pakistan's public debt continues to be judged as sustainable, consistent with the DSA published at the time of the second-to-fifth reviews of the EFF in March 2021. Debt ratios have since been revised downwards due to a slightly stronger-than-projected exchange rate at end-FY 2021 and a higher growth outturn.

While the extension of the Debt Service

Suspension Initiative (DSSI) until the end-December 2021 (covering about USD 1 billion of debt service in FY 2022) continues to provide relief in the short term, the forward-looking path for gross financing needs (GFN) has been revised upwards due to larger-than-expected reliance on short-term domestic issuance since late March 2021.

Nevertheless, public debt and GFN to GDP are projected to firmly decline over the medium term, supported by the EFF program fiscal adjustment path and efforts to enhance cash and debt management.

Pakistan's total debt is estimated at 88.6 percent of GDP at end-June 2021 (4.6 percentage points lower than at end-FY 2020), reversing the increase associated with the Covid-19 crisis and falling below end-FY 2019 levels before the start of the EFF program.

The trajectory of debt is expected to continue to decline to 70.4 percent of GDP by end-FY 2026, supported by a favourable interest rate-growth differential outlook, and fiscal adjustment efforts in the context of the EFF program.

Independent economists argue that on a short-term basis, there is no choice but to seek assistance from the IMF in view of annual gross financing needs of over USD

30 billion, projected to peak at over USD 41 billion in a couple of years.

However, the IMF always projected gross financing needs on the higher side at the time of completion of Fund sponsored program for making a case to convince and lobby Pakistani authorities for securing fresh bailout package by demonstrating that there is no other choice available with them. The IMF is considered as the lender of the last resort so they also project financing requirements on the external front on the higher side.

There is also a need to break this cycle of maturing the IMF program with the completion of five-year term of the government in Pakistan. It becomes difficult for politically elected regimes to take tough decisions at the twilight of their five-year term so there is a dire need to de-link the IMF program with the completion of the IMF program.

Dr Khaqan Najeel, former Advisor to Ministry of Finance, told The Truth International (TTI) there was no option available on short term but to seek IMF support to avert a crisis like situation on economic front.

However, he is of the view that Pakistan requires medium- to long-term plan by undertaking structural reforms to generate

more revenues, make the energy sector competitiveness, boost remittances and exports, and undertake aggressive import substitution. Only then can the country hope to put its economy on an even keel without an IMF program.

In short, Pakistan cannot achieve sustained long-term growth without promoting investments and savings because of the perpetual imbalances on fiscal and current account deficit.

However, there are other economists like Dr Ashfaq Hassan Khan who argue Pakistan must say goodbye to the IMF. They argue Islamabad is currently on the wrong side of Uncle Sam in the wake of the changed geopolitical situation so any IMF program will have tough conditions attached.

The choices are difficult but there remains no doubt that Pakistan's economic woes cannot be overcome while maintaining the status quo. The need for structural reforms is real and urgent.

All these structural reforms require broader political consensus among all major stakeholders including politicians, military establishment, judiciary, and bureaucracy. Failing this, the dream of breaking free of the IMF will remain just a daydream.



Markets Love the Restoration of Pakistan's IMF Bailout

The program may indeed be doing something right – although the salaried class has been left to foot the bill



By Javed Mahmood

The markets have weighed in, and their verdict is a resounding yes for the restoration of Pakistan's IMF (International Monetary Fund) bailout. The rupee has firmed up following the resumption of the EFF (Extend Fund Facility), recouping some of its lost value against dollar, and PSX has put on about 1000 points in short order.

In fact, the rupee is steadily gaining against the dollar and other major currencies from the day the government had passed the much-maligned SBP amendment bill and the IMF announced disbursement of USD 1 billion tranche.

Before approval of the IMF loan, the dollar-rupee exchange rate in the inter-bank was fluctuation around 178 rupees while in the open market the dollar-rupee parity was moving in the narrow range of 180 rupees.

However, after the IMF programme's revival, the dollar-rupee exchange rate has declined around 174.50 rupees in the inter-bank and 176 in the open market. Experts are saying that this exchange rate will further decrease in the days ahead because of expected improvement in the foreign exchange reserves.

However, for how long the value of rupee will remain stable, no one knows it because it is linked to the trend of current account and trade deficits.

Pakistan Stock Exchange is another economic indicator which has shown a significant growth after the approval of the SBP amendment Bill and IMF programme. As of 9 February 2022, the KSE-100 index was edging over 46,000 points, up from less than 45,000 points prior to the resumption of IMF loan facility.

After a spell of volatility with major jolts until January 2022, PSX is now expected move forward steadily amid a hope of economic revival in the country.

Nonetheless, some analysts still insist the IMF programme is no good. It will boost inflation, increase the cost of doing business, and create more difficulties for businesses and households alike.

For instance, the government had already abolished subsidies and in the coming budget, the IMF wants Pakistan to raise the rate of income tax and generate more than PKR 400 billion in additional tax revenue.

In simple words, the focus of the taxation would be the same people who are already paying taxes. None of the IMF stipulations requires the government to reduce pay and perks of legisla-

tors or bureaucrats or otherwise minimize non-productive expenditure.

Forex reserves

In addition to improvement in the dollar-rupee exchange rate, the foreign exchange reserves of Pakistan are also expected to improve with Pakistan receiving the USD 1 billion tranche from the IMF as well as USD 1 billion in proceeds from the a Sukuk issue in February 2022.

Additionally, with the IMF programme back on track, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other multilateral credit agencies are expected to advance further loans to Pakistan in 2022 and 2023.

In the month of January 2022, the State Bank of Pakistan reported nearly a USD 1 billion forex decline in the country's forex reserves because of payment of foreign debt and mark-up. On 14 January 2022, SBP reported a decline of USD 560 million in its foreign exchange reserves while on 28 January 2022, the SBP lost another USD 400 million as a result of which the foreign exchange reserves with the central bank fell to USD 15.72 billion while the commercial

banks maintained their reserves around USD 6.3 billion dollars.

With the resumption of the IMF programme, the pace of erosion of forex is expected to slow, bringing relative stability to the level of forex reserves in coming months.

Competitiveness is the key

IMF's Resident Representative in Islamabad, Pakistan, Ms Esther Perez Ruiz has said that Pakistan must not suffice to taking just tax measures, and the government should also find ways and options to enhance the competitiveness of the economy.

Mr Ruiz was speaking to the representatives of the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Feb 9, 2022. She was of the viewpoint that IMF programme is to promote macroeconomic stability and Pakistan's fiscal and monetary policies must support this economic coherence.

Ms Ruiz further said the IMF programme's

aim is to introduce policies, which further promote a sustainable and inclusive growth.

She said that since Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio was low and a key purpose of abolishing the sales tax exemptions to the industry through the recent finance bill was to reduce the complexity in the taxation system.

Ruiz further said, "We want Pakistan to achieve a long-term growth with stability in the economic system and to achieve this goal, there is need to first endeavour to enforce macroeconomic policies," she said.

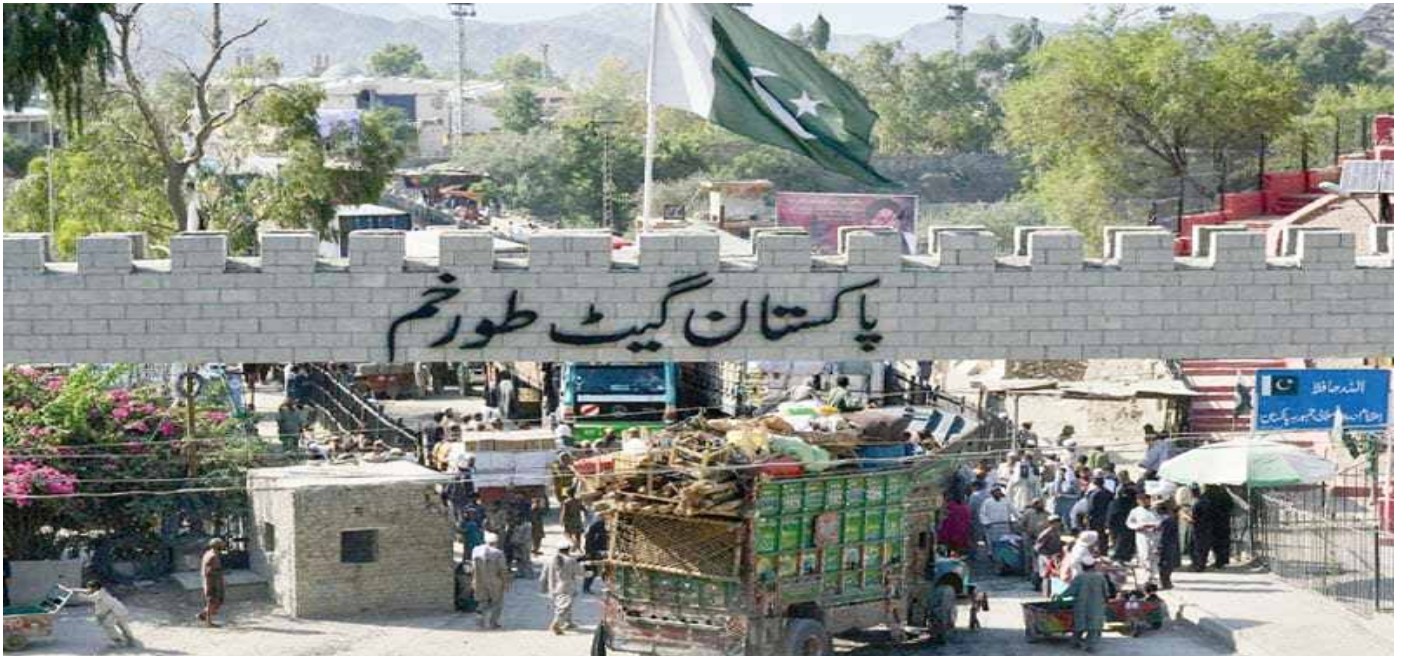
Meanwhile, sharing viewpoint of business persons about the IMF conditions, President Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry Mian Nauman Kabir said the LCCI was sensitive about the impact of Pakistan's 22nd IMF programme on the national economy, including the private sector growth.

LCCI chief said, "We will witness the successful completion of this programme just like the 21st programme".



The Uphill Task of Jumpstarting Pak-Afghan Trade

Traders say the utility of allowing trade in PKR remains limited in the absence of banking channels



By Azeem Waqas

With the banking sector of Afghanistan on a standstill and foreign currency hard to come by for the country's beleaguered traders, Pakistan is attempting to provide some relief by jumpstarting bilateral trade through the use of Pakistani rupee and barter mechanisms. The task, however, remains uphill, several prominent trade leaders tell The Truth International (TTI).

Pakistan has started trading with Afghanistan in Pakistani Rupee (PKR) instead of the US dollar and restored barter trade mechanisms with the neighbouring country to lend some support to its depreciating currency while promoting bilateral trade after the Taliban takeover of the country.

Finance Minister Shaukat Tareen is on the record having said that Afghan traders were taking USD 20 million per day to Afghanistan, which was contributing to the devaluation of the Pakistani currency. The federal Government has now allowed 14 items to be traded in Pakistani Currency with Afghanistan.

As per an official notification, exports of fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and meat were already allowed in Pakistan

currency whereas new additions are rice, fish and fish products, poultry, meat and products, sugar confectionery and bakery products, fruit, nuts and other edible parts of plants, oilcake and other solid residues, vegetable materials and vegetable waste, salt, cement, pharmaceuticals, matches, textile and textile articles, building stone, and surgical instruments.

The decision came in light of the Afghanistan's halted banking activities and unavailability of USD against the backdrop of a continued humanitarian crisis.

Currently, Afghan currency is valued somewhat higher than the Pakistani rupee. One Afghani is equal to 1.85 PKR.

Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan decreased by 34 percent in December 2021 to USD 59.1 million as against USD 89.2 million in December 2020.

Recently, State Bank of Pakistan introduced a new policy of exports to Afghanistan in December 2021 requiring Afghan traders to show US dollars along with their passports at the time of entry to Pakistan to acquire Form-E for buying and importing Pakistani goods to Afghanistan.

Business community has voiced its concerns regarding non-issuance of E-Form and EIF halting both exports and imports, leading to congestion at border crossings due to non-clearance of trucks as a result of restrictive banking policies.

With the Afghan banking system on the verge of collapse and their foreign exchange reserves almost dried up, the new trade policy failed to give the much-needed impetus to the bilateral trade

Pakistani traders said that they could not abide by the new policy as no formal banking was operational in Afghanistan after the Taliban came to power in August last year. Ahsan Malik, Chairman Pakistan Business Council (PBC) has termed it an onerous situation for Pakistan.

"It's a hard time for bilateral trade with the neighbouring country", Malik says. "Afghanistan's banking system is closed. They neither have access to US dollars nor to the Pakistani rupee. Allowing Pakistani exporters to trade in Pakistani currency in this situation is incomprehensible".

Ahsan Malik is of the view that the government move is not sustainable and workable.

Pakistan's trade with Afghanistan would continue to suffer until the world recognizes the Taliban regime. The only other option is to arrange some loan for Afghanistan by Pakistan as a stopgap measure, he added.

An Afghan relief fund plan by the Finance Ministry has already been blocked by the SBP on regulatory grounds.

Pakistani Exporters have been demanding that imports to Afghanistan should also be allowed in PKR and barter mechanism in practice should keep working. They demanded to abolish the mandatory forms until an appropriate procedure has been devised, as non-issuance of these forms leads to transactions being declined by WeBOC, halting consignments and also affecting refund requests made by the traders.

Former President Chaman Chamber of Commerce and Industry Daro Khan Achakzai says the move by the Pakistani government may be beneficial for Pak-Afghan trade in the short term, but the government needs to look at trade with neighbouring countries on a long-term basis.

Allowing exporters to purchase goods from the local market and export them to Afghanistan will allow the businesses to operate temporarily.

He explained that now Pakistani exporters will send their shipments to Afghanistan and in return, Afghan traders will deposit the rupee equivalent of the price in Afghan currency.

Daro Khan Achakzai said that the government should allow bilateral trade in dollars with Afghanistan. Doing business in dollars does not weaken the Pakistani currency. Exporters send payment in dollar to Afghanistan through legal channels.

He asked the government to include more export items to Afghanistan in the Pakistan rupee and expedite the negotiation process with the Afghan government for the promotion of barter trade.

The United Nations estimates that the Taliban have increased their revenues in the five months of their rule. Deborah Lyons, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, said that the Taliban collected a surprising USD 1 billion in exports in the last five months.

Vice President Pak-Afghan Joint Chamber of Commerce, Ziaul Haq Sarhadi has said that Pakistan and Afghanistan have traded in Pakistani currency in the past. The latest move to restore this mechanism is only for 45 days as it is hard for both sides of the traders to conduct business in the absence of any banking channel.

He said that SBP is not helping out Pakistani exporters. Instead it has tightened its rules for the traders as if "it is in foreign hands". He asked SBP to allow businessmen to conduct trade in dollars as well.

Ziaul Haq emphasized upon the two governments to take joint measures to promote trade ties, adding that the two

countries have the capacity to enhance mutual trade up to USD 5 billion.

He urged the governments of the two countries to revisit and implement Afghan Transit Trade Agreement 2010 so that the 70 percent transit trade cargo, which switched to Chahbahar and Bandar Abbas, can return to the Pakistani route. It is also requisite to address the concerns of stakeholders of the two countries, he said.

Sarhadi called for restoring Karachi to Peshawar and Chaman railway track to allow Afghan Transit Trade Cargo.

These developments come against the backdrop of an International Labour Organization (ILO) report that said a downward economic spiral has thrown more than half a million people out of work in Afghanistan, with women chiefly hit by the rise in unemployment.

The ILO report said that Afghan companies were struggling to stay afloat and that thousands of Afghans were fleeing the country each day. It predicted more dire prospects for 2022.

President Pak-Afghan Joint Chamber of Commerce Javed Bilwani said it is complicated to trade with Afghanistan in the absence of any legal channel. He said Pakistan is helping Afghanistan on humanitarian grounds, but the international community should also come forward to unblock the assets of Afghanistan and allow them to start legal trade with its neighbours.



'New' State Bank of Pakistan

Our central bank is not the government's bank anymore – it's the bankers' bank



By Arshad Zaman

The way the State Bank of Pakistan (Amendment) Bill, 2022 ("Bill," when enacted: "Act") was railroaded through the Assembly and the Senate to appease the International Monetary Fund (IMF), with the open complicity of the opposition, is a national embarrassment. It exposed the reality of both the farce at the foothills of Margalla which rejoices in the name of 'parliamentary democracy' and the noora kushti we call 'politics' in Pakistan.

When assented by the President, the Act itself may be the last nail in the coffin of a free, sovereign, democratic Pakistan. It would spell untold misery for the people of Pakistan and wouldn't spare the clueless rulers who are abandoning ship in droves. This article takes a closer look at what might lie ahead.

A name is no clue to what it names. When it acquired control of Bengal in 1757, the East India Company did not change its name: United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies. But in reality, from a Company of Merchants, it had become a government in Bengal.

Just so, the single most important fact to grasp is that although still called the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) in the new law, the new SBP ("NSBP") to be created by the Act

will no longer be a public agency. It will be a privatised, but not fully autonomous non-government organisation, an NGO, albeit of a special kind: a Quasi-Autonomous NGO, or QUANGO, as it was called in the 1970s.

Without getting bogged down in details—although important reservations can be expressed about numerous scandalous clauses of the Bill—the consequent management arrangements suffer from three major faults. First, in the name of operational freedom ('autonomy'), NSBP will be given freedom from all institutional constraints ('independence'); with virtually no accountability (institutional or personal), and insufficient requirements for transparency.

Second, this will gravely impair the efficacy of public policy by creating "a fragmented, 'siloized', central government system, lacking a sense of wholeness and strategic integrity" (as the New Zealand State Services Commission found in 2001, after pioneering public management reforms of the same ilk). Third, it will undermine the basis of constitutional government, rule of law, and democracy in Pakistan, by its naïve theory-inspired provisions.

Turning to the financial impact, NSBP will be funded entirely by public money. In fact,

together with the gift of independence, the Act will grant NSBP a completely unnecessary, immediate increase in paid-up capital from Rs.100 million to Rs.100,000 million (an increase of over USD 550 million).

Most, if not all the increase must be paid "in cash" by the government from public funds. So, the net proceeds of the USD 1 billion to be received in additional debt to the IMF would be around USD 450 million. This too will be recycled in interest payments to our creditors, with zero if not negative impact on the government's deteriorating fiscal position.

The cutting edge of the Bill, however, its *raison d'être*, is its prohibition on government borrowing. All governments borrow to cover maturing debt service payments plus some new borrowing to finance additional spending. Presently, there is a "limit" on government borrowing from SBP which has to be zero at the end of each quarter.

The Act would turn this into a "prohibition" at all times. To assess its impact, we need to understand how government borrows and how a Creditors' Cartel-Without-Borders now holds the people of Pakistan in bondage, through their government.

Currently, the government announces its borrowing requirements for each auction. Banks bid and government rejects bids above a cut-off interest rate, which it decides. If all bids are rejected, the government borrows from SBP to meet its requirements.

The availability of this SBP option keeps the bids realistic. With the start of the IMF programme in July 2019, however, the government has not borrowed from SBP, by agreement. Not surprisingly, the banks — a close cartel, with the six biggest banks (two foreign-owned) accounting for 80 percent of assets of all banks — jacked up interest rates and are making massive windfall profits.

The business is so lucrative that by now over 60 percent of total bank loans go to the government rather than the private sector, suppressing investment and growth. To compound matters, banks borrow the money they lend government, from SBP (through open market operations), pocketing the margin. The permanent prohibition of borrowing will deliver the sheep to the wolves.

The Creditors' Cartel consists of domestic and foreign recipients of interest income. It is led by the small class of super-rich domestic recipients who constitute and control governments in Pakistan. (They also derive income from rents, monopoly profits, and grand corruption, and are the largest holders of Pakistan Investment Bonds.) Through government, they extract revenues from common citizens who earn modest

wages and salaries and moderate competitive profits, while themselves evading taxes and investing abroad.

This domestic class, led by bankers, works closely with foreign recipients of interest income: Foreign governments, banks (including bank clients), and now also expatriates, especially large holders of Naya Pakistan Certificates. The IMF looks out for their interests.

They receive less than 10 percent of the interest paid by the government but wield indirect, non-economic power. It is ironic that while civilians and soldiers battled for supremacy, this Creditors' Cartel succeeded in placing them, the government, and the people, in debt bondage. Occupying and gate-keeping all decision-making forums, this Cartel blocks all solutions in the national interest.

The IMF has been 'bailing out' Pakistan, lending money to the government so it doesn't default on foreign interest. But domestic banks and bondholders have raised false alarms about a potential default on domestic interest payments, to enlist the IMF to coerce the government into taking several anti-people, pro-banks actions.

The alarms are false because a rupee default is impossible as long as the government can print money. (No, it doesn't always cause inflation.) All central banks are both the government's bank and the bankers' bank. Enlisting IMF support, domestic banks and bondholders have ensured that in Pakistan, the central bank would become solely the

bankers' bank. In this way, like the IMF looks out for foreign cartel members, NSBP would take care of domestic cartel members.

It is against this background that we begin to understand the impact of the borrowing prohibition. Besides foreign borrowing, the government has only three sources of financing: revenues from the people, borrowing from (and through) banks, and printing money through the central bank.

By cutting off the government from the last source, the Act will shift the burden of debt servicing squarely to the people, since the NSBP would protect the banks' profit margins. This will endanger public finances, render the next budget impossible to make, and by protecting and enriching domestic banks and bondholders, create social unrest by pitting the government against the people.

Nor does it bode well for a democratic, sovereign Pakistan. In 1948, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah had inaugurated the State Bank of Pakistan with the words: "The opening of the State Bank of Pakistan symbolises the sovereignty of our State in the financial sphere, and I am very glad to be here today to perform the opening ceremony."

Unfortunately, however, the parliament seems to have stained the Quaid's memory, smashed his symbol of financial sovereignty, and cleared the way for non-democratic influence through the passage of the NSBP Bill.



Celebrating Winter in Northern Pakistan



Illustrious skiers and spectators from home and abroad graced Karakoram Winterlude and Ski Cup

By Pavan Manzoor

We have long heard mountaineers, winter sportspeople, and officials sing praises for the winter sports potential of northern Pakistan. This year, thankfully, we have something concrete to show for it – mostly to the brave efforts of the Pakistan Winter Sports Federation (WSFP) and Pakistan Air Force (PAF).

Altit in Hunza, Ghulkin in Gojal, Khalti Lake in Ghizer, Naltar in Gilgit, and Hussainabad in Skardu are just a few of the well-known winter sports places in the area. Ice skating, ice hockey, ice football, KoPolo, and other winter sports are held in various Gilgit Baltistan valleys.

In regards to gender participation, Hunza is one of Pakistan's most vibrant and inclusive districts, as witnessed by the many sports galas conducted in the valley, where women's participation is the norm rather than the exception, unlike the rest of the country.

Wendy Gilmour, the Canadian High Commissioner to Pakistan, took part in the Karakoram Winterlude in Altit Hunza, which elevated the visibility of the burgeoning winter games in Gilgit Baltistan (GB) both nationally and globally.

A skiers' paradise

Mother Nature has bestowed upon Pakistan the world's highest mountain ranges, which include eight of the world's highest peaks. Gilgit Baltistan, the home of

these gorgeous mountains, is recognised for its snow-capped mountains and picturesque valleys.

The beautiful valley of Naltar, located in the majestic Karakoram Range, is Gilgit Baltistan's crown jewel. This stunning and picturesque valley is known for its turquoise-coloured lake, mesmerising pine trees, and the best potatoes on the planet.

Naltar lies at a height of 15,000 feet and is connected to Gilgit via a 40-kilometer jeepable road. Tourists are enthralled by the excursion, which takes them through breath-taking scenery on its way up to this magical resort.

Skiing on the magic carpet of ice in Naltar Valley is a heavenly experience. This year, the Pakistan Winter Sports Federation put out a detailed schedule of events for the season.

The scenic resort has previously hosted a number of exciting winter sporting events, including the Saadia Khan & Children Ski Cup and the Inter Varsity Ski Championships for men and women.

Another significant event was the first time in Pakistan's history that Figure Skating was introduced. Mallak, an eleven-year-old girl from Dubai, displayed some extremely graceful and quick moves on ice, surprising the audience with her outstanding performance.

WSFP also wants to build ice skating rings

around all of the frozen lakes in Gilgit, Skardu, and KPK, as well as create a full-scale indoor simulator in Karachi to help the Southern chapter's skiers and enthusiasts.

Skiers from far and wide

Some 38 international skiers from all over the world descended on the magnificent Karakoram mountain ranges to compete in various categories of international ski races at the PAF Ski Resort Naltar (Gilgit), an event organised by the Pakistan Winter Sports Federation.

These athletes competed in the CAS International Karakoram Alpine Ski Cup in the slalom and giant slalom divisions. On the dangerous slopes of Naltar Ski Resort, top national skiers from various areas and ski clubs were also seen in action.

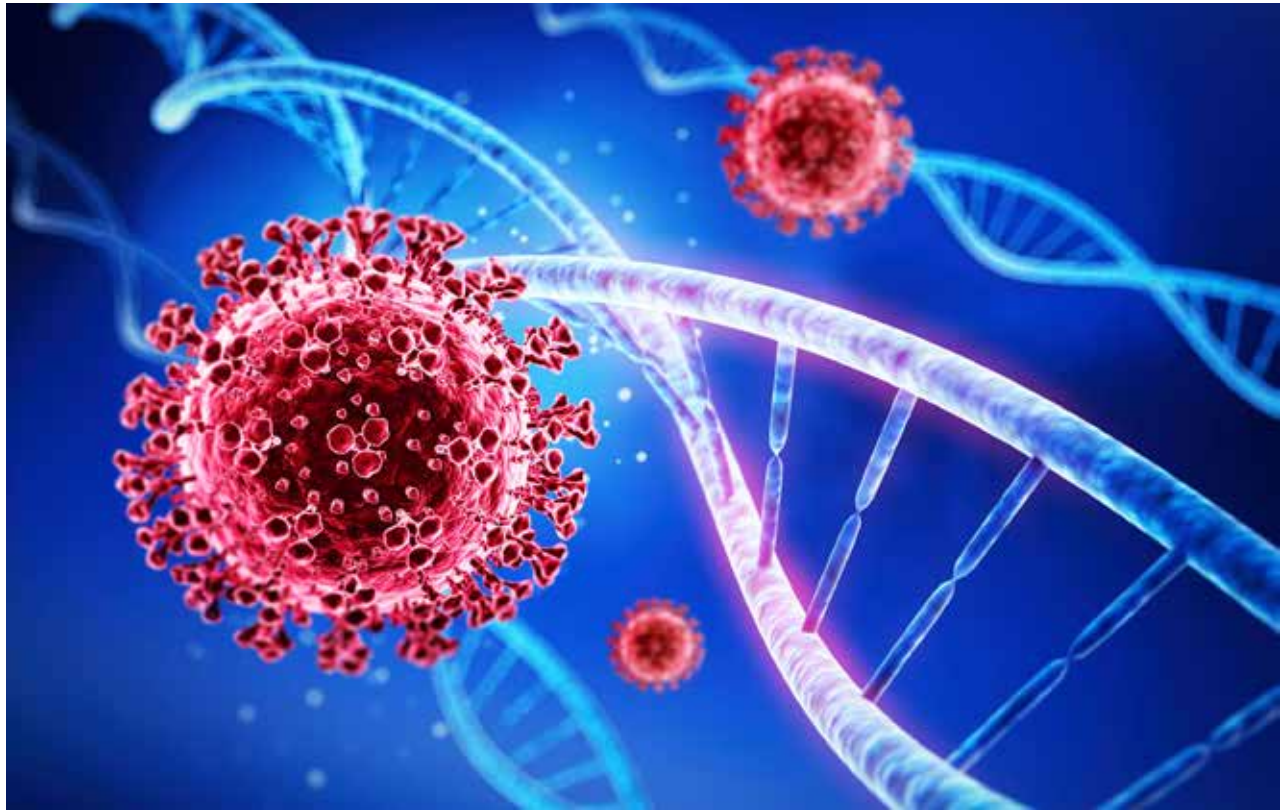
Competing in FIS competitions against the world's best skiers afforded Pakistani sportsmen a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate their talent at an international level while also learning from their opponents' experiences.

The Pakistan Winter Sports Federation, in collaboration with the Pakistan Air Force, is working hard to promote winter sports in the country, and holding such events would not only help to boost the tourism industry in Pakistan's magnificent mountains and valleys, but also help to project a positive image of the country around the world.



Omicron 2.0: The New Enemy

Just as the original Omicron starts to peak out in country after country, a new subvariant is threatening to sweep the globe



By Noor Aftab

No one anticipated that the original Omicron would sweep the globe but it did, and in short order. Omicron BA.2 is different. Global health authorities are already warning that the emerging subvariant is likely to become the dominant cause of Covid-19 across the world, and soon.

Although the surge from the Omicron variant of coronavirus is starting to taper off in many countries including Pakistan, worldwide case numbers are still on the rise as the outbreak is yet to peak in other countries.

In Pakistan, too, the curve of the Omicron-driven fifth wave of Covid-19 has flattened, but it is still too early to proclaim victory against the bug.

Last week, as many as 10 cities reported over 10 percent positivity: Karachi, Hyderabad, Lahore, Swabi, Peshawar, Nowshera, Mardan, Gilgit, Muzaffarabad, and Mirpur.

There are no reports of an Omicron BA.2 case in Pakistan if we go to press.

A Yahoo News report last week said: "While the original Omicron variant, first detected in South Africa in late November, is still responsible for the majority of new cases in most countries, BA.2 has rapidly spread in places such as South Africa, India, England and Denmark, where it is now dominant."

The reason cited for this projected dominance is that "the BA.2 subvariant is substantially more transmissible than the original variant". However, "The BA.2 lineage does not appear to cause more severe disease, so there is no reason to panic", says Aljazeera's Dr Amir Khan.

Up until last week, 95 percent of the total Covid-19 cases in Pakistan were from Omicron BA.1, while most of the remaining five percent were from the Delta variant.

The Omicron variant in most cases is not fatal, but carelessness while handling patients during home isolation can cause complications and

increase burden on high-dependency and intensive care units of the hospitals.

Door-to-door vaccination

The government has launched a nationwide door-to-door Covid-19 vaccination drive across the country. The National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), which oversees the country's pandemic response, said about 55,000 mobile teams were providing the doses, including booster shots.

The first phase of the campaign will last for two weeks and officials hope more than 35 million people will be vaccinated over this initial phase.

NCOC chief Asad Umer has said "If you have not been vaccinated, then get yourself inoculated. If you have received both doses and it has been more than six months, then get the booster dose."

BA.2 variant

The World Health Organization (WHO) said that BA.2 form of the Omicron Covid-19 variant does not seem to be any more severe than the original BA.1 form but it is inherently substantially more transmissible than BA.1.

Vaccines continue to provide similar protection against the different forms of Omicron. The new subvariant is already becoming dominant in the Philippines, Nepal, Qatar, India, and Denmark.

It said that many countries have not gone through the peak of Omicron yet and many others have low levels of vaccination coverage with very vulnerable individuals within their populations.

"And so now is not the time to lift everything all at once. We have always urged: always (be) very cautious in applying interventions as well as lifting those interventions in a steady and in a slow way, piece by piece. Because this virus is quite dynamic," it said.

New research

Two studies suggest that 'breakthrough' SARS-CoV-2 infections result in improved immune protection against multiple variants of the virus, and data from one of the studies indicates that such infections

also protect against both variants of Omicron.

Researchers have previously shown that people who have caught SARS-CoV-2 and are later vaccinated tend to make high levels of antibodies against the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein, one of the immune system's main targets when it is fending off the virus.

These individuals' blood serum — which contains antibodies — blocks a diverse array of SARS-CoV-2 variants, and does so more effectively than serum from vaccinated people who were never infected and serum from people whose immunity comes from infection only.

But it has been unclear whether this powerful 'hybrid immunity' is also generated in people who were vaccinated before being infected.

Questions, questions

Experts say the human immune system's ability to remember past infections is one of its hallmarks, but a durable response is not guaranteed.

Some infections and immunizations elicit lifelong protection, but for others, the response is modest and requires regular reminders in the form of booster shots or new, reformulated vaccines.

Scientists are still grappling with key questions like for how long will vaccination protect people, what will that protection look like, and, of course, how will a vaccine developed against the original SARS-CoV-2 fare against other variants, such as Omicron?

When will it end?

So, how will it end? This will not be the last variant, and so the next variant will have its own characteristics. Given that the virus is unlikely to disappear completely, Covid-19 will inevitably become an endemic disease.

The transition to endemicity, or living with the virus without restrictions and safeguards, is difficult to model with any accuracy. That is partly because even the best disease models struggle to make sensible forecasts beyond a few weeks ahead.

It is also because endemicity reflects a judgement call on how many deaths societies are willing to tolerate while the global population steadily builds up immunity.

We must understand that life will move ahead in tandem with the coronavirus pandemic and only vaccination and observance of SOPs will help us survive meanwhile.



Beating Back the Menace of Terror, Again

Political unity will be key to overcoming spoiler's violence aimed at hurting Pak-Afghan ties



By Naveed Miraj

Despite the heavy price Pakistan has paid in blood as well as material in the war on terrorism over the last two decades or so, the threat of terror is far from over and unfortunately continues to haunt us. The apprehensions that terrorists will once again raise their ugly head following the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan stand validated.

The situation warrants urgent action to preserve the gains made against terrorists in the Zarb-e-Azb and Raadul Fasad operations.

The terrorist attack from Afghanistan on security forces in Kurram Agency; two separate attacks on security forces' camps in Pangjur and Naushki areas of Balochistan; and the bomb blast in Lahore before that unambiguously indicate that the situation is precarious and worrying, and the terrorists may strike again in the days ahead.

However, what is important to understand is that the enemy is no longer hidden but its face is as apparent as daylight and our security forces have

the ability and capability to thwart their sordid designs. The nation is and should be proud of its armed forces who achieved such unprecedented successes in the war on terrorism.

History will forever bear witness that the US backed NATO forces collectively could not win a similar war on the other side of border in Afghanistan regardless of all the latest weapons and equipment they had at their disposal and the trillions of dollars they poured in to control the situation.

Our security forces, on the other hand, inflicted a major blow to the terrorists in tribal districts, Karachi, Balochistan and other areas because of which peace largely stood restored in the country.

The latest terror attacks clearly suggest that a grand conspiracy has been hatched by our archenemy India with the connivance of terrorist outfits such as TTP to falsely create the impression that Pakistan is as unstable as it was few years ago.

The enemy's aim is to halt the forward

march of Pakistan-China economic cooperation, especially the multi billion dollars China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Gwadar deep-sea port being the centrepiece of CPEC, Balochistan province is their target number one.

The links between India and the TTP is not mere an allegation on the part of Pakistan but a well-established fact endorsed by several international reports including one from the United Nations. A recent interview of the TTP Chief with the Indian newspaper The Sunday Guardian and the kind of questions asked further expose their evil links.

On the other hand, Pakistan cannot expect that the international community will charge sheet or act against India over its crimes and established links with the terrorist groups. Those harbouring such idea are only living in a fool's paradise.

We therefore need to formulate a counter strategy to give a befitting response to any act from India –

although our authorities concerned especially the foreign office should continue to shake their conscience through dossiers.

The close relationship between Pakistan and the new Afghan setup is something which also irks our enemy. It can go to any extent to drive a wedge between two neighbours, including staging attacks from the Afghan side on our side as happened most recently in Kurram Agency.

The concerns of our authorities on the attack are genuine as the Afghan Taliban enjoys sufficient sway over certain factions of TTP and they must have told these factions in categorical terms that they would not allow their land used against Pakistan.

However, India along with certain elements which were earlier part of Afghan intelligence agency NDS, wants to create misunderstanding between Pakistan and the new Afghan setup. Hence, we should not create an impression that our patience with the Taliban setup is running out.

Serious political, security, and economic challenges facing Afghanistan cannot be handled in a matter of five or six months. At a time when the Afghanistan is faced with dire humanitarian and economic

crises, expecting too much from the Taliban regime will be unjust.

Against this backdrop, it is important to engage more closely with them to address the security related issues especially on the border. Afghanistan indeed is a sovereign and independent country but Pakistan can extend support to it to meet the security related challenges.

For instance, both the sides can enter into a tacit agreement where in case of any attack on Pakistan from Afghan side, our forces should be allowed chase down the terrorists in Afghan territory.

As an important trilateral meeting between Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan is due next month in Beijing, an understanding of this sort may be reached there which may stay in place until the Afghan setup becomes fully capable to handle the border security situation on its own. This will go a long way in defeating and eliminating the foreign backed terrorists.

Then most importantly, there is a dire need to enhance the coordination between intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies especially in Balochistan province in order to timely pre-empt terrorist activities.

The ISI, known as one of the best intelligence agencies in the world, has always remained at the forefront in protecting the national interests and we are confident that its unsung heroes along with the personnel of other intelligence agencies will continue to fulfil their responsibilities in the most professional manner to crush the terrorists in their dens.

At this important juncture, the country cannot afford political wrangling. Threatening government at this point in time will only benefit our enemies to execute their evil agenda.

Those sitting on the treasury and opposition benches should therefore come together, rising above their petty political interests, and give the message of unity to register the same kind of successes that were secured during the Swat operation or the anti-terrorist operations in the wake of attack on Army Public School, Peshawar.

Given a united stance and a clear course of action, the current uptick in terrorism can be reversed in a matter of weeks not months, which will give a sense of security both to the people of the country as well as the investors.



Due Northeast

As Pakistan's military pivots decisively towards China, where are the politicians?



By Umer Farooq

For those who are part of Chinese power structure, the political dynamics of its all-weather friend Pakistan's domestic politics are nothing less than an enigma. Accustomed to the extremely disciplinarian culture of Chinese politics, they stay tight-lipped over the unstable and unruly nature of Pakistan's domestic politics – especially when the vagaries of Pakistani politics make the smooth functionality of Pak-China relations extremely rough.

This was what happened when in September 2014 Chinese President, Xi Jinping had to postpone his visit to Islamabad—a crucial one because it was taking place before the launch of CPEC projects—amidst political turmoil in Islamabad. Imran Khan had only entered Islamabad, at the head of an unruly mob of a couple of thousand people with the aim to oust the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from power.

The Chinese have a long standing foreign policy tradition of never commenting on the internal affairs or political development of a foreign country. So the unpleasant burden of

announcing the postponement of visit was put on the shoulders of the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This, however, was not the last time Pakistan's domestic politics caused turbulence in the otherwise smooth functioning of Pak-China relations.

Recently, Prime Minister Imran Khan started his official visit to Beijing on 4th February and only a day later the leaders of two major political parties—PMLN and PPP met in Lahore to finalize strategy for the removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan through a no-confidence motion in the National assembly.

The high profile meetings that followed were widely covered in the news headlines and the focus shifted away from Prime Minister's Beijing visit to a possible showdown between the government and opposition.

The opposition in fact was weighing its options as to whether they should table a no-trust move in the national assembly or plan a Long March to Islamabad—which in fact would be a

repeat of what Imran Khan did while Chinese Foreign Ministry was giving final shape to the program of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Islamabad in August 2014.

Soon Prime Minister Imran Khan could be seen in the company of Chinese President Xi Jinping in an official bilateral meeting. Back home the opposition was loudly discussing how to remove Imran Khan from the Prime Minister's office.

The fact that Chinese always stick to their tradition of not speaking or commenting on the domestic political situation of friendly countries does not mean that Pakistan's domestic political situation would have gone unnoticed in Beijing's power corridors.

Islamabad's air was loudly screaming about the unstable nature of the Imran Khan government and complete uncertainty about its future survival while Prime Minister Imran Khan would be preparing to go to the Presidential palace to call on the Chinese President. The result could not have been more in line with the diplomatic clichés that

were announced at the conclusion of the four days official visit.

Before leaving for Pakistan, PM Imran Khan met President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of People in Beijing — the first meeting of the two leaders since the prime minister's visit to China in October 2019.

The two leaders reviewed the entire gamut of Pakistan-China bilateral cooperation, while also exchanging views on regional and global issues of mutual interest, a PM Office statement said. He lauded China's continued support and assistance to Pakistan's socio-economic development which had greatly benefitted from the high-quality development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The Prime Minister welcomed increased Chinese investments in CPEC's Phase-II which centered on "industrialization and improving people's livelihoods".

However, Pakistan's dire economic and financial conditions were amply displayed before the world on the eve of Prime Minister's visit to Beijing when a local newspaper in Islamabad reported that Islamabad is eyeing a USD 3 billion (EUR 2.6 billion) loan from China.

The English daily Express Tribune recently reported that the government was considering requesting China to approve another

USD 3 billion loan," which could be kept in China's State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE) so as to boost its foreign exchange reserves".

The newspaper also reported that Islamabad was also seeking Chinese investment in the industries of textiles, footwear, pharmaceuticals, furniture, agriculture, automobile and information technology.

The newspaper further wrote: "The government is expected to tell the 75 Chinese companies that it could provide access to trade routes to the Middle East, Africa and the rest of the world, offering greater incentives in the shape of reduction in freight costs."

Pakistan is dependent heavily on China for economic assistance and cooperation. The communist country has already pumped billions of dollars into the Islamic republic under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. A number of energy and infrastructure projects have been completed in Pakistan under the CPEC.

There were clear signs in the air even before Prime Minister Khan embarked on visit to Beijing that Pakistan's foreign policy establishment had put all its eggs in the Chinese basket by choosing sides in the impending new Cold War between the proverbial rising power China and the reigning superpower, the United States of America.

Pakistan is dependent economically on Chinese investment and financially on Chinese loans. Politically when the country's opposition is tightening the noose around the government's neck, the Prime Minister finds nowhere else to go apart from visiting Beijing. The country's armed forces are well on their way to completing their shift to Chinese weaponry with the induction of new Chinese weapons systems into its inventory.

In such a situation, Prime Minister Imran Khan's assertion that Pakistan would try to bring China and the United States together in order to save the world from another Cold War like situation is nothing more than a good joke. He made this assertion in an interview with Chinese television during his stay in Beijing.

Ironically, the country's Prime Minister is making this assertion after Pakistan is about to complete its dependence on China in every sphere of life—from political to economic to financial to military.

Just like our political institutions, our military structures and military and strategic thought is a product of Cold War compulsions. Our military structures started taking shape during the Cold War—it was American weapons systems, training, strategic advice and financial assistance that shaped our strategic thought



and our military conceptions and structures.

Initial land forces formations of the Pakistan Army emerged as a final product in the late 1950s after massive financial assistance from America. Our formations were equipped with American weapons systems.

Pakistani Armed Forces are no longer in a formative phase as they have quite developed military structures and institutions. Their strategic thought exists in quite developed form. The inductions of new Chinese weapon systems will, however, crucially and critically introduce new strategic ideas and concepts in our strategic thinking.



The induction of Type-54AP Frigates into Pakistan Navy's inventory is primarily aimed at enhancing the interoperability between Pakistan Navy and Chinese People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN). The practical manifestation of this enhanced interoperability is the Pak-China joint and multinational counter terrorism Naval Exercises in Arabian Sea.

On its part, Pakistan Air force (PAF) has been evaluating the purchase of state-of-the-art J-10 fighters. According to experts, J-10 is ideally suited for a maritime role, especially in the light of new thinking in the Pakistani Navy to venture deep into Arabian Sea.

No existing aircraft in Pakistan's inventory has the ideal capacity to carry out the

maritime role. PAF wants to replace its Mirage fleet and J-10, according to experts, is ideally suited to replace the Mirage Fleet. It can carry heavy payloads and could therefore become a carrier of strategic weapons. One expert said that the JF-17 doesn't have the capacity to carry heavy payloads.

Western weapons systems in Pakistan's inventory do not come without technical restrictions, especially when it comes to strategic weapons. JF-17 is a joint production of China and Pakistan and it doesn't carry technical restrictions.

However it is a light aircraft and cannot carry heavy payloads. J-10 could carry Pakistan's strategic weapons and penetrate

be in line with Chinese ambitions to increase its footprints in the Indian Ocean.

The first difference between American military assistance to Pakistan Armed Forces during the Cold War and Chinese military assistance in the present day is that the former's strategic objectives were directly in conflict with the defence strategy of Pakistan, whereas the latter's strategic objectives are completely in line with Pakistan's strategic interests.

Ironically, there has been no debate in Pakistani media and political circles about the induction of these weapon systems into Pakistani Armed Forces. Even more ironical is the fact that the Pakistani political and media elite is completely oblivious towards the strategic implications these weapons will have for Pakistan's military and strategic thought.

The fact of the matter is that the outside world, especially our military adversaries, sees the induction of these weapons systems into Pakistani inventory and corresponding extensions of Pakistan Navy's role into deep Arabian Sea as Pakistan's voluntary inclusion into Chinese military and naval orbit. For the world we will just be changing the masters.

During Cold War we were receiving weapons and finances from Americans and they were our military masters. Now we will be receiving weapon systems at subsidized rates from China and Chinese will be our military masters.

This is a major political step—we again are becoming a little military pawn in the big games of big powers. Defending our land, air, and sea frontiers requires us to follow a limited logic of military needs. Playing a pawn in a Chinese game in the Indian Ocean, we will stretch ourselves thin just like the 1950s.

That was when we signed both SEATO and CENTO—two defence treaties that extended our defence from South West Asia to South East Asia. We had spread ourselves thin then. Are we stretching ourselves thin again?

Somebody rightly pointed out that defence procurement should be a political decision primarily.

deep into the Indian Territory. Officials said that the government of Pakistan was in the final stage of negotiations with the Chinese government when the plan to purchase 150 J-10 aircraft was shelved, "The reason was the financial and economic crunch of those days" he said. The J-10 is mainly designed for air-to-air combat, but can also perform strike missions.

The induction of these two weapon systems into the inventory of Pakistani Armed forces will ensure the deep sea role of Pakistan Navy. Pakistani Experts say that Pakistan Navy is in the process of developing new strategic concepts and ideas according to which it would be able to play a deep-sea role in Arabian Sea and Indian ocean—a strategic development that would

China-Russia Cozying Up Amid Ukraine Crisis



By Shahmir Niazi

Moscow and Beijing, in a rare expression of complete convergence on a multitude of issues, issued a remarkably long joint statement that sought to reaffirm the growing ties in the face of increased Western pressure.

In the readout, both sides supported each other's stances on core foreign policy issues – with Russia affirming China's opposition to “any forms of independence of Taiwan” and China opposing a “further expansion of NATO.”

It comes amid Russia's renewed tensions with the West over Ukraine, since the former amassed over 100,000 troops at the Ukrainian border, stoking fears of an invasion. Western leaders, including French President Emmanuel Macron, have been engaged in shuttle diplomacy to defuse tensions – but to no vein, since the primary demand of Moscow that NATO should cease all expansion places, has still not been met.

For Beijing to categorically reject any expansion of NATO, though Ukraine was not explicitly mentioned in the joint

communique, indicates a major realignment not seen since the Stalin-Mao alliance, where the two countries pledged to cooperate in world affairs.

Though previous agreements between Moscow and Beijing have been laden with lofty, if vague, rhetoric that failed to materialize into anything substantial, the Putin-Xi alliance, driven by a shared hostility towards the U.S., reflects a more comprehensive partnership unlike any other in recent times. The two countries are probably closer now than at any point over the past 70 years.

That China agreed to buy \$117.5 billion worth of oil supplies from Russia, means that in the event of an incursion into Ukraine, Russia's economy may be able to sustain the harsh economic sanctions emanating from the West. Further, it has reduced the significance of the U.S. president's threat of suspending Nord Stream 2 – a 750-miles natural gas pipeline running from Russia to Germany, which it was holding over Putin as a political weapon.

Concerns over security blocs

It appears that the two sides are foreseeing an imminent confrontation with the West, led by the U.S., that would require a collective response. The concerns raised against the expansion of NATO, and AUKUS, reflect on the growing sense of insecurity prevalent in the two Eurasian states.

The joint communique said, “the sides [Russia and China] stand against the formation of closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region and remain highly vigilant about the negative impact of the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy on peace and stability in the region.”

AUKUS is a trilateral security pact between the U.S., UK, and Australia, formalized to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The strategic pact would see Australia acquire nuclear propulsion technology from the U.S. to power its submarines. This marks the first time the U.S. has shared this sophisticated technology with an ally apart from the UK.

Russia's explicit support for China over an alliance that does not directly affect its core security interests, means that this relationship is based on a long-term assessment of their foreign policy objectives and are indeed superior to the "political and military alliances of the Cold War era," as noted in the statement.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to label Putin's visit to China as successful. He has probably achieved more dividends than what he had initially set out for: a diplomatic boon amid his showdown with the West over Ukraine.

Although China has not explicitly given a green signal to Russian aggression against Ukraine, since it holds longstanding political and economic relations with the latter, Xi appears ready to make up for the losses to the Russian economy when Western sanctions start kicking in.

But is Putin willing to risk such a heavy blow to the Russian economy? Well, the answer appears to be in the affirmative if we look at the strategic significance of Ukraine, as a crown jewel of Russia's security. This has made it the locus of both the general

and the strategic in Russian foreign and security policy. In many ways, it is also personal for Putin.

Putin's Ukraine obsession

Putin's obsession with Ukraine has continued for decades, however, it reached an unprecedented level in 2021 when, in an unprecedented treatise published on the Kremlin's website, he offered several political, historical, and security predicate for invading it.

What this effectively means is that the Russian leader considers Ukraine an inalienable part of Russia. It would be a mistake to assume Putin has made his peace with the status quo. The frequent violations of the Minsk agreement – an international deal to restore peace to the east, where Russian-backed groups control swathes of the territory – is a testament that any political or diplomatic solution to the conflict will remain elusive unless the Russian leader forgoes his assertion that "Ukraine is not and has never been an independent state."

Will China go all the way for Russia?

China has good relations with Ukraine and would prefer that Russia does not invade its neighbor. However, if Russia plans to go ahead with the offensive, China will have to pay a price in the form of a backlash from the U.S. and its European allies.

Beijing would much rather prefer the crisis to continue in its current shape so that it could reap the maximum benefits at a concessional value from its alliance with Russia. In the event, the crisis takes the form of a full-fledged war over Ukraine, China's relationship with Russia is not likely to fracture anytime soon.

This was echoed by China's foreign ministry in its statement issued after the leaders met, "the two countries have never and will never waiver in this choice" to work as partners.

But will the alliance hold this time around? Only time will tell.



Will the Tories Stand by Boris Johnson?

The opposition, whose support helped the PM weather a series of party revolts, is implacable over Partygate

By Dr Khalid Bajwa

For a long time, Brexit has been shaping the politics of Great Britain and it is still used to divert attention from the urgent and damaging issues at home. However, recently, British politics has also been dominated by Covid-19 pandemic and the performance of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government in handling it.

The public approval of the government has oscillated between good and bad. There were times when the government was under severe criticism and pressure for its inadequate and delayed response during different peaks and troughs of the pandemic. Sometimes, it was also criticised for acting too early to open up the society when the lockdown was the need of the hour.

The approval ratings of the prime minister saw the same fluctuations. The success of the vaccine programme definitely marked the high point both for the government and Boris Johnson.

The government got through the bad times during various phases of pandemic, when the number of cases and deaths were beyond imagination and lockdowns played havoc with public lives and economy, with no threat to its survival.

The opposition was mostly supportive in a sense that although it criticised government's handling of the pandemic but played along by supporting necessary lockdowns' legislation for controlling the pandemic.

Despite a spate of revolts by Conservative MPs against such legislation, the government was able to pass it with huge majorities on all occasions because of opposition's help. The government saw the biggest revolt in December 2021, against the latest pandemic restrictions, when around 100 Conservative Party members voted against it.

It is clear that there were fissures in the Conservative Party and its MPs were ready to openly revolt and vote against the government – not a good omen for the longevity or stability of the government. The defiance they showed has the potential to widen and intensify and land Prime minister in trouble, if and when an opportunity arises.



One such opportunity came on 30 November 2021, when the Daily Mirror reported about gatherings being held at 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's residence and office, by its staff. The Prime Minister denied that any rules had been broken.

This incident proved to be a proverbial first drop of the rain as, subsequently, more parties were unearthed in the heart of the government including 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister admitted attending one such party on 20 May 2020 and apologised.

The 10 Downing Street also apologised to Queen Elizabeth II as it was revealed that two such parties were held at 10 Downing Street one day before the funeral of Queen's husband, Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, which was held according to lockdown restrictions. It is now believed that twelve and may be even more parties are in question.

The avalanche of revelations forced Prime Minister to relent and constitute an Enquiry Committee under Sue Gray, a senior civil servant, to investigate the matter. The Metropolitan Police is also investigating if there was any breach of law.

The Sue Gray report has not been published because of ongoing Police investigation. However, some parts of the report were published. It found some behaviour in the gatherings was 'difficult to justify' and that some gatherings represent a 'failure of

leadership' and lack of upholding standards expected of government and public.

Gray also criticised booze culture in evidence at these parties, stating 'excessive consumption of alcohol is not appropriate in a professional workplace at any time'.

Since the publication of excerpts from the Sue Gray's report, calls are mounting for the Prime Minister to resign. The Labour Party and opposition leader, Sir Kier Starmer, lead the calls for the Prime Minister's resignation and are joined by all the other opposition parties.

The Prime Minister has apologised and promised to get things right with the change of culture at the top. However, the row is far from over as by now, fourteen of Conservative MPs have openly called for his resignation while the publication of the Sue Gray report and the findings of the Metropolitan Police's investigation are awaited.

The conservatives have a good knack for betting on the winning horse. If they feel that the Prime Minister is still a winning horse, they will stick with him. But if they think otherwise, then the Prime Minister's fate is sealed.

Opposition is not in position to table and win a no-confidence vote. Whatever happens, in the coming days and weeks, will all be decided by the Conservatives. The fate of the Prime Minister is in the hands of his party.

Middle East's Imperfect Peace is Fraught

There is an urgent need for de-escalation to give peace a chance in the region



By Hamzah Rifaat Hussain

Much has happened in the Middle East in the early months of 2022 where conflicting narratives and kinetic actions have heightened the already high strategic temperature.

Given the disproportionate amount of coverage the Ukrainian crisis has received due to the involvement of NATO and Russia and the historic propensity for the situation in Eastern Europe to spiral out of control, it is all too easy to overlook the dynamics of a region the stability of which has far-reaching implications.

It therefore bears repeating that the events unfolding in the Middle East are alarming and warrant immediate attention from stakeholders of peace.

The United States has sent warships and fighter jets to the United Arab Emirates after a Houthi rebel attack, which both Washington DC and Abu Dhabi attribute to Iran.

The US embassy in Abu Dhabi claimed that the deployment in the Emirates sends across a clear message that the UAE remains a strategic partner of the US and the US forces are battle ready to defend its sovereignty.

These sentiments have been echoed by Israel as well, which views Iranian proxy warfare with great suspicion and has equated it with state sponsored terrorism. This

surely has implications for JCPOA negotiations, which have taken place in Vienna yet have not yielded any substantial breakthrough with Iran.

Phone calls between US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan resulted in a joint affirmation that such proxy warfare will not be tolerated and will be met with a befitting response.

While there is little disagreement that rogue non-state actors are a threat to regional peace and stability, putting too much emphasis Iranian involvement in Houthi attacks would be a red herring. Nobody needs over-the-top naval maneuvers in the Gulf and increasing the probability of miscalculations.

The guided missile destroyer called USS Cole will be in partnership with the UAE Navy with the concomitant deployment of fifth-generation fighter planes by the United States on the horizon.

This can easily be construed as a provocation by the Iranian government, which has continued to lambast American diplomacy for preventing the waiver of sanctions or a breakthrough in JCPOA negotiations with P5+1. All this points to great chances of conflict in the Gulf region.

The truth is that rebel attacks have opened a difficult front in Yemen's intractable

conflict, which has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the century. Rebels transcending national borders have the ability to inflict serious damage to critical infrastructure by employing guerilla tactics and unconventional warfare, which is difficult to monitor.

American intelligence will find it increasingly difficult to carry out punitive or preemptive operations given that their response to the Kabul airport attack of 2021, which was carried out by an Islamic State militant, was heavily criticized for targeting civilians.

Force posturing towards Iran and the risk of misunderstanding military maneuvers can ignite a tinderbox with civilian casualties unacceptable for either side.

These maneuvers also come in the wake of the assassination of commander of the Al Quds force, Qasem Soleimani and assassination of Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh of which the latter is believed to have been killed by Israel.

With this yawning trust deficit, it is unfathomable why that military build up in the region continues unabated.

In the post-Abraham Accords era, Israel is also reportedly moving towards supplying the United Arab Emirates with missile defense systems including the 'Iron Dome', which was used to successfully thwart

incoming missiles from Hamas during the 2021 Israel-Palestine crisis.

The issue is sensitive however. Iran can easily interpret the provision of Israeli technology as an indication that it will be encircled and stifled. This would be detrimental to prospects for peace.

Talks are also underway for provision of new missile interception platforms to the Emirates despite the fact that Abu Dhabi is using South Korean missile defense systems.

Israel's attempts to aggravate the current conflict and exploit it to its own advantage cannot be taken for granted. It is important to note that Naftali Bennett's election after dethroning the corruption infected Benjamin Netanyahu meant a more assertive foreign policy would be the key towards ensuring greater domestic clout.

Both Israel and the UAE had a back channel defense and intelligence relationship predating the signing of the Abraham Accords of 2020. In Abu Dhabi, Israeli officials had met with Emirati military officials who convinced the Emirates to gain assistance with its missile defense and counter-drone technology.

In an apparent signal to Iran, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said that Israel should consider designating the Houthi rebels as a terrorist organization. All this amounts to an increased footprint on part of the Bennett government to expand its clout in the Gulf and ensure that foreign policy priorities are aligned with the Israeli narrative.

The absence of calls for dialogue with Iran demonstrates ambivalence to any soft approach adopted towards Tehran, which is consistent with Israel's longstanding foreign policy.

With Israel increasingly assertive, the probability of conflict resolution remains low. While there is near unanimity that rebel forces attacking other sovereign states is a red line, wider geopolitical ambitions are at play.

For the first time in history, the Israeli parliament hosted the United Arab Emirates Federal National Council which was led by the chairman of Defense Affairs, Interior and Foreign Affairs Committee at the Council.

Talks of being joint agents of change as well as having comprehensive engagement in all sectors dominated these meetings. This raises the question whether the relationship thawing in 2020 will now translate into an alliance in countering Iran in the Gulf in 2022.

The Israel-UAE tryst underlines two distinct realities. Firstly, the possibility of provocations akin to the Ukrainian crisis with military build ups is a clear possibility. Secondly, the possibility of a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains remote. This clearly means the relationship is more about containing Iran than anything else, although its ramifications are broad.

With all these variables at play, the Middle East is tense. What is more, this imperfect

peace is prone to deterioration with any slight misstep, risking igniting a tinderbox. Diplomacy is the only way out of this quagmire as the quest for tackling militias such as the Houthi rebels from Yemen continues.

In the regional context, the UAE-Israel alliance building will only contribute towards greater mistrust deficits and further diminishing of the possibility of dialogue. This bodes ill for a region historically hostage to Saudi-Iranian rivalry, proxy warfare, and lack of consensus building.

Sticking with the status quo risks squandering any potential benefit of meaningful engagement from all sides to the conflict which include Russia as well, where Moscow has played its role in diffusing the Syrian crisis as well.

The price of letting such opportunities go to waste is always high, and the Middle East as a militarily, culturally, and ethnically sensitive region can ill afford such slipups.

It is high time the international community understood that curbing non-state actors from running amok cannot detract from the irrefutable reality that geopolitical power play by Israel and the UAE is in full force. If allowed to continue, it will result in an inevitable zero sum game which neither the region or the world can afford.

The best way forward, therefore, is to call for de-escalation and peace through dialogue and diplomacy and for all the relevant stakeholders to play a constructive role to this end.



It's Universal Human Rights vs the Nation State, and Refugees Are Dying

Can human rights be universal in a world compartmentalised into nation states?



By Aimen Bukhari

Last week, on 2 February, Turkey reported dreadful news of discovering bodies of 12 migrants who froze to death. They were found near Turkey's border with Greece. Turkey accused the Greeks of pushing back these migrants from the border, without clothes and shoes. Greece denied these charges. This highlights how brutally Europe's migrant crisis is playing out for refugees.

Among reasons for this crisis is the flood of refugees and other migrants from the troubled MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region Europe. In an attempt to flee the war in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya, etc., and due to many other reasons, droves of refugees board smugglers' unfit vessels or otherwise try to enter Europe illegally.

The European Union is trying to cope with this prevailing issue. But the events such as the one related at the beginning highlight

Europe's hypocrisy. They portray themselves as the biggest advocates of human rights, but on the other hand stand with Greece's appalling treatment of refugees. Many European countries deal with refugees in the most inhumane ways, stripping them of their clothes, pushing them away from their borders.

The refugee crisis shows European inconsistency and the inability to manage forced immigration in the present time. Even though Europe is the birthplace of modern concept of human rights and the notion of political asylum, it is governed by the global securitarian mentality. Management of Europe's borders, both internal and external, has been arbitrary in the face of the biggest influx of migrants and refugees since World War II.

Integration of a border management policy and the expansion of the European Union's membership to 27 countries has bolstered

efforts to eliminate internal boundaries. But Europeans see that their common space is under threat today, so there is a growing trend to restrict free movement inside Europe and reintroduce internal restrictions and barriers. This is because the need to protect Europe's exterior borders puts the European common space itself at risk.

As a result of the EU-wide approach to humanitarian immigration, there has been an upsurge in national interests and national egoisms. There are several calls for the European Union to help distribute the burden of refugees, but the EU is unable to take on the duty of coping with this enormous task.

Forced migration, by its very nature, crosses national borders, putting the international system of protection of refugees at risk because of the interaction between a state-centric governance structure with its inherent limits and this

occurrence. A minor amount of collaboration has been achieved between European countries because of the urgency of the task to scale back barbed-wire walls and laws.

But this is ironic. Europe is confronted with the challenge of rethinking the concept of border, which is at odds with the European civilizational premise of universal human equality. The refugee dilemma exposes the inevitable conflict between universal human rights and the nation state's prerogative to reject undesirables.

This is because the refugee image represents a State-centric system's contradiction in response to the demands for justice and belonging in the current global society and shows the limitations of the EU (and indeed international) system for protecting the poor and vulnerable, which is built on the myth of national societies delimited by national fences.

Despite its reputation as a tourism hotspot, Greece is hardly a haven for displaced people. A recent *Der Spiegel* and Forensic Architecture investigation found that Greek officials were especially aggressive in their efforts to deport migrants at the EU

country's border with Turkey, keeping and beating them in hidden cells without food or access to bathrooms.

These border guards were pursuing the goal to keep people from seeking asylum at all, which is against Greek legislation as well as international human rights standards.

Those that are successful in their asylum applications have a dismal outcome. Twenty-seven rights groups issued an open letter at the end of October criticising EU-funded refugee camps in Greece for failing to provide financial or material support to 60 percent of the camp's inmates. Rejected asylum seekers and recognised refugees were included in this group.

There will be no help for them in Greece under a law passed in March 2020, which includes housing facilities for asylum seekers. Many choose to continue their journey to Western Europe, where they illegally submit a second asylum claim. Several German courts, however, rejected last year's attempts to deport migrants back to Greece because of the dreadful conditions there.

Administrative barriers

Many refugees are unable to petition for asylum under Athens' refugee policy, according to an assistance agency located in Thessaloniki, Greece. It can take up to 14 months for an asylum seeker to receive an appointment with a caseworker and get the right to assistance after communicating with the asylum authority through Skype as the first stage in the application procedure.

Greece's Migration Ministry stopped such a method on 22 November 2014 but did not inform the humanitarian groups of the change. As a result, anyone seeking refuge on the Greek mainland must go to Fylakio, a reception and identification centre near the Turkish border.

Most refugees will be unable to get to this place but the EU government does not care about accessibility. For instance, Greek Refugee Camps welcome refugees to identification facilities and disconnect them from the Greek population, shutting them off from Greeks and making it impossible for them to adapt to their new communities.



Western Voices Advocate Taliban's Recognition

Amid a continuing humanitarian crisis, Pakistan has complained of cross-border attacks



By Haq Nawaz Khan

The Afghan Taliban's quest to secure international recognition for their government found two strong advocates in the Western capitals last week, although it is difficult to say at this point if they will have any impact.

The majority of world opinion and leadership remains strongly critical of the Taliban for not fully meeting the conditions they promised to meet in earlier covenants.

The call to formally recognize the government of the Taliban in Afghanistan came from a former senior military commander of NATO Gen. Lord David Richards, who had commanded Nato troops in Afghanistan in 2006. “

“The West needs accept it lost the war in Afghanistan and start working with the Taliban to prevent mass starvation,” he reportedly said. “There’s a great phrase to be magnanimous in victory. I think this an occasion for us to be magnanimous in defeat”.

Rory Stewart, UK's former Secretary of International Development, in a recent interview seemed to concur. “The West abandoned Afghanistan to the Taliban in August. Now it is abandoning Afghans to starvation. Betrayal follows betrayal.”

“There is no evidence to prove the Taliban is stealing aid but rather, the West feels ‘humiliated’ and bitter because it was defeated,” he stated in a tweet. His remarks stirred a debate in the West and gave a hope to the embattling Taliban to press its point of legitimacy.

Around 9.5 billion of funds of Afghanistan have been frozen by the US and other International banks. The Taliban have been scrambling to revive national economy, improve international trade and overcome the security challenges in the country

But none of these objectives is achievable unless the Taliban government is recognized formally by the international community.

Taliban leaders were optimistic when a high level delegation led by the acting foreign minister of Taliban Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi visited Oslo, Norway, on the invitation of Norwegian authorities.

But their hopes were dashed with the Norwegian officials did clarify that the visit was not as any indication of recognizing the Taliban government. However, the visit was considered as a great success as the first official visit to any Western capital since taking over of Kabul.

The Taliban senior officials have been arguing that there is no hurdle left to get formal recognition. The world is delaying the decision that are badly affecting the people of Afghanistan.

“We have met all the conditions required for the formal recognition”, Bilal Karimi, a deputy spokesman of the Afghan Taliban, told The Truth International (TTI).

“The Islamic Emirate has complete control over Afghanistan, there is complete security, a legitimate government is in power, and assuring the world and the neighbouring countries that Afghan soil would not be used against them.

“The policy of the Islamic Emirate is very clear from day one to have friendly and cordial relations with the world. We want economy-driven good relations with the countries of the region and the world.

“We want to have peaceful and friendly relations with the world based on the mutual trust and respect. These all steps are necessary for the recognition of any government that we have taken.

“Now it is the responsibility of the international community to come forward and play its role in establishing formal bilateral relations. There is no excuse left to delay it. The People have been suffering a lot for decades, and they must not suffer any longer.”

The International community has been asking Taliban to form an inclusive government, respect for human rights, and freedom for women to play their role in the development of the country. The United States, Russia, and other countries have been pushing Taliban to meet these conditions for formal recognition.

Meanwhile, a number of International human and women rights organizations have issued a joint statement on the continued mistreatment, harassment, and human rights abuses perpetrated by the Taliban against women activists in Afghanistan, according to a tweet by Amnesty International.

“We urge the international community, governments, and the UN to call for the safe, immediate, and unconditional release of detained women activists, and to demand the Taliban end crackdown on civil society,” according to the statement.

The UN High Commissioner for human rights also took strong exception of the alleged disappearances of women activists in Afghanistan. A spokesperson of the UN High Commissioner, Liz Throssell, called for an investigation and actions to free the missing women.

“Nearly 3 weeks after their disappearance, there is still no news about the whereabouts and well-being of 4 women activists,” the spokesperson was cited by an Afghan TV Tolo News.

Women and children are the worst hit by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The UN children’s agency Unicef has warned that more than one million children in Afghanistan can suffer from acute malnutrition and called for humanitarian aid to prevent the catastrophe.

Large numbers of Afghans have been trying to cross into Pakistan through difficult routes or waiting for weeks to get visas for the survival of their families. At least 19 hapless Afghans have lost their lives while crossing into Pakistan from Kunar province when hit by avalanche.

Reports say, Afghans have been using difficult, non-traditional crossing routes to Pakistan in search of jobs. Many local Afghans agree there is relative peace in Afghanistan, but they have no use for this peace with no business, no trade, and no jobs.

“The family needs to be fed,” and that is the issue people are trying to flee for survival.

Cross border attacks

If Pakistanis had hopes their western border will be secure after the government of Taliban in Afghanistan, those hopes have been dashed. In fact, things are moving in the opposite direction, as suggested by reports of nightly sniper attacks on Pakistani border guards from the Afghan side.

Officials of both Pakistan and the Taliban have been in contact to sort it to control attacks from the Afghan side. Pakistan has finally come out publicly condemning the use of Afghan soil by the militants.

Pakistan’s foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, Pakistani militants in Afghanistan is a test case for Taliban. Pakistan is also facing criticism from the international media that its policy of allegedly supporting of Afghan Taliban is backfiring.

In the Doha deal, the Taliban had assured the world that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used against any country of the world. But public outcry from a friendly country like Pakistan is a question mark on its commitments and situation on ground.

If the issue between the neighbouring countries were not resolved, it could have serious implications for the Taliban and Pakistan in the future.

In the recent weeks, some militant attacks were carried out in different parts of Pakistan that Pakistani security official hinted to have cross border links.

In Balochistan, some militants claiming to be members of the defunct Baloch Liberation Army or BLA attacked the bases of the paramilitary Frontier Corps in Noshki and Panjgor districts.

Pakistani officials indicated that the attackers were in contact with their handlers in Afghanistan. Pakistan has been in negotiations with the Taliban officials to dismantle the hideouts of Baloch separatists inside the Afghanistan territory.

Following the Balochistan foiled attack, Pakistani banned outfit Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan militants claimed attack on security forces in a north-western tribal district Kurram.

Pakistan army public relation wing – ISPR – strongly reacted on the attack, blaming the attackers have crossed into Pakistan from the Afghan side of the border.

“Pakistan strongly condemns the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for activities against Pakistan and expects that interim Afghan government will not allow conduct of such activities against Pakistan in future,” according to a state issued by ISPR.

Zabihullah Mujahid, a key spokesman of the Taliban and acting deputy information minister, told media, “We are investigating the presence of TTP inside Afghanistan.”

However, other Taliban officials denied the allegations, saying no evidences were provided to them by Pakistan.

A Taliban deputy spokesman said, “The Taliban is committed to its pledges that it would not allow anyone to use the Afghan soil against other countries, particularly the neighbouring countries.

“Pakistan may have its internal issues, but the Islamic Emirate wants to have lasting peace in other countries as well. As we want peace in Afghanistan, so we have the same feelings for other countries, particularly our neighbouring countries to be at peace. We would like that there should be no conflicts around.”

Regulating Big Tech, One Step at a Time

European Parliament has once again shown leadership in holding tech giants accountable, but what about the global South?



By Mishaal Ashraf

On 20 January, the European Parliament voted in favour of the inceptive draft of a bill to counter tech giants' intrusive practices for targeted advertising. They mandated the draft with 530 votes of approval, 78 against, and 80 abstentions.

The Digital Services Act was first initially introduced in 2020 to safeguard the information of users from Google, Amazon, and Meta. Users' data such as their gender, sexual orientation, race, and religion, which tech companies use for targeting marketing and advertising, is protected by the Act. The Act proposes that these social media platforms offer the choice to users to opt out of tracking by declining cookies.

Furthermore, the EU parliament is pressurizing social media companies to remove content relating to hate speech, fraudulent products, and other illegal content and products that go online.

Two more rules are a part of this approved proposal: banning targeted ads for minors and dark patterns. Dark Pattern is an exercise carried out by

platforms to trick users into sharing their data. Practicing dark patterns earned Google and Meta a combined USD 238 million French fines. According to the Act, companies failing to comply with these rules can face fines of up to six percent of their global revenue.

Implications

The proposed bill has the potential to transform the tech industry. It would have a huge impact on surveillance-based marketing as practiced by tech companies, media houses, publishing companies, advertising agencies, etc.

Moreover, the Parliament, consisting of 27 EU member states' representatives, approved an amendment to force tech companies to provide options to users to decline to be tracked while they avail their services. For instance, Instagram will not be able to force users to agree to being tracked before they can view posts on its app.

A senior campaigner with NGO Global Witness, Naomi Hirst, said, "MEPs

have voted to protect citizens' rights and wishes by voting to restrict the invasive practice of surveillance advertising, signalling the beginning of the end for Big Tech's toxic business model."

She added, "As negotiations progress, we urge legislators to hold firm and deliver on today's promise."

"Amnesty International has as long been highlighting the dangers of surveillance advertising", said Claudia Prettnner, Legal and Policy Advisor at Amnesty Tech, responds to the Digital Services Act. "and today's vote represents a significant step towards seriously protecting people's rights."

"It is encouraging that the amendments outlaw the most invasive practices, including targeting children and using our most sensitive data. However, there remains more work to be done fully to ban the intrusive practice of surveillance advertising."

Prettnner said with this vote, MEPs are helping us to move towards an online environment that better respects our rights to privacy, freedom of expres-

sion, and non-discrimination. “Further meaningful regulation of Big Tech platforms remains crucial to forcing companies – such as Google and Facebook – to address the human rights harms created by their surveillance-based business model.”

The plight of global south

The quality of tech companies’ digital corporate accountability in the global North and South is poles apart. In 2018, the EU Parliament passed the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to keep a check on how users’ data is collected and used.

GDPR is considered the “toughest privacy and security law” on the subject anywhere as of now, and applies to corporations of all sizes in the EU. Companies who fail to comply with the law have to pay heavy fines.

Responding to the Act, companies like Microsoft announced expanding the GDPR rules beyond its EU clients. Similarly, Facebook’s Vice President and Chief Privacy Officer, Erin Egan, and Vice President and Deputy Counsel, Ashlie Beringer, released a statement to announce adherence to the law.

“We’re introducing new privacy experiences for everyone on Facebook as part of the EU’s GDPR, including updates to our terms and data policy”, the statement said. “Everyone - no matter where they live - will be asked to review important information about how Facebook uses data and make choices about their privacy on Facebook.”

Google took similar steps when it released the details of changes in its privacy policy in 2018. Announcing the expansion of EU guidelines to not just Google users in the EU but all over the world, Flavia Sekles, Google spokesperson, told Government Technology, “The products we have improved to meet GDPR compliance as well as Google’s new privacy policy, are available to all our users globally.”

In comparison to the tech giant’s compliance with EU regulations, it is interesting to note that when it comes to the law in the Global South, the same companies are not too eager to abide by it.

The genocide in Myanmar is one prominent example of how Meta, Facebook’s parent company, failed to take action on reports of

hate speech. The Guardian accused Facebook of facilitating the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

Legal action launched in the UK and the US revealed that the tech giant’s algorithms supplemented hate speech and it was unable to take down aggressive posts. At the time, Facebook faced a GBP 150 billion lawsuit over genocide against Muslims.

As part of the genocide campaign, clients and their family members were subjected to acts of “serious violence, murder/or other grave human right abuses,” according to the letter submitted to Facebook’s UK office by lawyers.



In June 2020, Gambia brought unprecedented charges against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice. The orders sought information from Facebook that could hold Myanmar responsible for its violent actions against the people of Rohingya in 2016 and 2017.

The lawsuit particularly asked for “documents and communications from Myanmar military officials.” However, Facebook rejected the request to release any data based on Gambia’s request being “extraordinarily broad.”

Likewise, when social media rules were mandated in Pakistan in 2020, tech giants threatened to sanction operations in Pakistan. The Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight, and Safeguard) Rules 2020 were regulated under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016’s (PECA) framework.

The Rules imposed heavy fines on social

media platforms if they failed to remove “unlawful” content. Social media companies also have the responsibility to appoint investigation officers for any decrypted data. The Rules also suggest that companies provide information to the government about users, content, traffic, and other pieces of information.

After the Rules empowered regulatory bodies with more authority, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, LinkedIn, Yahoo, Twitter, and others threatened to leave Pakistan over what they called increased censorship.

The tech companies communicated with

authorities through Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) and opposed the government’s “opaque process”. Jeff Paine, Managing Director AIC, issued a statement, saying, “The consultation that was announced in February never occurred.”

The companies maintained the Rules would make it very difficult for them to offer their services to Pakistanis and conduct business.

Developing nations like Pakistan focus on maintaining relationships with corporations rather than holding them accountable because they cannot let go of tech giants. Big Tech is also aware that the rule of law and its implementation is so weak that they can easily manipulate governments to bend the rules to accommodate them.

This kind of intimidation cannot be practiced, for instance, in EU countries, where robust implementation of laws and imposition of heavy fines make it extremely difficult for tech companies to protest their regulation.

Zuckerberg's Meta Had it Coming

Led by Lina Khan, the nemesis of monopolistic big tech, FTC is taking Meta by the horns



By Amna Shoaib

The long arm of law is finally catching up with Mark Zuckerberg's social networking behemoth Facebook – newly rebranded as Meta. The United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has filed a lawsuit against Facebook, alleging that the firm has been illegally maintaining its personal social networking monopoly through anticompetitive behaviour for years.

The FTC's challenge to the tech giant's multi-year course of unlawful conduct comes on the watch of Lina Khan, an American legal scholar of Pakistani parentage brought in to chair of FTC by President Joe Biden in June 2021.

Incidentally, the month of June saw Federal Judge James Boasberg dismiss the FTC's antitrust lawsuit against Facebook for lack of substantive evidence. Khan, who was born in London and travelled to the United States with her parents when she was 11, had been confirmed as commissioner of the agency a mere two weeks ago.

Khan rose to prominence in 2017 while still a student at Yale Law School when the Yale Law Journal published her article

"Amazon's Antitrust Paradox". The article made a significant impact in American legal and business circles, and the New York Times described it as "reframing decades of monopoly law".

In the article, Khan argued that the prevalent American antitrust law framework, which focused on keeping consumer prices down, could not account for the anticompetitive effects of platform-based business models such as that of Amazon.

She proposed alternative frameworks for antitrust policy, including "restoring traditional antitrust and competition policy principles or applying common carrier obligations and duties."

In 2018, Politico heralded Khan as "a leader of a new school of antitrust thought" as part of its "Politico 50" list of influential thinkers. New York magazine said she was "indisputably the most powerful figure in the anti-monopoly vanguard".

Against this backdrop, when FTC refiled its antitrust case against Facebook in August 2021, Lina Khan was "facing a moment

that could end up defining her legacy" as the US government's top antitrust arbiter, according to The Washington Post.

"Khan inherited the case from her Trump-appointed predecessor. But observers say it is Khan's actions that will be closely watched as she manages what is likely to be a costly, years-long legal battle", The Post's Cat Zakrzewski wrote.

"On the line is the widespread sentiment in Washington that something must be done to rein in Big Tech after years of what critics would summarize as election interference, misinformation, privacy breaches and predatory business practices."

Facebook sought (unsuccessfully) to have Khan recused from the case on the basis of her public criticism of big tech companies before her current job.

As the case progressed, it became clear FTC under Lina Khan had done its homework. This January, the judge gave the FTC the go-ahead to move forward with an antitrust case against Meta. That case has now been filed.

If the FTC succeeds, Meta may be forced to sell off Instagram and WhatsApp, respectively acquired in 2012 and 2014.

“The American public deserves a vibrant, competitive social networking environment”, Ian Conner, Director of the Bureau of Competition, states in a press release on the filing of the case. “And we are taking this action to restore the competitive vigour necessary to foster innovation and consumer choice.”

The complaint claims that Facebook has used a systematic plan to eliminate risks to its monopoly, including the 2012 acquisition of up-and-coming competition Instagram, the 2014 acquisition of mobile messaging app WhatsApp, and the imposition of anti-competitive conditions on software developers.

This unrivalled position has resulted in massive earnings for Facebook. Facebook made more than USD 70 billion in revenue and USD 18.5 billion in profit last year alone. According to the FTC’s complaint, Facebook sought out possible competitors who could threaten its monopoly.

Instagram, a fast-growing business, launched at a crucial time in the personal social networking space, when users of

personal social networking services were shifting from desktop computers to smartphones and consumers were increasingly embracing photo-sharing.

According to the complaint, Facebook executives, including CEO Mark Zuckerberg, recognized Instagram as a lively and innovative personal social network that posed an existential threat to the company’s monopoly position.

According to the complaint, Facebook attempted to compete with Instagram on the merits by upgrading its own offerings, but instead decided to buy Instagram rather than compete.

Facebook’s USD 1 billion acquisition of Instagram in April 2012 is said to have both neutralised Instagram’s direct threat and made it more difficult for another personal social networking competitor to acquire growth.

Around the same time, Facebook believed that “over-the-top” mobile messaging apps posed a severe threat to Facebook’s monopoly position, as asserted in the lawsuit.

The complaint argues, in particular, that Facebook’s leadership realised — and feared — that a successful mobile messag-

ing app could enter the personal social networking market by adding new features or spinning off a standalone personal social networking app.

Furthermore, it is stated that WhatsApp had established itself as the clear global “category leader” in mobile messaging by 2012. Facebook chose to buy a rising threat rather than compete, according to the complaint, and announced a deal to acquire WhatsApp for USD 19 billion in February 2014.

Facebook’s acquisition of WhatsApp both eliminated the possibility that WhatsApp might pose a danger to Facebook’s personal social networking monopoly and ensured that any future threat would have a tougher time gaining traction in mobile messaging.

The lawsuit stems from an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission’s Technology Enforcement Division, whose personnel worked closely with a coalition of attorneys general, coordinated by the New York State Attorney General’s Office.

FTC concluded their press release claiming that they look forward to pursuing and winning this case in court and not in the press, which is why they won’t be commenting anything further at this time.



May the Best Win!

Its seventh edition has amply demonstrated why PSL is Pakistan's leading cricketing festival

Pakistan Super League 2022 has gotten off to a cracking start and ambled through the first leg of the current edition with exceptional panache.

This edition of PSL has been all about players outdoing one another with their best efforts. A new cricket star steals each game, leaving fans mesmerised. Cricket fans love to sing the praises of their favourite players after each game.

This season's PSL 7 Karachi leg has seen an outpouring of batting talent unmatched by any of the previous six editions. Just over half of the season and there have now more 200-point games this season than in the previous six seasons combined, making up roughly a third of the league's all-time 200-point totals. Batting strike rates in the PSL this season are up to five runs per 100 balls more than the second-best season, which is not surprising.

Greater and faster totals, more boundaries, and more sixes were all part of the action in Karachi during the seventh season of the Pakistan Super League.

Shaheen Shah Afridi was the star of the Lahore Qalandars-Peshawar Zalmi game on 2nd Feb, Wednesday night, according to social media users. To many, he Lahore Qalandars captain brought his A-game and captured the hearts of fans.

Fakhar Zaman, who plays for Lahore Qalandars, also drew the attention of the crowd. He was hailed as a match-winner by fans over the social media.

Shadab Khan, captain of Islamabad United of the Pakistan Super League, is a close second in winning hearts. His 91 runs off 42 balls against the Multan Sultans that Tuesday night will be remembered for a long time. Many people praised Khushdil Shah of Multan Sultans.

When a PSL team does well, supporters are quick to praise them, but they're less forgiving when they fail. Sarfaraz Ahmed, the skipper of Quetta Gladiators, was the subject of trolls after his team fell to Multan Sultans by six runs on 31 January. The viewers saw Ahmed's strained and exasperated demeanour during the game.

Twice reigning Pakistan Super League champions Islamabad United defeated Karachi Kings for the fifth time in a row to score a convincing 42-run victory. Babar Azam is leading his team to Lahore for the last PSL leg with no points. The Karachi Kings team is in danger of going home if they suffer one more loss.

Multan Sultans is the leading team entering the final leg of this edition of PSL, with Lahore Qalandars leading with 10 points, followed by Islamabad United and Lahore Qalandars tied at number two with 6 points, with Quetta Gladiators and Peshawar Zalmi at number three, with 4 points apiece.

Karachi hosted the 15 matches of the first leg of PSL 2022 that ended on 7 February 2022. The remaining 19 matches



will be contested in Lahore. Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore will host PSL matches from 10 to 27 February. No final decision has been made as to the venue of the tournament's final game.

Because of COVID-19, it was recommended by the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) that the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) limit

The number of spectators in to Karachi games had been restricted to 25 percent as recommended by the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC). However, with the recent flattening of the Covid-19 curve, NCOC has allowed 50 percent on 8th February 2022 and later from 16th February 2022, 100 percent audience in the stadiums.

The six franchise sides of PCB have been given tight bio-security bubbles at Lahore (as they were in Karachi) in order to avoid any delays. As per the rules established by the technical committee of the board, the matches will go on as scheduled even if just 13 out of 20 players for each side are available.

Teams affected by a lack of player availability will be able to select from a reserve pool if the scenario warrants it. PCB is also prepared for the COVID-19 outbreak. In that case, for seven days, the tournament will be suspended, bio-secure bubbles will be reset, and double-headers will be staged to meet the February 27 deadline.

PCB has made fool proof arrangements this time. Despite these precautions, a pre-existing pandemic has already hampered the event. Shahid Afridi, the all-rounder for the Quetta Gladiators, was diagnosed with coronavirus and missed the early part of the tournament.

As the second leg of PSL 7 go underway in Lahore on Thursday, 10 February 2022, Multan Sultans extended their unbeaten run by downing Peshawar Zalmi by 42 runs so that they now lead the points table with 12.

The playoffs stage begins 23 February, with the final showdown of the tournament slated for 27 February 2022.

By Aimen Bukhari

Top-Ranked Australia Returns to Pakistan After 24 Yrs

By Ali Abdullah

Top cricketing sides have refrained from making a trip to Pakistan since the cowardly terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan team in Lahore in 2009. After a long hiatus, with the restoration of peace and stability, the country is finally seeing a gradual return of international cricket.

Against the backdrop of two back-to-back setbacks for Pakistan cricket with New Zealand and England pulling out from their planned tours on the pretext of security concerns, there's finally something to cherish for the fans; mighty Australia is all set to visit Pakistan after 24 long years.

The team last visited the country in 1998 when they played three tests and as many One Day Internationals in Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Rawalpindi. Back then, the host country was unable to win any match.

This upcoming tour will include three Tests, three ODIs, and one T20 International. The matches will be played in three cities including Rawalpindi, Karachi, and Lahore. Karachi and Lahore will host one Test each whereas the rest of the matches will be held at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium.

Earlier, the first Test which was scheduled in Karachi from March 3, was shifted to Rawalpindi. According to the revised schedule, Karachi will now host the second Test from March 12-16.

Except for Mitchel Starc and Glenn Maxwell, the whole world cup squad is slated to tour Pakistan. Fans have been craving to see international stars back in Pakistan. Australian white ball Captain Aaron Finch said "As a player, I can hardly wait to go to Pakistan for the white-ball series,"

The tour holds great importance for the resumption of international cricket in Pakistan. Many Australian Cricketers are already playing in the ongoing Pakistan Super League (PSL). James Faulkner of Quetta Gladiators and Ben Dunk of Lahore Qalandars believe that the Tour will be exciting and a great success.

AUSTRALIA V PAKISTAN MARCH - APRIL 2022		
TEST MATCHES		
1ST TEST	PAKISTAN V AUSTRALIA RAWALPINDI	4-8 MARCH, 2022
2ND TEST	PAKISTAN V AUSTRALIA KARACHI	12-16 MARCH, 2022
3RD TEST	PAKISTAN V AUSTRALIA LAHORE	21-25 MARCH, 2022
ODI MATCHES		
1ST ODI	PAKISTAN V AUSTRALIA RAWALPINDI	29 MARCH, 2022
2ND ODI	PAKISTAN V AUSTRALIA RAWALPINDI	31 MARCH, 2022
3RD ODI	PAKISTAN V AUSTRALIA RAWALPINDI	2 APRIL, 2022
T20I MATCHES		
ONLY T20	PAKISTAN V AUSTRALIA RAWALPINDI	5 APRIL, 2022

The latter has been in Pakistan for the fourth consecutive year. He has played 30 matches in PSL. Dunk said that Pakistani fans throng stadiums in large numbers which shows their love for cricket.

"I am hopeful that Pakistan Vs. Australia 2022 series will be a treat to watch for the fans and they will witness quality cricket action", Dunk added.

Ben Dunk further revealed that he has assured the touring players of Pakistan's hospitality and that they are great fans of cricket.

James Faulkner said that Pakistan and Australia are two of the best Test teams in the World. "It will be a test for the Aussie players against Pakistan because the pitches here are different", he added. Interestingly, when the Australian Team last visited Pakistan, in 1994, Faulkner was a part of the U19 Team.

The series will begin with a Test match in Rawalpindi on March 4. The visiting side will stay in the country from February 27 to April 5.

The three test matches will be a part of the ICC World Test Championship whereas

the points from the One Day Internationals will be considered for the World Cup Super League from which the top 8 teams will qualify for the world cup directly.

Pakistan Team

Babar Azam (c), Mohammad Rizwan (vc), Abdullah Shafique, Azhar Ali, Faheem Ashraf, Fawad Alam, Haris Rauf, Hasan Ali, Imam-ul-Haq, Mohammad Nawaz, Nauman Ali, Sajid Khan, Saud Shakeel, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shan Masood, Zahid Mahmood,

Reserves: Kamran Ghulam, Mohammad Abbas, Naseem Shah, Sarfaraz Ahmed, Yasir Shah

Australia Team

Pat Cummins (c), Ashton Agar, Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Cameron Green, Marcus Harris, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Michael Neser, Steve Smith (vc), Mitchell Starc, Mitchell Swepson, David Warner

Tabish Hashmi's Comedy is Inspired by His Aligarh Alumni Parents

An honest conversation with the face of ground-breaking YouTube comedy show To Be Honest



By **Kaukab Jahan**

Coming of age comedy is a rare concept in a country like Pakistan. We are still likely years from the time when the gatekeepers of traditional media in our country allow such discourse on national television.

The genre has nevertheless arrived these shores on the wings of digital media – and earned acceptance. A case in point would be 'To Be Honest' (TBH) by the YouTube channel Nashpati Prime hosted by the witty Tabish Hashmi.

His tongue-in-cheek jokes and mocking innuendo has largely gripped the audience. It seems fair to say he has carved his own niche in the world of comedy and satire.

Hashmi recently revealed he is set to host a new show on Geo TV. As his fans eagerly wait for what he has for them in his next show, The Truth International (TTI) reached Tabish Hashmi and talked about his experiences of TBH.

TTI: You started a coming of age comedy and satire show on digital media. What was the idea behind this?

TH: People were already doing it. I was fortunate enough that I got a big platform to show my talent. Moreover, my observations developed in a different perspective as compared to those who start their careers from scratch in this field. I decided to start my luck in this field after my studies, job, and marriage and having children. I am using my own observation, which is why it looks different.

TTI: Your jokes in the show are very spontaneous. How do you do it?

TH: They come naturally. Both of my parents were from Aligarh University, so there was an atmosphere of talking in a certain manner like those funny and satirical sentences and jokes. Friends visiting our place also had that panache which created the same aura in social activities I was growing up. So, there was a little training at home.

TTI: Who is your inspiration?

TH: My first inspiration at home was my elder sister, who was and still is very funny. She used to tell jokes in family gatherings. I had started to mimic others in my childhood. Later, I got inspiration whenever and wherever I came across good comedy or a good joke.

TTI: Do you discuss with your guest or script the show with your guests earlier?

TH: No, I don't. The director of the show, Azfar Ali purposefully asked me not to interact with the guests before the show, because in doing so, I become very sweet and might not be very spontaneous on camera. These are some backstage issues I am very careful about. I talk to them generally but not about the show. Actually my personality backstage is entirely different from on stage. I become hyper as the camera rolls, this gets people into shock.

TTI: Doesn't it make them curious what you are going to ask? Especially in a show like you do?

TH: Most of them come after having watched the show. Sometimes they are scared because of having watched some special episodes. I put them at their ease by telling them that the show will proceed with how they carry themselves on camera. "If you leave, the show will end with it, and if you truly present your personality, it will go on and on". That's the only deal we make.

TTI: Has anyone said 'No' to come on your show?

TH: Yes. Many! Some refuse very politely that they won't be able to handle the show. I respect them but there are those who reject them with very harsh comments and belittling sentences. For them I decide that I will get them one day.

TTI: What happened to Aamir Liaqut Hussain. What was he afraid of coming into your show?

TH: To my knowledge, his team contacted us that he wanted to come on TBH. We decided the date and time to record the show. We had already decided to interview him in a subtle way but he didn't come. His phone was off on the day of the show; even his manager was unable to contact him. I don't know what he was afraid of.

TTI: We heard that Feroze Khan was not happy with his show.

TH: He left quite happy but yes during the show, he got angry on a question. He had a certain point of view on that. I respect that but there could be many ways to pass that on. Viewers thought he was angry. I myself got disturbed a bit but I controlled the situation somehow.

TTI: Has anybody left the show in the middle?

TH: No one. Never. Yes, a couple of times I wanted to leave the show.

TTI: Whom do you want to invite to your show going forward?

TH: I wanted to invite Omar Sharif to my show. Not to play TBH with him, but to grace my show.

Currently I want to interview COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa,

Imran Khan and Sheikh Rasheed. I very politely want to ask the COAS, on behalf of the public, some questions they have in their minds from him. As far as Sheikh Rasheed is concerned, I have an idea that he would get offended after two or three questions.

TTI: How does the mind of a comedian works? Is it true a comedian doesn't stop him or herself if anything just comes into their minds?

TH: No. Not always. These days, comedians have also to be very careful about their words. They must be sure their sentences don't come into any sensitive category. In the Omar Sharif era, misogynistic jokes were taken very easily but these days they are not acceptable. But yes, you can agree or disagree with his content but one can never disagree with him on his insistence to say what he wanted to, this way or that. I am actually inspired by the attitude and try to keep that in me as well.

TTI: Your episode with Mathira got immense popularity. How did it happen?

TH: I give total credit to Mathira for that episode. I didn't have any idea what I would talk to her about. I was a bit confused as I was also told that she was going through a rough patch of life so I didn't want to touch any aspects which could become personal to her. From the beginning, I didn't want to dominate her but believe me Mathira was giving me points to design my questions. She was the star of the show. She was To Be Honest in the real sense and I think tailor-made for the show.

TTI: Did you stop any guest somewhere?

TH: Yes. Farooq Sattar. Sometimes when guests start to enjoy the show, they speak too much in flow. So we have to hint them about no-go areas.

TTI: Anything for your fans

TH: I remained very thoughtful and sometimes very anxious about disappointing my fans. I feel under pressure not because of earning money but because of the fact that I must fulfil their expectations after getting an overwhelming response from them. So, please if you feel somewhere my performance is a bit weak, give your sincere feedback.



‘The Future Looks Bright’

A conversation with Truck It In cofounder Raza Afzal

The Pakistani startup scene is finally hotting up – and attracting record investments from the US, Singapore, and the UAE. In 2021, the country received over USD 350 million in funding for startups, greater than the amount raised in the past six years combined.

A major catalyst has been the explosion of the internet economy over the last decade. Just ask Truck It In, a Karachi-based startup that has raised USD 13 million in a seed funding round – by far the largest for a logistics startup in the MENA (Middle East, North Africa, and Pakistan) region.

Truck It In Cofounder Raza Afzal believes Pakistani startups are attractive because they are addressing massive challenges that people and businesses have faced traditionally.

“This is enabling a digital ecosystem in one of the largest populations in the world that now boasts good internet coverage and mobile internet and smartphone penetration,” says Afzal. “The future looks bright!”

This shouldn’t come as a surprise to anyone though. Pakistan is the world’s 5th most populous country with 64 percent of its population under 30 – and this huge market is still untapped.

Reflecting on the huge investment his startup has attracted in a seed funding round, Afzal said: “The investment is a result of the massive opportunity available and confidence in the potential and performance of the team that [Truck It In] have brought together to solve this challenge.”

“The best talent locally is working to solve this challenge. Pakistanis from abroad are coming back to help us solve the problem and the market is embracing us with open arms. All of this is working to make this an attractive proposition”.

The logistics startup’s seed round was jointly led by Fatima Gobi Ventures and Global Founders Capital. Other investors included Picus Capital, Millville, Wamda, Zayn Capital, i2i Ventures, ADB Ventures, Cianna Capital, Reflect Ventures, and K3 Ventures.



Owing to the dilapidated condition of rail transport marred by frequent accidents and long delays, Pakistan relies majorly on trucks for cargo. This provides Truck It In an immense opportunity to cash in and disrupt this sector with its technological innovation and creativity.

Asked what made the cofounders to explore the freight sector, Mr. Afzal said: “Our cofounder Sarmad [Farooq’s] family has been in the trucking industry for the past 50 years. There hasn’t been an upgrade in the working methodology. The opportunity is huge at USD 25 billion a year and the impact will be felt by more than 3 million small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and five hundred thousand truckers.”

“Our experience building marketplaces at Careem and Bykea gave us confidence in our abilities to execute and solve this massive opportunity,” he added.

Presently, truckers are made to wait for days and even weeks before they receive an order, and when they finally get one, they are often poorly paid. The startup aims to bridge the gap between the truckers and shippers by acting as an intermediary, in turn making the sector more efficient: Lower costs for the shippers and higher wages for truckers.

Afzal believes the opportunities in this sector are boundless. “The connectivity for shippers with truckers is only starting. Digitization will unlock multiple benefits for both and we are excited to be at the

forefront of this, creating value for Pakistani businesses and truckers,” he said.

Pakistan’s road freight industry is marred by excessive fragmentation. Most of the operators are running small businesses with very few trucks and drivers. This allows middlemen room for exploitation.

Truck It In aims to eliminate this by directly connecting shippers with truckers through its mobile phone application, resulting in better returns for both sides. What’s in it for the platform? The company will earn a commission each time its service is used – the exact amount of which would be determined on a case-to-case basis.

When TTI asked Afzal about his expectations of the government, he replied: “We need the government to create an enabling environment which makes it easier for startups to operate and scale.”

While explaining what he meant by that, Afzal said the government should create “simpler and reduced taxation regimes for startups who are bringing in precious Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and helping advance traditional businesses and segments of the economy.”

Before launching Truck It In, the three cofounders, Raza Afzal, Sarmad Farooq, and Haider Navid worked together at Dubai-based ride-hailing company Careem, Inc. Their new startup is now on a hiring spree to double its workforce to more than 400 employees.

By Shahmir Niazi

Lata Mangeshkar is dead, Long Live Lata Mangeshkar



By Hammad Ghaznavi

Lata Mangeshkar, perhaps the biggest name in the sub-continent playback singing, died last Sunday of Covid-19 complications in Mumbai. She was 92. Lata ji reigned Bollywood playback singing industry for around six decades, from 1947 to 2006, recording around 25,000 songs in Hindi and various other languages, for over 1000 films, mesmerizing at least four generations with her mellifluous renditions of a huge variety of songs. "If we play her songs one by one, we could hear her for a month and never hear the same song again," said Indian actress Kajol in a tweet.

Explaining how Lata ji has been a part of every household in this part of the world, my better-half has put it quite aptly: "Lata ji's songs fulfilled all my emotional needs on different occasions all my life – when I was in love, sad or happy, felt jilted or adored, angry or contented, jealous or reassured."

Barray Ghulam Ali Khan, a legendary classical singer whom Lata ji deeply admired, once praised her in these words: "kambakht kabhi ghalati sey bhi baysura nahin gaati (she doesn't sing out of tune even by mistake)." Khan sahib's comment actually summed up Lata ji's biggest trait as a singer. Many great singers, no matter how rarely, go out of tune. But not Lata ji.

The nightingale of B-town, as Lata ji was fondly called, had a chaste voice. Innocence was the hallmark of her vocals. Her three octave range made it possible for her to sing songs of a wide variety, making her the first choice of great music composers including Master Ghulam Haider, Naushad, S.D. Burman, Laxmikant Pyaraylal, Shankar

Jaikishan, R.D. Burman, Madan Mohan and A.R. Rehman.

Unlike many great artists, Lata ji's voice quality remained unchanged for decades, a result of her pure soul and lifestyle. Though Urdu/Hindi was not her mother tongue, she worked diligently on her pronunciation, which is why there is hardly a mispronounced word in her songs. Beyond pronunciation, she worked hard to understand the context of the songs in the films, lending the words feelings, expressing the subtext of the lyrics. This expression of deeper emotions was the real asset of Lata Ji as a playback singer because film songs are not merely about singing in tune; they narrate emotional stories.

Lata Mangeshkar was born in 1929 in the city of Indore. She was the oldest of five children born to Pandit Deenanath Mangeshkar, a reputed classical singer who owned a Marathi language theater company. Lata Mangeshkar's father, her first music teacher, lived with his family in Sangli, Maharashtra, but mostly he was touring with his theater company along with his wife and children. Lata was five when she started acting and singing in his father's theater.

Lata Ji didn't have any formal education. In an interview she revealed that she gave up formal education on her first day of school. She had brought her 10 month old sister, Asha Bhoslay, with her, and the teacher refused to allow the baby into the classroom.

It was in 1942 that Lata's father died and the responsibility of the family fell on her shoulders.

She started singing and acting in Marathi films and then moved to Bombay in 1945. Lata Ji in an interview revealed that she hated acting in films. "I was very small and hated putting on makeup and having to laugh and cry in front of the cameras." She, however, loved playback singing.

It was composer Master Ghulam Haider who in 1948 spotted Lata Mangeshkar's exceptional talent and gave her the first big break in film *Majboor*. The next year Lata ji sang *Aeyga Anaywala* for film *Mahal*. That was it! It was an instant hit, winning the hearts of millions. Lata Mangeshkar had arrived! The rest, as they say, is history. It was the beginning of a long, successful journey wherein she reigned unchallenged for almost 6 decades.

Lata ji had millions of fans on this side of the border as well though she could never come to Pakistan for live performance, despite her deep desire to perform in Lahore, as she revealed in an interview. Her visit to Pakistan was planned more than once but politics impeded these efforts. Lata ji had great respect for various Pakistani artists. She expressed love and admiration for Madam Noor Jahan in various interviews. She was a great fan of Ustad Salamat Ali Khan and her oft-quoted remark about Mehdi Hassan is a part of our music history: "Shir-e-Mehdi Hassan kay galay mein bhagwan bolta hai."

Madam Noor Jahan once said about Lata Mangeshkar – "She admires me, respects me like a guru. I think it is her humility. Lata is unparalleled. Lata is Lata."



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