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Politics of Long March

Protest will continue to haunt the Government

Economy Crisis

Revival of Economy is biggest challenge for Shahbaz Sharif Govt

Pak-US Relations

Pakistan needs to stay away from US-Russia Conflict

No Political Stability No Economic Gain



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Economy first

By Hammad Ghaznavi



PTI chief Imran Khan's Long March ended abruptly, amidst rumors of some deal struck between the stakeholders. Finally, the new coalition government can breathe, with Imran Khan's threat receding at least for the time being. Feeling a bit confident, the government finally took the plunge and withdrew the petrol subsidy; which also confirmed the PDM plans to stay in power at least for some time.

With much fanfare, Imran Khan announced his Long March against the "imported" government of "slaves and beggars", with the aim to force the government dissolving the assembly and announcing the date for next elections. It was the government's crackdown against the PTI workers, besides the half-hearted participation of the PTI local leadership, that the crowd participation in the long march, particularly from the Punjab, did not appear daunting. Still, it was unlike Khan, and the grand retreat remained baffling for many.

Was there any deal struck with the government regarding the next election date? Didn't seem so, as Khan had given a rather face saving 6-days ultimatum to the government announcing the election date. Indicators suggested Imran Khan was not given any concrete guarantee from Rawalpindi. Hence, the withdrawal. PTI, in fact, is seriously divided on the idea of another attempt at dharna in June, as the nod considered necessary to make the sit-in meaningful, seems elusive so far. The powerful quarters reportedly are cognizant

of the fact that the frightening state of economy in the country doesn't permit any adventurism, and more political instability can prove fatal. The first task, the stakeholders seem to agree, shall be to fix the economy. The politics can wait.

The coalition government dragged its feet as for withdrawing the petrol subsidies which certainly dented the economy. The government conveyed to the powers that be that until it was given a guarantee of picking the election date of its own choice, it would not take the unpopular decision of withdrawing the petrol subsidy. There remained a disagreement on the issue for a few weeks and the government looked paralyzed. The stock market crashed and the Rupee plummeted, but the government stood its ground, as political stakes were considered too high. The IMF talks were bound to fail without the government withdrawing the petrol subsidy as was agreed in the agreement signed by the previous government. It was in this drastic situation that the garrison decided to take a step back.

The situation for the coalition government is tricky. If the PDM avails the remaining term of the assembly, it will go into the next election with the incumbency factor: but it doesn't look likely. The government after a couple of tough decisions may try and arrange some relief for the masses before announcing the election date. That seems to be the plan. The establishment seems okay with that plan today; but will it stay the course? Tough to predict, considering

the oscillating positions of the establishment in the recent weeks. On the other hand, Imran Khan would want snap elections, as his camp was convinced that his latest narrative was received well by the voter, and he was riding a wave. With the passage of time, politics moving on with its turns and twists, this situation might change. Khan, therefore, would remain unrelenting in the days to come. Even if the elections were held a few months before the schedule, he would take the credit for forcing the government to kneel down.

A couple of recent suo moto notices taken by the Supreme Court have been strongly criticized by the government circles in private. The government considers it an interference in the domain of executive, to cramp the government, and force it to call elections. The bar on the postings/transfers of the officers investigating high profile cases, questioning the removal of names from the ECL, directing the government to remove hurdles in the way of long march, etc, are some examples of the court's recent decision being censured by the government quarters. "The Supreme Court should not appear to be a party in the ongoing political tussle. It needs to repair its chequered history by staying out of controversial judicial activism," said a federal minister from Lahore.

Early elections or not, it is easy to predict political instability ahead. Meanwhile, inflation is bound to multiply. Pakistan is at a crossroads, for sure.

The effects of neutrality

The last time the establishment didn't win was in 1988



By M A Niazi

Why is Imran Khan demanding fresh elections? One reason is that it is the only means he has of getting back into power. The not-so-subtle hints that the military should intervene does not really provide him another means, as acknowledge a reality: that he has not developed a support base capable of bringing him to office in the teeth of institutional resistance.

An important factor that is perhaps ignored is that the 2018 election was not really won by Imran Khan. His PTI did emerge as the largest party in the National Assembly, but it fell short of the absolute majority needed to elect Imran as Prime Minister. For that, he had to win over independent and smaller parties, the so-called allies, whose switching brought down his government.

As he himself has made clear since his ouster especially, their support was only made possible because of military support. The withdrawal of that support was what made his government fall. As a result, in his narrative, the COAS and DG ISI move from being good guys to being 'neutral', a word that was once perfectly acceptable, but now is pejoratively associated with animals, though it is one again positive if shown during the Long March.

Part of the problem with Imran, and of the type of politics that he practises, is that neutrality is not an acceptable political position. Even at the height of their political confrontation, neither the PPP nor the PML(N) ever decried neutrality, accepting it as a valid position to hold. True, the neutral person should support their party, but no one thought it immoral to be neutral. It went without saying that government employees, whether working for the Sindh Agriculture Department or the Pakistan Army, were supposed to be neutral.

Now, it seems, the goalposts have shifted. Not supporting Imran is morally reprehensible. That seems to run counter to the basis of democracy, of the free market of ideas. Incidentally, it also seems to run counter to the Islamic concept of morality, where the Quran, the Hadith and legal rules derived thereby are the basis of morality. The concept of hating the sin, not the sinner, exists, which means that the corrupt person should not be disliked, only the corruption. The corruption may be repented, or punished, in which case it is purged.

That is the underpinning of the Islamic justice system: the purpose is not deterrence or revenge, though they might follow, but to punish in this world, purge of the offence and preserve the offender from a much more horrific punishment in the Hereafter.

Of course, whatever the legal system, there is the little detail of a trial. However, the PTI seems to operate under a legal system where a declaration by Imran, supported or not by evidence, is the equivalent of a trial, perhaps superior to it. That means not only that Imran used to refuse to have even the minimum contact with the opposition that was necessary, but has transformed a normal (though rare) application of the Constitution, with the transfer of power from one party to another, into a titanic struggle between Good and Evil. While Imran seems to have no problems being personified as Good, Shehbaz Sharif is finding it difficult to be the personification of Evil. More to the point, so is the COAS.

The fact that the usual tigerish campaign against the ousted government has not started may encourage Imran to believe that while the cat is away the mouse will play, and the very neutrality of the institution will allow existing advantages to be extended to his candidates.

The COAS probably has a right to feel more wounded than anyone else, because Imran is calling him names for playing his constitutional role. However, as he is probably finding out, support for one side cannot be turned on and off like a tap. Whoever did, the task was incredible. There was the institutional belief, which the Pakistani military shared with all professional militaries the world over, that their political masters (the politicians) are scoundrels. This was overcome for Imran. This allowed him to get the sort of help he needed to achieve power.



That means there are mechanisms in place for the delivery of constituencies where the race is close in favour of one candidate or the other. It goes to the credit of Imran that he brought the PTI to a point of competitiveness where his PTI emerged as the largest party, with the right sort of help.

That help varies from constituency to constituency, and probably cannot reverse a trend. However, it probably does not vanish with a simple order of neutrality. What exactly it is, is not known for sure. The most concerted effort to identify it came in 1988, when the PPP tried to find out why it did not achieve the absolute majority it expected. Apart from a white paper, the effort did not come to much, perhaps because it could uncover nothing.

It might be remembered that in 1988, the election result was such that the establishment did not get what it wanted. Nawaz Sharif did make an attempt to form a government at the centre, with the 56 IJI seats as his base, but it did not compete within the 93 the PPP had won, and his effort fizzled before it started.

It seems that Imran hopes for an even better result than the PPP got then, while as bereft of establishment support. One advantage he does have is that whereas the establishment was active in 1988, this time around, it will be neutral. There remains the question of what happens to its potential. 'Electables' are 'electables' because they have built, or have inherited and maintained, election machines. Some perennial candidates have their vote tallies enhanced by supportive elements, which elements tell them which party ticket to apply for. The party is told who to give the ticket to.

Apart from such candidates, there is a general hype created for the party that has won approval. The other side finds that it faces a slew of corruption cases. Its candidates, often not the best in the constitu-

ency, and face legal difficulties. The media contains much back-and-forth, but the trend is in favour of the party designed to win.

Because of this, Imran hopes that the neutrality does not go so far as to show what his government was upto. The tales of corruption are deliberately exaggerated, and so far have only resulted in the conviction of Nawaz Sharif in time for the 2019 poll. However, the point that is driven home is that politicians are corrupt. Imran has built his career on something that has been pushed since long before he came into politics.

One problem Imran has is that he has not really expanded his support base. When Bhutto came to power in 1971, his nationalizations, his setting up new corporations and his use of the rationing system (creating a class of depot holders) created a large body of people who were committed to the PPP even decades later. He gave a voice to peasants, workers, and others left behind by the growth of the Ayub years. Perhaps most importantly, this is the era of the rush of migrant labour to the Middle East.

With all of these, he entered the 1977 elections. And his daughter contested 1988 and subsequent elections. And presumably his grandson, the coming election. Imran only has a rather vague narrative of standing up to the USA. That might seem a touch-button issue, but Bhutto's defiance of the USA does not really define his appeal. His defiance came over the nuclear weapon. Ziaul Haq, who deposed him, furthered that programme, and the device was finally exploded under Nawaz.

The fact that the usual tigerish campaign against the ousted government has not started may encourage Imran to believe that while the cat's away the mouse will play, and the very neutrality of the institution will allow existing advantages to be extended to his candidates.



However, the sort of groundswell that would deliver a two-thirds majority is not visible, and he will have to overcome the electorate's economic suffering. While he might transfer the anger over the removal of petrol and power subsidies to his successors, he may not be able to remove the electorate's memory of his economic management.

The Long March is crucial for Imran not so much because of the pressure it exerts, as an indication of how much support he has from an establishment claiming to be neutral.

Avoiding default without misery



By Dr. Akmal Hussain

The challenge in dealing with the short-term crisis is to avoid debt default without making the poor pay for it. At the same time, the tactical measures undertaken should be designed to set the strategic direction of the economy towards a people-centred economic growth process. In this article, I will attempt to address this challenge.

There are two interrelated aspects to the current crisis. First, the State Bank reserves, net of liabilities and repayments over the next two months are reported to be substantially negative. Without a quick injection of US dollars by the IMF, there is a danger of an exchange rate collapse accompanied by hyper-inflation.

Second, the budget deficit must be kept at a level that prevents a huge build-up of foreign debt in the process of financing it. Historically, when faced with such a situation, the government has selected policy instruments that have added to the burden of the poor, while protecting elite interests. Given the current crisis of state,

society and economy, the government needs to stem the financial rot by placing the burden on the rich rather than the poor. The following measures can be undertaken in this regard.

First, the critically low State Bank reserves create the imperative of a drastic reduction in foreign exchange expenditures on non-essential imports. For example, the import of motor vehicles alone during 2020-21 was \$1.53 billion which constituted almost 4 per cent of total import expenditures. This figure represents an 80 per cent increase in import expenditures on motor vehicles, compared to the previous year.

The expenditure on the import of consumer durables, excluding motor vehicles, in the same period was another \$1.1 billion, or 2.8 per cent of total import expenditures. Mobile-phone imports added another \$1.54 billion to the import bill (about 4 per cent of import expenditures) and food imports (including Norwegian smoked salmon, French cheese, marmalade and Swiss chocolates) at \$6.1 billion constituted 15.6

per cent of total import expenditures. Import controls over just these items alone could save the country over \$10 billion.

Second, the budget deficit issue needs to be reconceptualized in light of recent research. The key thing to understand is that it is not the size of the budget deficit that should worry the government, but what causes it. If the budget deficit, even at 9 per cent of GDP, is generated by productive investment, then the ensuing economic growth and the associated increased income stream will reduce the deficit over time. It is unproductive expenditure of the government that needs to be curtailed, not productive expenditure. Thus, the preoccupation with 'finding fiscal space' is misconceived. As Professor Lord Robert Skidelsky observed at a recent Government College University Lahore (GCU) webinar, the government can create as much fiscal space as it wants to by borrowing from the State Bank and spending it on productive investment.

Third, a blanket withdrawal of all subsidies in an attempt to reduce the budget deficit

can have serious adverse consequences for the lives of the poor. So, those subsidies which ease the economic burden of the dispossessed classes should be retained, while those subsidies that enrich the upper class should be withdrawn. For example, tax concessions given to the elite in the form of exemptions from income tax, sales tax, and customs duty, amount to Rs1.3 trillion. Why not let the rich pay their tax dues and use the revenues to provide a cushion to the poor and middle class that would in fact accelerate economic growth.

Fourth, further revenue generation can be achieved by placing three types of direct taxes on the super-rich: (i) Increasing stamp duties on large land transactions; (ii) increasing property taxes on those having more than one house; and (iii) a 'Food for the Poor' tax on those possessing luxury motorcars and multiple houses.

Fifth, some policy measures can be immediately undertaken for the benefit of the poor, with the revenues saved from withdrawing tax exemptions of the super-rich and placing new direct taxes on them. One, the government can declare food as a fundamental human right. In this regard, the government can undertake to provide through food stamps, vital food rations (flour, ghee, cooking oil) at a 50 per cent subsidy to the bottom 40 per cent of the households who are currently food insecure.

Two, an employment guarantee scheme for the rural poor. This would involve offering employment for 200 days of the year to them at the going market wage rate. They can be hired to work, using simple tools, on rural infrastructure projects such as strengthening the banks of canals, pucca khalas, and building water reservoirs near rivers to build up water reserves during floods. Three, the government can give a commitment for the provision of high quality education, healthcare and social protection to all citizens. Recent research shows that government expenditures on health, education and social protection are not simply welfare measures, but also

contribute to increasing the productivity of citizens and therefore accelerate GDP growth.

The policy measures indicated in this essay can, while attempting to avoid an economic meltdown in the year ahead, also lay the basis of a new growth process that is powered by the people and works for their benefit. It is precisely during a major crisis that the seeds can be sown for a new economic trajectory that is for the people and by the people.

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The Khan Ultimatum

How the long march for 'azadi' went, and what to expect next from the master campaigner called Imran Khan



By Noor Aftab

After a day packed with political drama and violence across the country, ousted prime minister Imran Khan gave an ultimatum to the government to announce the election date otherwise he would return to Islamabad along with millions of people.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) chairman was off to Bani Gala after addressing the participants of the 'Azadi March' at Jinnah Avenue, leaving behind his supporters who marched for hours in anticipation of a major public gathering and sit-in.

In his speech, Imran Khan stated that the government tried every method to crush their 'Azadi March' and used teargas on peaceful protesters. He also claimed that five of his supporters were killed in the violence across the country.

Clashes erupted in Lahore on May 25 when the police fired tear gas and pushed back hundreds of demonstrators who hurled stones as they tried to pass a blocked bridge near the city to board buses bound for Islamabad.

Multiple PTI workers and leaders were arrested when Punjab Police raided the houses of several party leaders, while a police constable was also shot dead during a crackdown in Lahore. During a raid on one of the PTI leader's house in Lahore's Model Town, police constable Kamal Ahmed was shot in the chest and was taken to a nearby hospital, where he succumbed to his wounds.

Political circles are quite astonished over the new political strategy of PTI chairman Imran Khan who was earlier determined to remain in Islamabad with his supporters unless the government accepted his demand of dissolution of National Assembly and announcement of date for fresh general elections.

The mainstream leaders of PTI in their statements tried to boost the morale of the party workers but as a whole there was disappointment among party workers who were upbeat and hoping for something big as a result of their long march.

Khan's detractors termed this development as failure of long march and another political defeat for him after his ouster as the prime minister through a no-confidence motion.

But as soon as the political turmoil came to an end the stock market witnessed positive momentum with KSE-100 index soaring more than 500 points despite the fact that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) emphasised the urgency of Pakistan 'removing fuel and energy subsidies' to achieve programme objectives.

Some behind-the-scenes developments soon after start of the long march from the Swabi district where PTI chairman led his supporters definitely hold importance as apparently they led to the decision of Imran Khan to 'retreat' and 'live to fight another day'.

It is said that some 'influential' quarters took initiative to bridge the gap between PTI and the coalition government and convinced them to hold negotiations to find out a 'win-win' situation for them. Shah Mehmood Qureshi conveyed message to PTI chairman Imran Khan after which three PTI leaders including Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Pervaiz Khattak, and Asad Umer reached Islamabad through an official helicopter to hold negotiations with a government team led by former Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani.

The government team looked confident because it thought that the poor show of PTI on roads especially in the Punjab province had forced its central leadership to search for other options to mount pressure on the government.

Gilani, former Speaker National Assembly Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, and federal minister Maulana Asad Mehmood held secret negotiations with the PTI leaders at the residence of Speaker National Assembly Raja Pervez Ashraf and exchanged different proposals to resolve the issue.

The government officials initially flatly refused to let Imran-led caravan enter Islamabad and hold a public meeting at any specific location. The 'influential' officials also stayed away and conveyed to the PTI leaders that they should strike a deal with the government on their own.

The PTI leaders floated a proposal that the



government should announce any later date for general elections but the coalition government also rejected it and maintained no elections would be held on the demand of PTI.

At one time Shah Mehmood Qureshi shouted during the meeting and threatened that if the government never accepted their demand for fresh elections then they would stay in Islamabad for indefinite period. The participants of the meeting showed their annoyance over the behaviour of Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

Qureshi proposed that if the government agreed to hold fresh elections in December, PTI would support it but the announcement would be made by PTI chairman Imran Khan during his speech in Islamabad. The government team retaliated and 'advised' Shah Mehmood Qureshi to avoid floating 'useless' proposals.

On the other hand, the Supreme Court of Pakistan on the petition filed by the Islamabad High Court Bar Association (IHCBA) ordered the chief commissioner to provide an alternative place to PTI for its 'Azadi March' in Islamabad. Earlier, the Islamabad administration had turned down the PTI's request for holding a sit-in at the Srinagar Highway and blocked all the routes leading to the federal capital.

When the Supreme Court ordered the government to let PTI hold its public meeting then both the sides initially failed to develop consensus over terms and conditions in this respect.

Later, the workers of PTI started arriving D-Chowk and burnt down trees in the green belt of Blue Area. It felt that PTI and its supporters that appeared demoralised during the daytime got renewed energy and adopted violent tactics to register their protest.

Pakistan Army was called in Islamabad under Article 245 by the PMLN government as it feared the situation would deteriorate while ex-prime minister Imran Khan and his supporters entered the capital and headed towards the Red Zone.

Now the current political scenario clearly indicates that as part of an aggressive political strategy after his ouster, Imran Khan will continue to mount pressure on the government and other state institutions not only to defame the new ruling coalition

but also to paint them as conspirators in the eyes of the people.

He will utilise all available resources to muster support for his party within the state institutions. Many believe that any politician who can make the leadership of key state institutions controversial always has chances of his return to power. He is also involving religion and repeatedly calls his campaign a 'jihad'.

Political pundits admit the fact that PTI chairman Imran Khan within months of his ouster has been able to revive his support base and make his followers believe that he could win the general elections again in future.



Meanwhile, in an interview to CNN, Imran Khan has called for the sacking of US Assistant Secretary of State for Central and South Asia Donald Lu for 'sheer arrogance and bad manners'. Lu is the central figure in Imran's claims about a US backed regime change conspiracy that toppled his government through a no-confidence motion.

The PTI chairman accuses Lu of threatening Pakistan's former ambassador to the US, Asad Majeed, that a failure to remove Imran through a no-confidence vote would herald 'consequences' for Pakistan and vice versa.

Elected in 2018, the cricketing star-turned-politician was until not long ago seen as likely to defy the odds to become the only Pakistani prime minister to serve a full five-year term. But after two coalition partners abandoned him, the opposition finally had the votes needed to oust him from office.

On the other hand, the Sharif government is facing the same pressures as previous government did from voters should it fail to address inflation rates, now driven up

further by the Ukraine war and the sanctions imposed on Russia, which have raised fuel and food prices in particular.

The government has to defuse political tensions and stabilise the floundering economy besides securing assistance from international financial institutions otherwise it will be hard for it to survive till August 2023.

A senior PML leader informed during a private conversation at his residence that their party supremo Nawaz Sharif directed Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to tender resignation on May 20 and announce fresh general elections. When former president Asif Ali Zardari got this information he asked both of them to hold their decision for some time.

Later, Zardari held a meeting with an important 'personality' and discussed the whole situation with him. The next day, he arrived in Lahore to have a meeting with PM Sharif. The two exchanged views and later Nawaz Sharif changed his decision and accepted the proposal of Asif Ali Zardari and Shehbaz Sharif that the government should work till completion of the constitutional term of the national assembly.

Though the coalition government has announced it would continue to work till August 2023, the political issues are yet to be resolved. Majority of the PML-N members are still of the view that if the coalition government decides to fulfil conditions of the IMF and increases petroleum prices then there must be any kind of surety that this coalition government would survive and not lose simple majority in the national assembly.

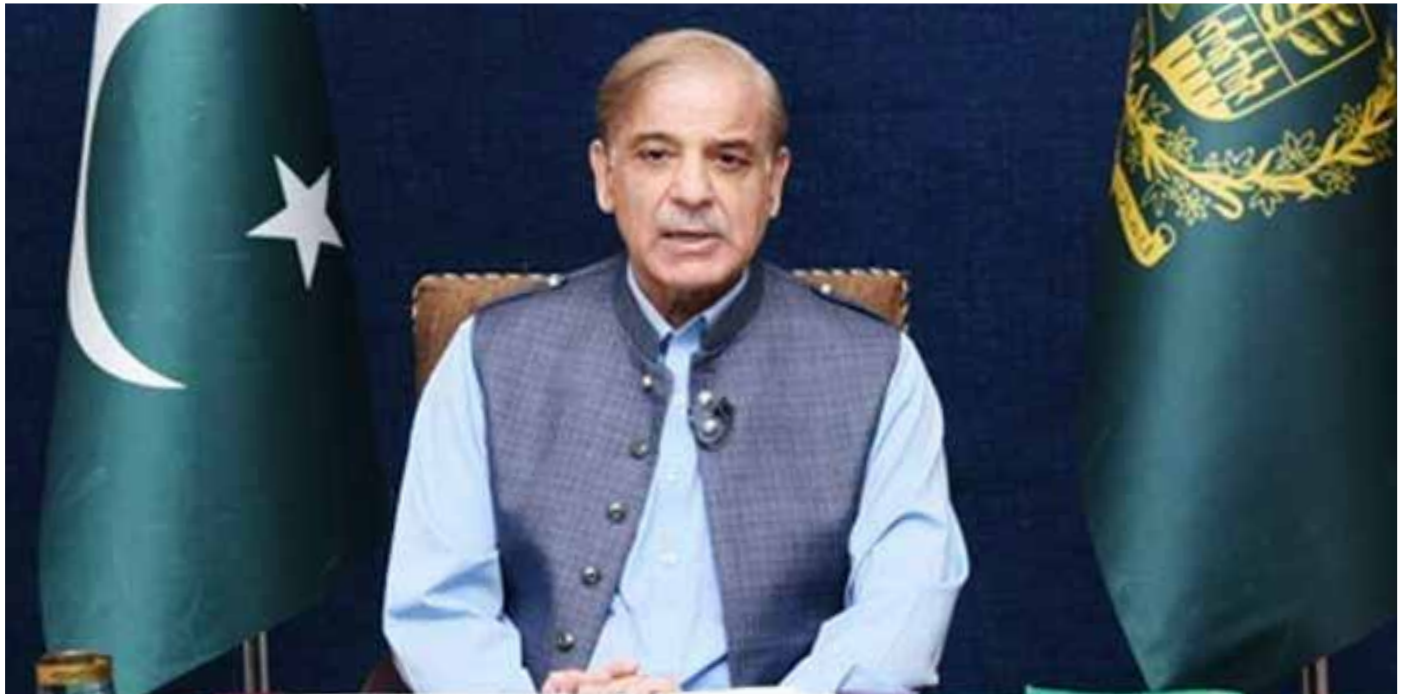
Some members have clearly conveyed to the party leadership that if the Sharif cabinet intends to take 'unpopular' decisions, there must be surety that this government would survive and be able to restore the economy and steer the country out of the financial problems.

PTI chairman Imran Khan is determined to force the government to dissolve National Assembly and announce an early date for next elections. On the other, the coalition government intends to continue to work till completion of constitutional term of the National Assembly.



PM Sharif and the Freedom to Call Elections at Will

With its legislative reform agenda nearing completion, the Pakistan Democratic Front (PDM) government is focused on economic stabilisation



By Sarfraz Raja

Since his removal from power in April, Imran Khan is on roads against those who ousted him, demanding announcement of immediate elections. The coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif, on its part, has marked some serious legislative business in the parliament, specifically related to elections and accountability, before entering the election phase.

With the bulk of that business now transacted and only some formalities left, the Pakistan Democratic Front (PDM) government is now shifting its focus to economic stabilisation, comfortable in the knowledge that it can call a general election pretty much at will.

A new leader of the opposition

Even a few months earlier, no one could imagine what is in the picture right now with leader of the house replaced by leader of the opposition and a member of formal ruling party who could not find a spot in federal cabinet has become leader of the opposition.

Raja Riaz Ahmed Khan, MNA from NA 110 a constituency of business hub Faisalabad was previously part of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and during previous tenure of Shehbaz Sharif as Chief Minister Punjab he remained opposition leader in provincial assembly from 2011 to 2013.

He lost his seat in 2013 general elections but became member of National Assembly in 2018 contesting election on Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) election symbol. He was actually annoyed with his party not giving importance he deserved and showed his annoyance openly at some occasions too.

After Jahangir Khan Tareen's estrangement from party because of his involvement in some cases, Raja Riaz with some of other members of national and provincial assemblies stood by him and consequently a dissident group called Tareen Group emerged.

During the no confidence move against Imran Khan in March, this group openly come up with their strength of around two and half dozens of members and become

important for both PTI and opposition. Although PTI declares them their dissidents and filed a reference for their disqualification but as these MNAs had not cast their votes in the no confidence motion, their skins were saved.

After the success of the no confidence move, Khan's PTI decided to resign from National Assembly. Dissidents did not go along with this idea, becoming the only one to represent opposition in National Assembly. Supported by his seventeen colleagues, Raja Riaz has since been appointed the Leader of Opposition by Speaker Raja Pervez Ashraf.

Now, it is again Leader of the House Shehbaz Sharif v. Leader of the Opposition Raja Riaz – as it was in 2011 in Punjab assembly. Only, this time it is in the National Assembly and the scenario is utterly different.

Important appointments

After the 18th Amendment, the Leader of Opposition has become important for some key appointments. One of the most important



ant have to be done is of Chairman, National Accountability Bureau, which is due.

The seats of two provincial members of election commission of Pakistan have remained vacant for many months. The Prime Minister has to appoint them with consultations of leader of the opposition and these appointments were pending because of some tense political relation between former Prime minister and his leader of opposition.



The all-important caretaker set up to conduct the new elections will also to be finalized mutually by the PM and Opposition Leader before dissolution of the assembly or completion of its term.

With all these most important appointments to be made and a malleable Leader of Opposition, it should not be too difficult for PM Sharif to develop consensus on these nominations. In fact, we have already witnessed this consensus on nomination of two of ECP members last week of May to complete the electoral body to its full strength of five.

The Charter of Democracy (CoD), signed by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in London in 2006, the two parties agreed to give chairmanship of the National Assembly's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) to the opposition.

One of the most powerful parliamentary committees, the PAC reviews yearly

spending of government institutions. During PPP's first term in office after CoD (from 2008 to 2013), opposition leader Chaudhary Nisar Ali Khan was the chairman of PAC. He remained active and it proved a successful tenure of him as chairman PAC.

He was followed in the office by Khursheed Shah from PPP and Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) as chairman of this all important

parliamentary committee during their terms as opposition leader.

Time looks ripe for this important appointment to return to the opposition.

Electoral reforms

First reforms then elections is the main motto of new allied set up. But when they took over the gigantic challenge emerged for them is economy. So they couldn't even talk about any other reforms but now allied government has decided to go for their motive as early as it could be. The major reforms are definitely electoral to go for new elections ensuring transparency and unanimity.

Under the previous government, the current parliament passed some laws which actually have become controversial for not taking opposition parties on board and passing legislation in quiet urgency and despite many reservations shown by

Election Commission of Pakistan, the body who actually has to conduct elections.

Internet voting (i-voting) enabled overseas Pakistanis who have registered as voters from the country of their residence to cast their votes through the internet. This bill was passed in November 2021 in a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament. The sitting saw a record 33 bills pass the parliament.

According to the bill, the Election Commission of Pakistan had to, with the technical assistance of NADRA and any other authority or agency, enable overseas Pakistanis in prescribed manner to secrecy and security to exercise their right to vote during the general elections.

Clearly, the law shifts the burden of ensuring secrecy and security of the vote on the Election Commission. But ECP officials say in internet voting there is no mechanism to ensure that the person who is casting vote is actually the real voter and this issue was under discussion for many years that how voter's identity and secrecy could be verified while casting his or her vote as per spirit of the constitution.

National Assembly in its sitting on May 26 passed new election reforms to repeal this amendment.

The other law passed by PTI government was use of electronic voting machines, which is another controversy. ECP was bound to get their perpetrations to ensure use of electronic voting machines in coming elections. Imran Khan was huge advocate of inducting EVMs immediately in voting process while opposition called it a move for a massive rigging planned by that time's ruling regime.

The ECP on its part has shown a number of written reservations on this issue questioning transparency, lack of technological facilities, chances of hacking, and above all an estimated cost in hundreds billion.

In new electoral reforms passed by National Assembly on May 26 the use of EVMs is linked with pilot projects to be initiated by ECP in by-elections and final decision would be based on that reports which would be presented in parliament after experimental projects with no compulsion to roll out its use in time for the coming general elections.



Accountability reforms

Reforms in accountability laws are another agenda item which was to be perused by new set up. Parties like PML-N and PPP in power right now consider themselves victims of National Accountability Bureau.

The NAB law was introduced by former military ruler Pervez Musharraf neither PPP nor PMLN was able to change these laws despite remaining in power for one term each. Even business community of the country showed their reservation from time to time. It was on the agenda of new alliance to go for some essential reforms and amendments in accountability laws.

In new reforms bill passed by National Assembly, some of NAB powers have been curtailed, reducing physical remand limit from 90 to just 14 days. It has to be ensured that case filed against any public office holder is based on solid documentary evidence and not on media or social media reports.

Another controversy was extension of chairman NAB. Now with new legislation passed tenure of chairman NAB would not be extendable and in case of his absence deputy chairman would work as chairman.

After the amendment, NAB law would not be applicable to transactions pertaining to federal and provincial taxation and funds. It would also not be applied to decisions of federal and provincial cabinets, their committees or sub-committees, like

Council of Common Interests, National Economic Council, National Finance, ECNEC, Central Development Working Parties, Provincial Development Working Parties and Departmental Development Working Parties, State Bank of Pakistan.

The law would also not be applied to any procedural lapse in any government project unless it is proven that any public office-holder has taken monetary benefits, and all pending inquiries, investigations and trials under the NAB ordinance will stand transferred to departments concerned under the respective law.

Early polls or full term?

For how long would this new set up continue is still a big question and the answer is still uncertain after almost two months. There were differences of opinion among allies and within parties. A senior group of PMLN leadership was in favour of going into elections immediately while Pakistan People's party is advocating to complete their remaining term that is till August next year.

When we discussed this matter with some important government functionaries they say, situation they were assessing and situation they are facing are totally different. Economic crisis is worse than they were anticipating.

Another issue is that the ECP is not ready for any immediate elections at least before October-November this year as they have to

complete new delimitations that became necessary after reducing National Assembly general seats from 272 to 266 due to merger of Federally administered tribal areas into province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

So with electoral and accountability legislations they have to go for urgent and important economic reforms too. Initially worsening economic situation was enforcing them to go for early elections but allies in government believed that going into elections immediately would enhance economic crisis drastically which would be disaster for country and people of Pakistan.

Sources in government believe that economic crisis is a greater challenge than that of Imran Khan who is making it hard on roads for them. Government sources assume that coming months are important in deciding future of this present set up.

If government can bring about economic stabilisation, improve the rupee's standing against the dollar, and bring a semblance of sanity to prices including petroleum and electricity prices, they would prefer to complete their term till August 2023. If, on the other hand, they have no success in that task, early elections could be called.

But for early elections to take place, electoral and accountability reforms in parliament has to be completed, to which end the parliament is at work.





The Battle for Punjab Rages On

Khan's project to deny PDM a clear victory in the Punjab is going great guns



By Ahmad Waleed

Ousted Prime Minister Imran Khan's desperate attempts to claw his way back into power may not have met much success, but his strategy to fight every inch of the way continues to deny Pakistan Democratic Front (PDM) a clear victory in the Punjab province.

Khan has been on campaign trail ever since his ouster through a parliamentary motion, storming town after town across the nation, canvassing people to his cause. On May 25, he marched on Islamabad to deal a final blow to the PDM-led government to get an election date.

But, his much-trumpeted 'Haqiqi Azadi' march ended in a whimper when he unexpectedly concluded his protest with an ultimatum to the government to dissolve assemblies in six days and announce a date of fresh elections, failing which he will be back in the capital with a much bigger crowd.

The PDM-led government in the centre breathed a sigh of relief and went back to work. It repealed a couple of legal amendments introduced by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government. Now it is seemingly inching towards stability.

However, the turmoil in Punjab shows no signs of ebbing. If PDM leadership had any hopes things will unfold according to their plan of installing their own chief minister in Pakistan's most populous province, they have been dashed.

In theory, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) had sufficient numbers to dethrone Usman Buzdar and install their own man in his stead. But Chaudhary Pervaiz Elahi's preference for the PTI has made all the difference in the world.

The crisis in Punjab has worsened since the Supreme Court gave the judgement of

interpreting the issue of disqualification of lawmakers under Article 63A of the Constitution, putting a question mark on the legitimacy of Hamza Shehbaz's election as chief minister.

The SC declared the votes cast by lawmakers in defiance of directions given by their parliamentary part 'cannot be counted and must (therefore) be disregarded'. This led many experts and lawyers to believe Hamza would be no more the chief minister as votes of 26 dissident PTI MPAs who had voted for him on April 16 stood nullified after the court's judgement.

Others, however, believe the decision would have a prospective and not a retrospective effect unless the court says otherwise in its detailed judgement.

But, things turned out differently and the Election Commission of Pakistan implemented the SC decision. Some say a new



chief minister has to be elected while others believe the Hamza Shehbaz, who has lost absolute majority in the House, has to seek a fresh vote of confidence.

The PTI-PML-Q led alliance called upon Hamza to leave the charge while Hamza Shehbaz has refused to step down. Both sides claim to have majority in the House while five special seats will play an important role if the run-off election is held. The legal experts believe the ECP will now distribute these seats as per the current strength of each party in the House.

The Punjab Assembly's current strength is 346 members: the PTI has 158 lawmakers, its ally PML-Q 10, the PML-N 165, PPP seven, and Rah-i-Haq Party one. Five members are independent.

In a related development, Punjab Assembly Speaker Pervez Elahi recently managed to retain his seat by thwarting the PML-N move of no-confidence against him on technical grounds as the PML-N could not ensure presence in the House when its lawmakers were meeting a few yards away from the assembly hall, where the proceedings were being conducted but they were unaware of the commencement of the proceedings on the no-confidence motion.

"I am Imran Khan's candidate and after taking oath as the CM, I will dissolve the assembly if he asks me", Punjab Assembly Speaker Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi vowed lately, adding that the ECP's verdict is a victory for 'truth and justice'.

Now the PML-N has submitted a second no-confidence motion while the assembly session has been postponed till June 6, 2022. The opposition says Hamza is no longer the chief minister while PML-N asserts that Hamza is still the chief minister of Punjab until the next election of his seat.

As Hamza has decided to fight till the last ball, the PTI-PML-Q alliance vows to out him through legal means after the SC and ECP decision. PML-Q leadership believe Hamza Has no legal or moral ground to remain the chief minister.

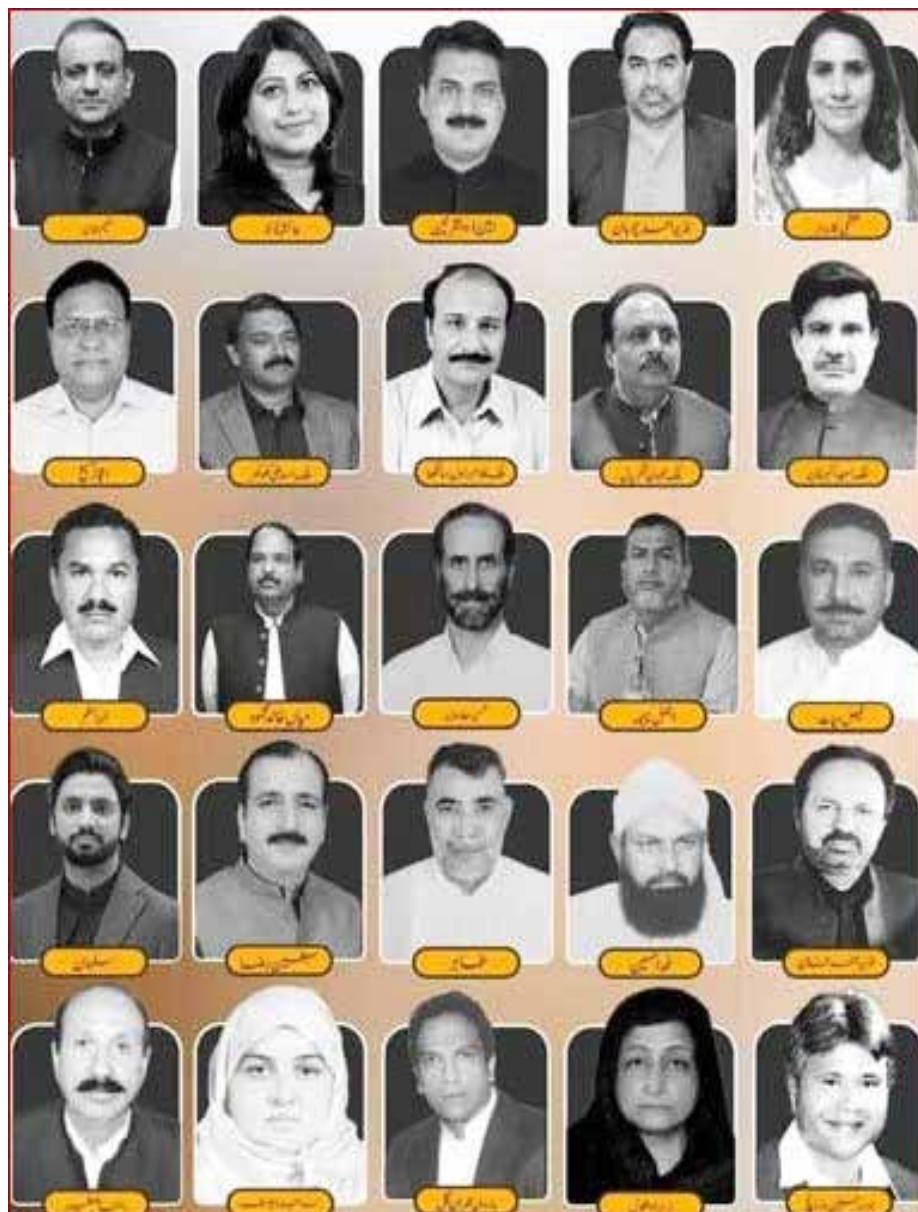
However, the PML-N insists that Hamza Shehbaz is still the reigning CM as he still enjoys a majority in the Punjab Assembly. "The ECP's decision has no impact on

Hamza's office," claims PML-N deputy secretary general Attaullah Tarrar.

He believes either the governor can ask the CM to take a vote of confidence or the opposition can bring a no-trust motion against him. "Neither option seems workable as the governor's seat is vacant, and the opposition needs 186 votes to oust

On the contrary, the PTI-PML-Q alliance believes since it lost five reserved seats following the ECP decision, it would get the same back as it is in a good position to have its candidate Pervaiz Elahi as the CM in the run-off election.

The de-seated lawmakers belonging to Jahangir Tareen, Asad Khokhar, and



the CM, which it does not have at the time. Similarly, the acting governor cannot ask the CM to take a vote of confidence".

The PML-N claims it has the support of 177 members against 168 of the opposition in total as it will get three of the five reserved seats making a total of 180 seats besides their five 'rebel' MPs will return to its fold with no other choice in hand.

Aleem Khan groups are also consulting their lawyers to appeal the ECP decision.

The chaos in Punjab has led to a virtual collapse of administrative machinery due to lack of decision-making by the political authority in the country's largest province and there is no hope of normalcy in the political situation anytime soon.



Who is Afraid of Local Governments?

They pay lip service to democracy, but major political parties always seek to weaken local governments



By **Qurban Baloch**

Elections are underway across Pakistan for local governments, historically manipulated by military and political rulers alike to serve their own ends. The third tier of government in Pakistan has remained unable to provide any hope or relief to poor public, with provincial governments, powerful elites, and ruling parties all trying to weaken and control it.

About a decade ago, the Eighteenth Amendment under President Asif Zardari of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) gave hope of one day controlling their destiny to public of small provinces through a new social contract. However, those hopes have been dashed with the passage of time, with provincial governments, civil bureaucracy, and powerful elites once again controlling the system completely to protect and promote their own financial and political benefits.

Nowadays, local government elections in the country are underway under the supervision of Election Commission of Pakistan, in which mostly candidates of political parties are contesting. After a long of time, common public feels that contesting elections are game of power and money so mostly people are shy to contest the election of any tier from general to local government election, so only few are in the game.

Local government election in Capital City Islamabad to three provinces Punjab, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan are being held under law introduced by previous government. In Sindh, new Local government Act are being prepared with consultation of ruling party Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) under agreements both parties signed before joining Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif's coalition federal government, with high hopes that the benefits of the agreement will accrue to the people of province.

LG polls across Pakistan

Capital Territory Islamabad

Delimitation of the local government constituencies for 300 general wards in 50 union councils of Islamabad, 27 of them rural and 23 urban, have been completed. Now it is up to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to issue election schedule for local government election in Islamabad Capital Territory.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Election process of local government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has been completed in phased manners on March 31, 2022. Unfor-

tunately, local government are yet to start working properly in the province due to political turmoil within country.

Government official including former Prime Minister Imran Khan, his Cabinet members, Chief Minister KP and Chairman Pakistan People's Party Bilawal Bhutto and some others violated the ECP code of conduct during LG elections in the province, whom Election of Pakistan set free by sending show cause notice or monetary fine.

Punjab

The ECP has issued the election schedule for the first phase of local government elections in Punjab province. In the first phase, election is to be held on June 9, 2022 in seventeen mostly southern districts of the province out of 37 total.

The districts included in the first phase are DG Khan, Rajanpur, Muzaffargarh, Layyah, Khanewal, Vehari, Bahawalpur, Sahiwal, Pakpattan, TT Singh, Chinniot, Khushab, Sialkot, Hafizabad, Mandi Bahauddin, Jehlum, and Attock.

Of the 17 districts of Punjab, there are 4 metropolitan, 17 district councils, 679 neighborhood councils and 1430 village councils.



Sindh

The Election Commission has issued the election schedule for the first phase and second phase of local government elections in Sindh province. The first phase covers a total of 14 districts of Sukkur, Larkana, Shaheed Benazirabad, and Mirpur Khas divisions.

According to ECP schedule election in the seventeen districts of Sindh to be held on June 26, 2022.

In the 2nd Phase LG elections of Sixteen districts of Sindh, Matiari, Tando Allahyar, Hyderabad, Tando Muhammad Khan, Jamshoro, Dadu, Badin, Sajawal, Thatta, Malir, Korangi, Karachi East, Karachi South, Karachi West, Karachi Central, Keamari to held on July 24, 2022.

MQM-P senior leader and Member National Assembly Sabir Hussain Qaimkhani told The Truth International (TTI) that his party wants the local government system to be completely independent with financial and development powers without intervention of the provincial government.

He said MQM-P wants mayors of metropolitans to be powerful not only in Karachi but also elsewhere in Sindh including Larkana, Sukkur, Khairpur, Nawabshah.

Qaimkhani said under the agreement with PPP, a committee has been constituted to assess bogus domicile and appointments within the province under Rural and Urban Quetta.

“Our demand about recruitment is simple,” he said. “We are saying appointment be from grade one to grade fifteen from local people in the whole province in the education, health and police departments, which is accepted by ruling party also”.

Work on the implementation the agreement is well underway. According the agreement Sindh Police introduced Community Policing in few areas of Karachi, according Metropolitan police chief.

Balochistan

Local government Elections in 32 Districts of Balochistan have been held on May 29, 2022. More than 17,774 candidates contested elections in the 32 districts of eight

divisions of Balochistan province, including Quetta, Rakhshan, Zhob, Loralai, Sibi, Nasirabad, Kalat, and Makran.

There are 838 union councils in 32 districts and 5,345 rural wards and 914 urban wards, with 7 municipal corporations and 49 municipal committees.

History and performance

In Pakistan, unfortunately military dictators have always used local governments to provide political cover to their unconstitutional power. Another aspect of the issue is that in all political governments weaken the local government system



instead makes them powerful to provide basic facilities from cleanness, water supply and sanitations.

Gen Pervaiz Musharraf introduced powerful local government and police system in the Pakistan, which to some extent started delivery to the grassroots level.

After Musharraf era, Pakistan People's Party rose to power in the 2008 general elections. During PPP's government, most political parties represented in the Parliament the introduced Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment with consensus.

The purpose of that constitutional amendment was to devolve power from federal to grassroots level. But unfortunately, the powers transferred from center, were seized

by provincial government grabs, leaving the local government including police system toothless again.

Almost political governments make LG system powerless to server their narrow political interests. It would seem they want the masses to remain beholden to their parliament members and ministers even for their basic necessities like water supply and sanitation.

From 2008 till now, three separate political parties have ruled Pakistan: Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Every one of them has sought to weaken the local government

system in turn so that it has become totally dysfunctional by now, and unable to benefit the people in any way.

Former Prime Minister Imran Khan Party was vocal advocate to make local system powerful, but instead his party in federation and Punjab made LGs nonfunctional. This was because the previous local governments elections were held under PML-N, who ended up winning a large proportion of seats.

Simple example of dysfunction and or powerlessness of LG system during past fourteen years in the Provinces especially in the Sindh is that, mostly funds which are being released for LG, using by local government's elected or unelected political government representatives after cut of salaries of staff and necessary utilizations.

Social Media and Pakistani Politics

How Imran Khan's PTI harnessed the power of social media to give the traditional political parties a run for their money



By Mishaal Ashraf

When it first arrived, social media was seen as a tool for individuals. Cool kids used Facebook to share pictures and Twitter to gossip. But with the passage of time, corporations, NGOs, governments, and political parties around the world began to see the utility of social media.

Social media has played an oversize role in the Pakistani politics starting with the 2008 general elections. That was when Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) started using social media actively in the service of its electioneering campaign.

With 64 percent of the Pakistani population being under the age of 30 years, it was evident to PTI that the key to securing the election is the youth of the country. Compared to the older generation, the younger generation is more susceptible to online political campaigns.

The PTI was the first political party in Pakistan to use the power of social media as it launched campaigns for the 2008 general election on the internet. The party identified its voter bank as the younger population of the country, and therefore turned to platforms that were most popular amongst them, like Facebook at the time.

Hija Kamran, Senior Manager Digital Rights at Media Matters for Democracy recalls, "I remember before the 2008 elections a lot of my friends on Facebook were working as political workers for PTI, it used to be the 'it' thing, you know? To be working with PTI."

PTI not only targeted the youth online but also conducted physical activities. "Not only did they mobilise online but

they also dispersed their ambassadors in university campuses. People would come and try to convince you to become part of [a PTI worker].

This was essentially to target people who were going to be the next generation voters", she remarks.

PTI ensured that their party's ideology aligned with the youth – that is how they connected to them. "Since PTI was targeting Pakistan's youth, their ideologies also matched", says Hija. "PTI would arrange events that would particularly attract them like hosting concerts in their dharnas.

"All of this insight was communicated to people on social media and people who could not attend it in person could get a hint of what kind of a political party PTI is going to be and why I would want to vote for them.

"So for instance in Karachi, jalsas before the 2008 general elections were proper concerts where people would dress up and all, you know? They would not look at it just like any other jalsa. They were proper concerts where artists were coming up; celebrities also played a huge role in promoting PTI."

Even though efforts to mobilise the youth began before the 2008 general election, it wasn't until the 2013 elections that PTI's social media campaign reached new heights. PTI had started building its voter bank early on but since the voters were young at the time, they were not eligible to cast votes.

Therefore, extensive efforts were made by PTI workers in the 2013 elections to secure a win. PTI was not only successful in

organising large crowds in Pakistan, but also focused its attention on overseas Pakistanis.

To learn more about PTI's presence on social media, I interviewed Hans Masroor Badvi, who says, "Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's social media team is the pioneer of social media usage in Pakistan's political scene. We started in 2008 with a website to interact with our voters. After a while, we created our Facebook page and Twitter account.

"Mr. Imran Ghazali, currently General Manager, Digital Media Wing Pakistan, led the 2013 election campaign along with Umer Murtaza, Faisal Javed, Ahsan Alavi, Fahad, Awab Alvi, Zee Faisal, Ali Ghuman, Jibran Ilyas, Naveeda Sultan, and myself."

When asked about how the party used social media to its advantage, Badvi replied, "The main focus on social media was to deliver the message of change. Our team successfully produced new voters to stand with the PTI manifesto.

"After that, the social media team played a vital role in the 2013 election campaign, which helped Dr. Arif Alvi in securing a position at the National Assembly from the Karachi constituency.

"Our social media was also an important tool in promoting the 2014 dharna and a huge team was formed nationwide following that. We started insaf.pk, PTI Official Facebook, PTI Official Twitter, Insaf Pk Twitter, Insaf TV, and Insaf Radio."

"It was at this time that our social media team started live coverage of dharnas on our social media platforms. PTI's social media team worked voluntarily to bring a wave of change to Pakistan.

"Our social media team's main object was to bring awareness amongst citizens about the importance of vote; we tried to teach them the importance of their vote, social rights, as well as political rights.

"In addition to this, we also tried to circulate information about the drawbacks of corruption, how important it is to counter it, and the burden on the nation due to the misuse of the country's resources."

"Initially, we used social media to share the Chairman's quotes and our party objectives but with time the scope of our social media forums has increased. For that, we not only use text-based posts and tweets, but also created attractive graphics, videos, and blogs.

"Currently, our social media team is divided into different segments: Creatives, Video, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Web Management, and Bloggers."

The PTI, led the trend of political parties having social media presence. Before them, most if not all, communication was offline and in-person. Political parties essentially did not have a digital footprint. Popular parties like Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) turned towards media technologies soon.

The 2013 General Election was the first election in Pakistan where social media was broadly used for political campaigns to create awareness and disseminate the message of the importance of voting across the country.

In the 2018 elections, where social media became an important tool for political campaigns, PTI maintained its position at the top for creating the most posts for Twitter and Facebook while PML-N and PPP stood at second and third positions, respectively.

Even today, PTI is the only political party to host Twitter Spaces every two-three days and engage with Twitter users.



PPP's Naz Baloch agrees that the use of social media worked to their party's advantage, "The world has digitised and so has the PPP. We are well aware of social media and the sort of power that it holds. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc. are not only used for entertainment purposes now, but to mount full-fledged campaigns.

"Just like industries use it to promote their business, political parties also use it to further their voice. It provides a way for two-way communication in which the people and the political party and the leadership get to know the real feel and pulse of the common man. Leaders get to engage with their followers and party workers.

"Hence, it has helped a lot to enhance the membership of the political parties as well and boost the morale of the political workers in different political parties. Even before the 2013 elections, we observed that the perception had totally changed. People started to engage with political leadership through these social media platforms in which especially Twitter played a vital role.

"I am a member of the Information Technology standing committee of the National Assembly so there we do work out a lot on social media code of conduct. We monitor a lot of issues that we face on social media. There are of course pros and cons to it as well.

"As far as political parties are concerned, PPP has a huge number of active social media supporters and it's not only that they communicate with the party leadership but also the party narrative gets very easily available and public through our social media accounts. Therefore, we must make the best of the readily available tools present in today's digital age, and use them positively, constructively, and ethically.

"The good thing about PPP's social media supporters is that we make sure that they follow the social media code of conduct and do not misuse the social media tool to harass other political parties' workers and maintain decency.

“PPP has very strong support base which is increasing day by day. This online presence has helped us in the previous elections and I am sure it will again play a strong role for the campaign in the next elections.”

Zain Qureshi, Member National Assembly from PTI believes that social media usage in Pakistan reflects how politically aware our nation is. He gives the example of how Pakistani TV channels air more than 80 talk shows in a week, which are predominantly political in nature.

“If you look at other countries in the world, they probably do not take as much interest in day-to-day politics as people in Pakistan do”, says he. “As a nation, we are politically very vocal and that is reflected in our social media activities.”

Talking about the benefits and drawbacks of social media, Qureshi says, “The advantage is that it has made people more aware. Access to information has increased, people can voice their opinions and concerns, people can highlight things.

“To give an example, we had a huge VIP culture in Pakistan. I think with the advent of social media, the VIPs have become more conscious and the culture has gone down a bit. People are always worried that somebody will take out their mobile phone, take a video or you know comment on it or whatever.

“So that’s a good thing. The bad thing is that people use social media to spread fake news to character assassinate people, get personal, etc., so you know it has its pros and cons.”

Regarding the usage of social media by political parties in Pakistan, and PTI’s claim of establishing social media as a viable tool of communication, Qureshi states, “The PTI was the pioneer of social media and politics in Pakistan.

“The reason for that was that we had two established political

parties in Pakistan: the PPP and PML-N. They had workers, grassroots-level support, offices in every city because obviously, they had been contesting the elections for the last 30 years or so.

“So when PTI really became an alternative to the two major parties, we had very few people who were accustomed to the political norms in the country. So we sort of had to start from scratch.

“But at that time, the youth supported Imran Khan. A lot of people didn’t even have ID cards and couldn’t even vote, but they were supporting him. Most of the time, they would just be sitting at home and writing on social media in his support.

“And this was a grassroots-level movement. I remember we used to hold jalsas and dharnas in various parts of the country. People would put up posts saying ‘meet up at lalik chowk lahore’ and people would actually turn up and that’s how that movement started.

“When the dharna started initially, a lot of it was essentially because of social media. So since we did not have a grassroots party structure, we did not have an organisation, we did not have a way of communicating through that sort of chain of command and that’s how social media came in handy and how we became good at handling social media.

“It was something that the party leadership and the [Imran Khan] himself was very aware of and put in a lot of effort and time in grooming his team. To this day, [Khan] is very much in touch with his social media team and a lot of his narrative is pushed through social media.

“So he has definitely harnessed the ability of social media and then obviously people realise that this is a very good way of doing it, a very cost-effective way of reaching a larger audience and they have followed suit.”



Sharif Ready to Walk the Tightrope of Economic Reform

Burning political capital to stabilise the national economy was always going to be a tough call, but someone had to make it



By Mehtab Haider

Finally convinced it has no wriggle room and no other options to weather the coming storm, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government is ready to hew to the economic reform program the previous government agreed to enact when signing up for an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) program from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Heading the coalition government of Pakistan Democratic Front (PDM), PM Sharif hiked pump prices by PKR 30 a litre, but hastened to throw a PKR 28 billion safety net to cushion the poorer segments of the society from the coming shock of inflation. But that is only the first step towards the revival of the stalled EFF program.

Pakistan needs the EFF back on track in short order to avert defaulting on its external obligations. The government will have to take other tough measures as well including hiking the electricity tariffs and passing the next fiscal year's budget which is aligned with the objectives of the IMF program.

The IMF has asked the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) to introduce reforms into Personal Income Tax (PIT) by slashing the number of slabs and jacking up rates in order to fetch 0.3 percent revenues equivalent to PKR 223 billion in the coming budget.

It remains to be seen how the incumbent government further hikes POL prices to bring the subsidy down to zero, hiking electricity tariff and then presenting as well as approving the next fiscal year budget which could please the IMF. It is clear the government does not want further burdening the masses anymore in order to protect its political capital.

There is no easy way out and the government will have to walk on a tight rope because there is not much fiscal space to manoeuvre under the existing macroeconomic and fiscal framework. Under the IMF program for aligning with the Fund objectives, the government will have to cool down the overheating economy by suppressing demands for curtailing the twin deficits known as the budget deficit and current account deficit.

Thus, the government will have to present its next budget in order to bring down the budget deficit from over 8 percent of GDP to around 6 percent of GDP especially the primary deficit which hovers around 2 percent of GDP to bring it down close to surplus in the budget for 2022-23.

The current account deficit will be brought down from USD 17-18 billion to USD 10 billion in next budget. For achieving these two objectives, the government will have to take tough measures to collect more tax and non-tax revenues.

On the other hand, non-debt-creating inflows such as exports, remittances and foreign investment will have to be promoted while imports will have to be compressed. Now there is a dilemma that without importing raw materials, intermediate goods and machinery, Pakistan cannot boost its stagnant exports hovering in the range of USD 25 to USD 30 billion.

There is a need to analyse why Pakistan and the IMF so far remained unable to

strike a staff-level agreement as both the governments including the previous PTI-led regime and now PDM-led Shehbaz Sharif regime failed to convince the Fund for reviving the stalled program.

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission led by Mr. Nathan Porter held both in-person and virtual discussions in Doha, Qatar with the Pakistani authorities during May 18-25 on policies to secure macroeconomic stability and support sustainable growth in Pakistan.

Mr. Porter issued a statement saying, “The mission has held highly constructive discussions with the Pakistani authorities aimed at reaching an agreement on policies and reforms that would lead to the conclusion of the pending seventh review of the authorities’ reform program, which is supported by an IMF Extended Fund Facility arrangement.

Considerable progress was made during the mission, including the need to continue to address high inflation and the elevated fiscal and current account deficits, while ensuring adequate protection for the most vulnerable. In this regard, the further increase in policy rates implemented on May 23 was a welcome step.

On the fiscal side, there have been deviations from the policies agreed upon in the last review, partly reflecting the fuel and power subsidies announced by the authorities in February. The team emphasized the

urgency of concrete policy actions, including in the context of removing fuel and energy subsidies and the FY2023 budget, to achieve program objectives.

“The IMF team looks forward to continuing its dialogue and close engagement with Pakistan’s government on policies to ensure macroeconomic stability for the benefit of all of Pakistan’s citizens.”

Pakistan and the IMF could not evolve a consensus on the completion of 7th review and release of the USD 1 billion tranche under the USD 6 billion EFF program.

The parleys failed because the authorities were unable to present any viable plan to tackle the arising lingering difficulties on internal and external fronts of the economy.

The IMF is perturbed over the breach of commitment made by the last PTI-led government whereby they promised to jack up petroleum levy up to PKR 30 per litre and increase electricity prices.

Instead of collecting petroleum levy and raising power tariff to curtail the monster of circular debt, the ousted prime minister froze POL and electricity prices and provided unfunded subsidies which were estimated to cost PKR 118 billion alone in May 2022 for subsidizing petrol and diesel prices for 30 days.

The subsidy requirement for the power sector stands separate and it is estimated

that the government requires PKR 140 billion for keeping power prices unchanged.

The IMF maintains that the government needs urgent actions to remove fuel and energy subsidies. The government hiked POL prices by PKR 30 per litre but still there is subsidy of PKR 17 per litre on petrol and PKR 53 per litre on diesel. The government will have to hike the electricity tariff by over PKR 7 per unit including base price and fuel adjustments on quarterly basis.

Now the government will have to make up its mind to take tough decisions because the revival of the IMF program is necessary to avert a defaulter. The delayed action will only aggravate the cost of adjustments.

The government already provided a targeted subsidy by using data of Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) as the country-wide survey had just completed so its data could be matched with Excise Departments at provincial level to identify owners of motorcycles, rickshaws, and tractors.

For all others, the prices of POL products could be increased up to level where subsidies reversed and actual price could be collected from domestic customers.

Apart from that, the revival of IMF program hinges on ability of the economic team to negotiate well with the Fund staff, something that calls for proper preparation and homework.



Why Did the Markets Endorse the Fuel Price Hike?

The hike reflects the government commitment to long-term economic reform to achieve macroeconomic stability



By Javed Mahmood

Bourses and money markets staged a sharp recovery the morning after the government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif allowed pump prices to rise, endorsing the coalition government's move to prioritise the resumption of a stalled International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout.

Experts have long linked economic stability in Pakistan to the resumption of the fund's Extended Fund Facility (EFF) program. Businessmen, investors and capital market investors are awaiting the release of the next tranche from the IMF with the anticipation that it will stabilise value of rupee, strengthen the fast-depleting foreign exchange reserves and put the economy on the path towards growth and sustainability.

The government increased petroleum products by PKR 30 a litre from the midnight of May 26. Finance Minister Miftah Ismail announced the hike after getting approval from the Prime Minister and the cabinet.

It is understood that this huge increase in domestic petroleum prices would trigger a new wave of inflation in the country, with the prices shooting through the roof in the

short term. In the long term, however, the decision will gradually stabilize the deteriorating economic situation in the country.

On Friday May 27, the value of rupee and stock market demonstrated a significant improvement. The US dollar recorded the biggest-ever single-day fall of PKR 2.50 in its value in the inter-bank at the morning, as the price of greenback dropped to PKR 200 from previous closing of PKR 202.50.

This is the first immediate outcome of the government's decision to fulfil the key demand of the IMF for the resumption of the stalled programme.

Meanwhile, Pakistan Stock Exchange also welcomed the decision with more than 870 points increase at 10:30 am on Friday anticipation resumption of IMF loan as the government fulfilled the last demand of the fund.

The benchmark KSE-100 has edged up to over 43,430 points at 10:30 am on Friday. With abrupt improvements in the value of rupee and trading sentiment at the stock market, the process of economic stability has taken off which will gain further pace with the disbursement of the IMF tranche any time next month.

In April 2022 the new government has requested IMF to enhance the quantum of the loan to USD 8 billion, from the existing USD 6 billion. Another advantage of the IMF loan approval is that the friendly countries like Saudi Arabia, China, UAE and others would also provide financial assistance to Pakistan.

Also, the country will be able to offer for sale bonds in the international market to mop up foreign exchange conveniently and at an affordable rate of return. According to Finance Minister Miftah Ismail, in 2022-23 Pakistan will have to pay back USD 21 billion foreign loans and this would be possible only with the support of the IMF and friendly countries.

Earlier, the finance minister has stated that the government would not reverse the subsidy on petrol and electricity while Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and other PML(N) leaders are talking about minimum burden on the consumers in the wake of the revival of the IMF loan programme.

Nevertheless, after IMF's inflexible stance against subsidies, the government has taken the decision to hike domestic petroleum

prices, ending economic uncertainty and paving the way for the resumption of loan from the IMF.

On Feb 28, Imran Khan (when he was PM), reduced domestic petroleum prices by PKR 10/liter and also reduced electricity tariff by PKR 5/unit from 1st of March with the promise that the cost of electricity will not be raised any more.

Nonetheless, in March (hardly 10 days after Khan's announcement), NEPRA announced about PKR 6 per unit hike in the name of fuel cost adjustment. NEPRA has been doing this exercise every month for the last couple of years and it did not change its policy even after change of the government because it is one of the IMF's requirements to raise money to reduce circular debt and one of the best methods to extort billions of rupees from the consumers every month.

For the new government, the foremost priority is to ensure economic stability in the country amid the challenges of very high international fuel prices and other essential commodities. This task can be achieved by boosting the foreign exchange reserves which have depleted to below USD 10.30 billion by mid-May because of suspension of the IMF programme and a wide gap in the current account deficit driven by alarming growth in imports.

In the first ten months of the outgoing financial year (2021-22), Pakistan sustained USD 13.77 billion current account deficit,

although the intensity of CAD has decreased in the month of April 2022. At present, the SBP's reserves are barely enough for six to seven weeks imports.

As the government has imposed ban on the imports of 38 categories involving thousands of non-essential items from the third week of May, the resumption of IMF loan would help the government to contain unnecessary growth in imports, trade deficit, and current account imbalance.

Already, CAD for the month of April 2022 has declined to USD 650 million, against average monthly CAD of about USD 1.2 billion because of slowdown in imports in the backdrop of increase in the value of dollar (at PKR 200) and an unprecedented hike in prices of major commodities.

Decline in the CAD was being seen as a good development for the stability of the foreign exchange reserves, nevertheless, dollar-rupee exchange rate regime is showing no impact of this positive development.

In this situation, analysts believe that the resumption of the IMF loan could be a blow for the dollar and its value may decline in inter-bank and open market operations in the country.

Challenges of Making New Budget

The present government faces an uphill task of preparing budget for the year 2022-23. The new budget would be 'make or break'

for the new government because if the government makes harsh decisions, it will lose its popularity and the allies in the government may not be able to win support of the masses in the upcoming general elections.

The IMF is asking the government to end tax and cash subsidies, increase prices of electricity, petrol and gas and also enhance tax revenue target by almost 1.1 trillion rupees (to around 7.2 trillion rupees), which seems to be a very tough task in the prevailing situation.

Increasing tax revenue to this level will motivate the government to impose more taxes or increase tax rates at a time when the government is struggling to curb imports and put minimum financial burden on the inflation-hit masses.

Ban on imports will certainly deprive the government a significant amount of tax revenues, but this policy decision is essential to minimise financing bleeding in the shape of erosion of foreign exchange reserves, depreciation of rupee, alarming growth in twin deficits.

The government has set June 10, 2022, as its deadline to announce new budget and what kinds of strategies the government puts in place to announce a balanced budget, it will be clear when the 2022-23 budget is made public. New budget will be enforced from July 1, 2022.



A fiscal Quagmire: Genesis



By Waqar Masood Khan

In the last article, many readers felt that there was no explanation as to how we came to this pass and what remedial actions would be required to extricate the nation from this quagmire.

We would give an account of the causes responsible for this situation and suggest, in a follow-up article, the remedial measures to correct it. Although, figures would be minimized but the reference period is 2008-09 to 2021 with brief mention of 2021-22.

Fiscal deficit: As they say, fiscal deficit is the mother of all economic ills. Though there is a 5000-year history of debt, mostly public, the peculiar manner in which debt is created is a modern phenomenon. It simply means spending more than your income with no need (or intention) to pay back. Pakistan, like all other countries, also does so.

Are there some safe limits to such profligacy or it can go unchecked? During 2008-2021, fiscal deficit has averaged around 6.36% but with a very high variability.

FY12 saw the highest deficit of 8.53% and FY16 saw the lowest deficit at 4.12%. More recently, during 2018-19 to 2020-21, deficit averaged at 7.03% and FY22 is projected to equal the 8.5%, last seen in FY22. By prudential standards these are high fiscal deficits. Fund would recommend 3.5% as maximum deficit for emerging market economies.

Tax revenues: The foremost cause of deficit is inadequate tax collections. During 2008-21, the average FBR taxes have been 9%, with small variation around this average. This is woefully inadequate for an economy of 250 million people. In FY22, tax collection is likely to be in the high 9%.

Gross revenues, including other taxes and non-tax revenues, improve only to 12.52%. There is virtual stagnation in revenues despite huge tax efforts routinely undertaken on the occasion of each budget.

Provincial transfers: Pakistan works through a system of fiscal federalism. Most of the taxes are collected at the federal level

and then distributed through National Finance Commission (NFC) among the federation and provinces. The current NFC has led to severe imbalance in resources distribution as 57.5% revenues are transferred to provinces.

The imbalance is evident from the fact that in 2008-09, the year before the current NFC came into effect, only 28.4% of gross revenues were transferred to provinces and thereafter this has averaged at 42.8% with a high of 54.1 in FY19. In terms of percentage of GDP, provincial transfers on average amounted to 5.18% of GDP with a high of 5.66% in FY18.

Net revenues: What is available to the federal government after provincial transfers is net revenues. As percentage of GDP, net revenues averaged at 7.34% with a high of 9.14% in the first year of NFC in FY10. As we would see, this is utterly insufficient to support continuing high expenditures.

Expenditures: Now let's see how much do

we spend against the net revenues of the federal government. On average, federal expenditures amounted to 14% of GDP. Therefore, given the net revenue of 7.34%, the average deficit is 6.66% or say 7%. But as we noted earlier, the average is accompanied with significant variation or more so in recent years, where it is exceeding 8%.

Interest payments: Nothing explains the precarious nature of our fiscal state than the burden of debt servicing and interest payments we carry in our budgets. On average, interest payments as percentage of GDP were 4.42% with a high of 5.51% in FY20 and are likely to exceed significantly in FY22 and FY23 because of high interest rates.

Net revenues after interest payments: It would be highly instructive to ask how much of net revenues are left for meeting other expenditures after making interest payments. Clearly, on average, net revenues were 7.34% whereas interest payments averaged 4.42%.

But in view of deteriorating trends in recent fiscal years, this positive margin has virtually eroded as against 5.97% of net revenues in 2019-21, interest payments were 5.08% leaving less than 1% of GDP for all other expenditures including defence, civil administration, pensions, development, social safety-net and uncontrollable subsidies.

Development spending: It should not be surprising that in view of the precarious fiscal finances, the hardest hit expenditure has been the development spending. From a high of 6% of GDP, development spending has constantly declined to 2.81% in FY21.

With such level of spending it is impossible to hope for high level of growth. Curiously, the development spending budgeted at Rs.900 billion has already seen a cut of one-third or Rs.300 billion to contain the deficit within the Fund programme. Unfortunately, however, this is a trend whenever a Fund programme is done, the first casualty is development spending.

Leveraged consumption (LC): A measure that captures the size of unsustainable fiscal burden is the notion of leveraged consumption. This is defined as the difference between fiscal deficit and development spending, both taken as percentages of GDP.

The idea is that if the leverage (borrowing) is used for development spending, there is hope that such borrowings would create productive assets capable to liquidate the future debt servicing.

A zero value of leveraged consumption precisely means leverage is limited to development spending and a positive value

shows how much borrowings are for consumption which creates no income earning assets.

Evidently, during the last IMF programme (2013-16), LC was brought down to zero as part of the completion of the IMF program in FY2016. This was partially compromised in next two years but was moderate at 1.22% of GDP.

Subsequently, it shot up to 4.89% before improving in last two year to 3.32%. As we noted earlier, in FY22, fiscal deficit would cross 8.5% while development spending has already contracted by a one-third. Therefore, in all likelihood the level of leveraged consumption would easily cross 5%.

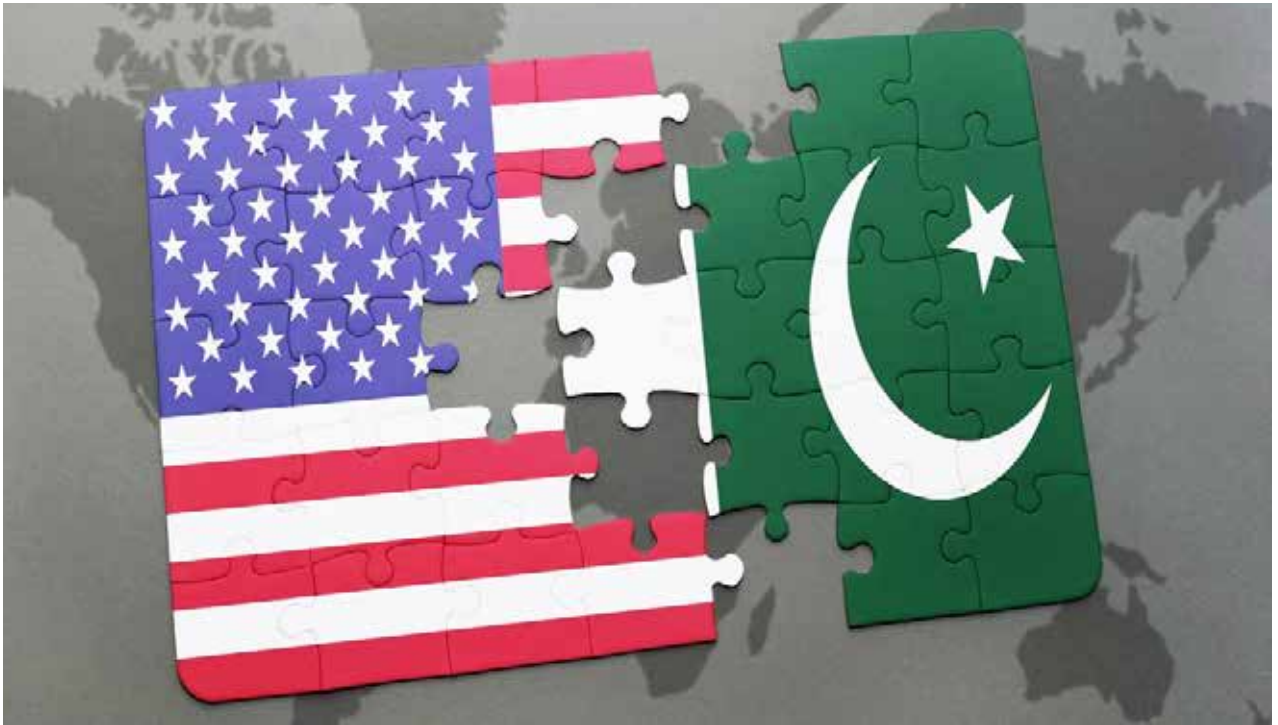
This, then, is the picture of a precarious fiscal state and how it has been brought upon us. We have practiced profligacy without paying the bills. Clearly, it is not sustainable. Frankly, the fiscal finances have broken down.

There are no easy solutions nor would any of the standard approaches having applied from inside or outside work. This is now a huge political programme. There are acute distributional consequences associated with this policy and unfortunately acting against the ordinary people and in favor of the wealthy groups.



On the Rocks for Now and for the Foreseeable Future

The chemistry Pak-US relations once had is not there anymore – and the sooner we stomach this, the better



By Umer Farooq

The relations between United States and Pakistan during the past 75 years have transformed the nature of security architecture of South Asian region in a myriad ways. They have set Pakistan and India on course of military tensions, arms race, and confrontation; have inflamed multiple civil wars in Afghanistan; and have militarised not only the whole region of South Asia but surrounding regions as well.

Whether it is the Cold War calculus or the dynamics of War on Terror, Washington on both counts pumped cash and military hardware into the militarisation of the Pakistani society and the consequent militarisation of the region.

The half-hearted attempts during the Obama Administration to do something for the socioeconomic uplift of Pakistani society never took off. Whether military coups in Pakistan were the result of forces unleashed by Washington in the process of arming Pakistan is debatable.

What, however, is certain is that the military strongmen – Ayub, Zia and

Musharraf – that did seize power and were greatly assisted by Washington in consolidating their position in the power structure of Pakistan. These military strongmen in turn pursued American strategic interests in the region with great fervour and at the cost of endangering Pakistan's vital security interests.

In the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the military government of General Zia assisted the American CIA in aiding an armed uprising against Soviets inside Afghanistan, putting Pakistan on the wrong side of a superpower knocking at our doors from 1979 till 1989.

Again, the military regime of Gen Pervez Musharraf assisted American occupation of Afghanistan in the wake of terror attacks on American cities and thus unleashed a dangerous backlash of local militant-extremists, forces in Pakistani society, which were painstakingly harboured and built up by Pakistan intelligence with the active assistance of American CIA during the first Afghan War.

Washington's relations with democratic governments in Islamabad have remained feeble, despite US avowed championing of democratic causes around the world. Several times in US-Pakistan relations, the ties between two countries entered troubled waters the moment democracy was restored in Pakistan after a decade or so of military rule.

The upshot is that the primary focus of relations between Pakistan and the United States remained military ties and strategic calculations.

The relations started when the two countries entered into a defence CAT in 1954. This was the time when the United States first started to play an active role in the South Asian region, despite the fact that the region itself played no significant role in American Cold War calculations. Pakistan and its sturdy military started to act as a bulwark against Soviet Communism. How and why Pakistani came to occupy this position in American strategic consideration is an interesting story.

How and Why Pakistan became a strategic partner of Washington during the Cold War?

The moment North Korea crossed the 38th parallel to invade South Korea in June 1950, the United States' understanding of the nature of post-World War-II international relations underwent a dramatic change. The Western world led by Washington started to perceive the Soviet Union as an aggressive, uncontrollable military power.



The backdrop to this thinking was an uneasy stalemate prevailing in Europe where US military forces were facing Soviet land forces across the border of Western and East Europe.

The US had a strong military presence in Western Europe and therefore the chances of Soviet forces invading Washington's Western European allies were minimal. Soviet adventurism in East Asia, represented by North Korean invasion of South Korea, has been countered by US forces launching a counter-offensive with all the modern weaponry at their disposal.

In Washington's calculation the most vulnerable theatre, close to the Soviet Border, left undefended in the face of military aggressiveness demonstrated by the Soviet Union was the Middle East. The Middle Eastern Arab countries were underdeveloped with no military machine or manpower to defend the region in the event of a military aggression by the Soviet Union.

What was more, these sheikhdoms were dangerously prone to social and political unrest and hence could not be reliable military partners against Soviet communism.

In such a situation, the eyes of Washington's strategists and military planners fell on Pakistan – an emerging South Asia Muslim nation, with a strong martial tradition and geographically close enough to Soviet borders to be used as bombing bases or surveillance stations.

The then US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was extremely impressed by the

It is generally believed that Pakistani land forces in those days carried out joint exercises with Western military planners to recapture the Middle Eastern Oil field after their capture by the Soviet Union.

US efforts to bring Pakistan into the Middle East defence structure in the 1950s remained on the drawing board. They were eyeing Pakistan's military manpower as a resource to counter Soviet incursion against the "Free world". This fear of Soviet incursion heightened manifold after Northern Korea attacked South Korea with help from China and the Soviet Union.

Americans, however, were sure that it would be difficult to make Pakistan defend Middle Eastern oilfields without resolving the Kashmir dispute and neutralising India as a military threat to Pakistan. Throughout this period, Americans were clearly funding and arming Pakistani armed forces with the defence of the Middle East in mind.

US military planners in the 1950s were clearly obsessed with the strategic location of Pakistan territory. In their opinion, it was a big deal that US bombers based in "Karachi-Lahore Area" – to use a term often mentioned in US policy papers of that era – could easily reach Middle Eastern oilfields as well as Soviet territory.

It was generally believed then that the cost of Pakistan becoming a partner in any military adventurism or any military conflict in the region would be very high. It was high when Pakistan became a US military partner in 1950 against the Soviet Union.

However, after Pakistan receiving arms from Washington, the chances of a rapprochement with India evaporated into thin air, tensions in the region increased dramatically, and Kashmir became a problem with no solution.

In May 1954, a mutual defence agreement between the the US and Pakistan was signed at Karachi under which the US undertook to provide military equipment and training for the Pakistan Army. Simultaneously it was announced by both the governments that it was not a military alliance nor were any military bases for the US in Pakistan agreed upon.

Before this agreement was signed between the two countries, the then US President

young military officers of the Pakistan army – as he later testified before US Congressional committees – and saw them in complete contrast with the unreliable Arabs.

The US military and foreign policy planners started to think in terms of giving Pakistan a permanent place in the joint Middle Eastern defence structures. And thus began the arming of Pakistani forces.

Pakistan's civilian leadership at that time including Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was well aware of the debate in Washington's policy making circles that saw Pakistani land forces acting as first line of defence against Soviet invasion of Middle East.

The US military planners believed that Pakistani forces could slow down the march of Soviet invading forces before the Western allies made a decisive military intervention in the Middle East, as they had done in the Korean peninsula.

Eisenhower announced that the US had decided to give military assistance to Pakistan in a move to strengthen the defensive capabilities of the strategic Middle East. Simultaneously, he promised to consider sympathetically India's requests for military aid if India decided to seek such assistance.

How repeatedly Washington abandoned Pakistan?

The history of Pakistan-US relations is replete with instances when Pakistani ruling elite felt betrayed by Washington's lack of interest in the region or unilateral imposition of sanctions against Pakistan. This pattern was repeated at the time of 1965 war and later in the wake of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The US Administration imposing military and economic sanctions against Pakistan in the wake of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan particularly piqued the Pakistani ruling elite, but there was a silver lining: Washington had not completely withdrawn from the region.

Since the early 1990s, American diplomacy in South Asia has largely remained focused on managing the tense relations between two regional nuclear rivals, India and Pakistan. In the year 1990, Americans managed the military tensions between the two countries – which according to most accounts had nuclear dimensions – over an

uprising in Kashmir which started on the heels of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Then military crises came one after the other. There was a crisis during the tit-for-tat nuclear testing by the two countries, and there was the Kargil conflict, which also had a nuclear dimension according to most accounts. Then there was the Twin Peaks Crisis in 2002, triggered by a militant attack on the Indian parliament; and the 2008 crisis in political relations after Mumbai attacks.

In the latest military crisis, the Indian Air Force claimed carrying out a raid across Line of Control (LoC). Americans remained engaged in South Asia during this period, which, in the words of many international nuclear experts, has been described as a 'prolonged Cuban Missile Crisis', instead of a stable nuclear deterrence relations between Soviet Unions and United States during the Cold War.

In many of these crises, conflict was narrowly averted. And to give the devil its due, American diplomacy played no small role in defusing the military crises between South Asian nuclear rivals. Every time there was a military mobilisation in South Asia, the US diplomats came running to this region in order to convince the decision-makers in Islamabad and New Delhi not to escalate any further.

In fact, US diplomacy deeply influenced the military and political strategy on both sides

of the international border. As far as Pakistan is concerned, its strategy during these military crises remained focused on gaining time by prolonging the initial phase of the military standoff and thus allowing the US and other Western countries to launch a diplomatic initiative to defuse the tensions.

US experts now maintain that the American capacity to influence the military developments in South Asia has dwindled. This analysis of US dwindling capacity came to light much before the Kabul debacle that witnessed the Taliban militia coming back into power.

Apparently Washington's standing in the region received a severe jolt after the Taliban just walked into the corridors of power in Kabul and other cities of Afghanistan.

There is no US military presence anywhere in Central Asia at present. The US had established temporary bases in Uzbekistan in 2001, which it closed in 2005, and Kyrgyzstan, which it closed in 2014. Now both Russia and China are dead-set against the US securing military bases anywhere in Central Asia.

Pakistan has already closed down all US military bases on its territory and if Pakistan media reports are to be believed, it has rejected a US request for a new basis on Pakistani land in the wake of US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

None of this is to say that the US military



power project in this region has got anything to do with its crisis management diplomacy in South Asia. Quite the contrary.

But American planners must have anticipated this situation where they would not have any military presence in the region starting from tip of the Indian Ocean on Indian shores, going all the way from plains of Pakistani Punjab till the mountainous regions of Central Asia, when they decided to put out of Afghanistan.

This seemed like a deliberate and consecutive act of disengagement. And this is in complete contrast with the past.

American diplomacy during the Twin Peaks Crisis in 2002 largely stemmed from its large-scale military presence in the region. American bases in Central Asia and American land forces in Afghanistan would have felt the heat of Indian-Pakistan active conflict in 2002, when both the armies mobilised hundreds of thousands troops and brought them close to the international border.

In 1990, when Indian armoured divisions advanced towards the Pakistani border over a crisis in Kashmir, Americans were actively engaged in supporting an Anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan.

The present is a totally changed situation in the region as far as American diplomacy and military presence in the region are concerned. There is no American military presence, and there is nothing related to this region that is actively on the political agenda of American diplomacy for South Asia.

Americans have long said goodbye to nuclear non-proliferation diplomacy. They have just abandoned Afghanistan, which in affect means they are not concerned about terrorism, extremism, and militancy emanating from that country. Only recently US officials are on record saying that Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan has no capacity to carry out terror attacks against mainland America.

There is a clear realisation in Pakistan's foreign policy circles that Washington's unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan indicates that Washington is no more fixated on terrorism related issues,

which for all practical purposes means dwindling strategic importance of Islamabad.

Coupled with this is Islamabad's inability in sustaining the financial and political assistance from country's chief patrons like oil rich Arab states, whose leadership has long since dropped the policy of supporting so-called 'Islamic causes' all over the world.

There were, however, weak signals emanating from regional capitals that Pakistani security establishment's 'strategic assets' – as the Afghan Taliban have often been referred to in international media – enjoy strong support among regional countries like Russia, Iran, and China.



During the peak of US presence in Afghanistan, the US intelligence reportedly presented the US Administration with the information that Iran and Russia both were providing weapons, intelligence support and finances to Taliban for attacks on US forces inside Afghanistan.

And Afghan Taliban, at the behest of Russians and Iranians, have carried out operations against Islamic State affiliated groups in Northern and Eastern Afghanistan, in the period between 2014 and 2016, when there was a sudden rise in the profile of Islamic State in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's top spy even hosted the intelligence chiefs of Russia, Iran, and China in Islamabad for a conference in July 2018 where it was agreed that the four intelligence services would coordinate their efforts against the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The relations between Washington and Islamabad are on the lowest ebb for two reasons. Firstly, during the last five years, Washington has made a strategic decision to embrace India – Pakistan's arch-rival – as its strategic partner in the region. Secondly, Pakistan as a result has also drifted away from Western powers including Washington and into the orbits of Moscow and Beijing.

This has happened at a time when the experts of international political situations are predicting a renewed Cold War between Washington on the one hand and Beijing and Moscow on the other.

Aggravating the situation is the fact that a powerful Pakistani political leader, former Prime Minister Imran Khan, has accused Washington of bribing his opposition to dislodge him from power through a no confidence motion. Khan is now out of power – and accusing the country's military establishment and opposition of playing into the hands of Americans.

The military top brass did show some interest in reviving strategic partnership with Washington, issuing statements to the effect that Pakistan want to play no part in any new Cold War. But that doesn't seem to invoke any positive response in Washington at the moment.

Biden's Taiwan Brinkmanship

Biden's message in Japan marked the end of US strategic ambiguity over Taiwan – for better or for worse

By Hamzah Rifaat Hussain

During his trip to Tokyo as part of his East Asian tour, President Joe Biden said that the United States was willing to use force to defend Taiwan. This statement marks a break from Washington DC's decades-long policy of so-called strategic ambiguity. The US focus on mustering East Asian states' support against Beijing always betrayed its hidden intentions. Now those intentions are not hidden anymore.

Biden's message to Japan during his East Asia tour was a clear and controversial one. Washington DC would exercise force against China to defend Taiwan through militarisation. This statement constitutes an open threat as the American establishment seeks to contain China by shoring up support from East Asian states as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Such strategies need to be called out as provocations given that they constitute a relentless pursuit of forming a joint front in the region where the use of force against another state is an option.

This is despite the fact that Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the Asia Pacific region should not be transformed into a geopolitical gladiatorial arena but a high ground for peaceful development instead.

The United States however, has other ideas. As the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework was unveiled, Biden's comments on Taiwan unpacked America's previous policy of strategic ambiguity on Taiwan. He vacillated between claiming to adhere to the One China Principle on the one hand while also keeping the option of using force on the other.

By issuing an open warning to Beijing, President Biden also revealed the inherent hypocrisy shaping the White House's outlook on the subject. Note that immediately after the controversial remarks in Tokyo, White House officials told reporters (as per Reuters) that the US policy on Taiwan remained unchanged.

This is also the third time that President Biden has made such a statement only to be cautioned later by his own White House staff. Matthew Kroenig, deputy director at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Centre for Strategy and Security endorsed the fact that the remarks in Tokyo clarifies his stance on China.

The Japan-US Joint Leaders' Statement is further evidence of this fact. Throughout the statement the United States was fixated on securitisation as a policy tool which ranged from supporting Japan's permanent membership to the Security Council to promoting fallacies of China weakening the international rules-based order.

Talk also centred on curbing China's nuclear capabilities while ignoring America's own role in nuclearizing the Asia-Pacific through alliances such as AUKUS. In light of this, the remarks made on employing force to defend Taiwan in Tokyo confirms how the United States went against its own claims of opposing unilateral attempts by changing the status quo or militarising the South China Sea.

This disconnect and hypocrisy is glaring despite the fact that the



Asia-Pacific trading network was introduced as members of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity expressed scepticism over tariffs and market access.

Many member states such as those from the ASEAN bloc are reluctant to join the IPEF due to lack of practical incentives or any appetite to support America's aggression against another state. Unsurprisingly, trade experts gave a lukewarm response to the framework.

Yet the Biden administration continues to brandish the Taiwan card as an attempt to divert attention from clearly defined redlines. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act prevents the United States from sending troops or directly participating in conflict.

Yet there have been calls to pursue asymmetric warfare with more sophisticated weapons on part of Taiwan against China. As a result, open calls to use force as part of America's Indo-Pacific Strategy must be called out as a violation of international law with the targeted state reserving the right to invoke Article 51 of the UN Charter if an armed attack occurs on its territory.

China's response has been to denounce the policy statement as a violation of its territorial integrity which cannot be compromised as per the Foreign Ministry.

The minus China formula that the United States is seeking to implement in the Asia Pacific can only be considered as a nonsensical strategy which is doomed to fail.

On the regional front, China has secured several agreements with its neighbouring countries without once claiming to militarily deploy its forces to subjugate or contain the United States despite the latter's pronounced military presence in the region and its offensive posturing.

In contrast, the Biden administration continues to coax potential members to join the IPEF with the lingering possibility that military threats will once again be made against China.

This pursuit of brazen aggression needs to be called out by all stakeholders of peace and stability. If the region turns into a geopolitical gladiatorial arena as Foreign Minister Wang Yi cautioned against, the US will be solely responsible.

No End in Sight to Afghanistan's Troubles

New domestic and international troubles are brewing while the Taliban seem to have no idea how to run Afghanistan

By Syed Fakhar KaKaKhel

With its ruling Taliban knee-deep in domestic troubles and their dream of international recognition slipping further and further from their reach with every passing day, Afghanistan seems to be moving into deeper trouble.

Their mediation between Pakistan and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) seems to plod along for now, but they have suffered fresh setbacks in the form of emergence of new domestic challengers – and they have attracted fresh fire and fury from their Western interlocutors on account of their repressive policies.

Mediating peace

In its perpetual quest for peace, Pakistan has once again begun talks with the proscribed Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Unlike in the past, hopes are high this time around. The media is limited to the announcements made by the militant organization about the negotiation process.

The militant group made even the confirmation for the third time since the ceasefire announcement till May 30. Afghan Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid also confirmed the talks and asked the parties to show flexibility.

After the arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, multiple rounds of talks have been held, although none came to fruition. Pakistan also approached the Taliban government to get things done. Later on, the Afghan Taliban confirmed this by saying that the Afghan Taliban would play their role as mediators.

Because of the Haqqani family's affiliation with the TTP due to its specific background, they have been assigned to do the job on behalf of the Afghan Taliban. Afghan Interior Minister Siraj Haqqani has a vital role in these talks. Pakistan believes that efforts should be made to stop the ongoing terrorism in Pakistan through dialogue.

Meanwhile, there were reports that former militant commanders Mahmood Khan and Muslim Khan from Swat had also been handed over to the Afghan Taliban. However, no independent source has confirmed it so far.

Sources believe that 30 militants from different parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been released. None of the names emerging in the list are of any significance.

This time a 48-member jirga has been sent to Afghanistan for talks. Thirty-two members are from Waziristan, while 16 members are from Malakand.

Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) has a vital role to play in these talks. JUI's former senator Saleh Shah from South Waziristan remained active during the process. Security sources are very optimistic about this time.

The provincial government led by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has so far remained silent on the whole situation. The only demand

of the government is that by laying down arms and obeying the constitution and law of the country, members of the banned outfit can live in Pakistan.

On the other hand, besides the release of comrades, TTP demands to include the implementation of Sharia in the country. Nothing can be said definitively about these talks. A minor incident can disrupt negotiations, as happened in the past.

As far as the Afghan Taliban are concerned, their hands are full with considerable internal and external challenges, so they want to settle the issue as soon as possible.

Pakistan has recently observed a surge in attacks carried out by ISKP. When the TTP declared a ceasefire, ISKP intensified its attacks in Pakistan.

ISKP killed two Sikhs, an intelligence operative and a police officer in Peshawar during the Taliban negotiations and ceasefire declaration. Security has been beefed up across the province as attacks escalate.

It seems that ISKP is waiting for a peace deal between TTP and the government of Pakistan. If it turns successful, the ISKP will attract fighters that want to continue the fight. Pakistan should pay more attention to the negotiation process in such a scenario. If the terror reigns with the mere name change, the whole exercise is futile and a waste of time.

Flak over niqab

Recently, the de facto rulers of Afghanistan attracted global condemnation for mandating niqab for all Afghan women. Though the burqa and hijab are traditions of the Afghan society, the issue was raised when the government asked female journalists and TV hosts to cover their faces.

Afghan Taliban were already under heavy criticism for restrictions on female education. In a recent interview with CNN, Afghan Interior Minister Siraj Uddin Haqqani even said they wanted good relations with the United States. As far as women's education is concerned, Siraj Haqqani expressed hope that some good news is expected regarding the female issues.

Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani told CNN that the issue of women's education has stalled due to some policy issues on co-education. He added that there were a lot of rumors about this government, which were baseless.

After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of families, mainly youth, left the country. That youth is very much active on social media. It is also a fact that some Afghans living in Europe, America and other countries have continued to spread fake news on social media.

But there is no doubt that the Afghan Taliban are facing severe difficulties in foreign relations, economy and security.

Emerging challengers

Five leaders of Afghanistan's political parties, who have sought refuge in various countries since the fall of Ashraf Ghani's government, have announced an agreement to establish a 'Supreme Council of National Resistance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan' against the Taliban.

National Movement Party leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, Jamiat-e-Islami branch leader Ata Muhammad Noor, Wahdat Party leader Haji Muhammad Mohaqiq, Ittehad-e-Islami party leader Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, and former vice president Younis Qanuni are key members of the new coalition.

These political leaders have issued a statement saying that the activities of the Supreme Council of National Resistance are organized in two parts, political and military, and their priority is to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan through politics.

The council urged the international community not to recognize the Taliban cabinet, some of whose members are subject to sanctions. Leaders of the council made appeals to the Afghan people to prepare themselves for the complex and long-term resistance against oppression and aggression by the Taliban.

The council called on the Taliban to refrain from targeted killings and detentions of ex-government soldiers and to end forced displacement and occupation of people's homes.

Writer and political activist Dr. Hussain Yassin, who attended a political party leaders meeting to establish the National Resistance Council, said, "It is important to establish a central axis to fight the Taliban for peace and stability in Afghanistan."

According to him, if political efforts do not bring peace and stability to Afghanistan or if the Taliban do not follow the political process and democratic norms, the Supreme Council of National Resistance will resort to military action. The Taliban will be responsible for the consequences.

"There is no single leader in the Supreme Council of National Resistance, but it is led as a council," Yassin told the media.

The similarities between the goals of the Supreme Council of the National Resistance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the goals of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan give an impression that the two fronts are alike. Still, Dr. Hussain Yassin said that the two are different, but they are of the same opinion.

According to him, Ahmed Masood has also been invited to the leadership level of the Supreme Council of National Resistance. Still, he has not yet given a final answer to this request and talks between the leaders of the Supreme Council of National Resistance and the National Resistance Front are underway.

According to Yassin, the leaders of the Supreme Council of National Resistance have approved the activities and programs of the National Resistance Front, and they may have a joint meeting in the near future.

Abdul Rashid Dostum, Mohammad Mohaqiq, Ata Mohammad Noor, Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf and Younis Qanuni the founders

of the Supreme Council of National Resistance, were key members of the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud in the 1990s and had a long experience of fighting Taliban.

Some council members, including Muhammad Mohaqiq, urged Taliban leaders to establish a comprehensive system, form a broad government and accept all tribes, the demand made by the international community to form an all-inclusive government.

The announcement of the Taliban cabinet, in which no one from outside the movement, shattered the hopes of people like Mohaqiq and shocked many stakeholders and countries who believed that the Taliban had changed.

Recently, to keep the anti-Taliban movement afloat, Rashid Dostum, who fled the country to the Turkish capital Ankara, met with Abdul Karim Khalili, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq from Balkh and Ata Mohammad Noor. All of these fugitive leaders have decided to support the anti-Taliban coalition.

The ISKP threat

But despite all these developments, the reality is that they are no longer a threat to the Taliban because none of them have widespread support in Afghanistan. Instead, the real threat to the Taliban is from ISKP, which now appears to be advancing northward.

ISKP continues to fire and bomb Afghan Taliban and civilians.

In May, the Afghan Taliban organized a ceremony in the memory of their leader Akhtar Mansour. All the key leaders of the Taliban movement attended that gathering in Kabul. The Islamic State in Khurasan Province (ISKP) targeted the gathering with a suicide bomber named Shahram Mowahid.

Although the Taliban denied any casualties in the attack, this attack was very significant. Attacking Afghan Taliban leadership in the capital is a clear message. The Taliban have consistently denied the power, capacity and intensity of ISKP. But ISKP is proving its strong presence by constantly attacking such gatherings right in the middle of national capital, Kabul. The extremist outfit also carried out a suicide attack on the Hazara community in the capital.

In the North, the former Northern Alliance and anti-Taliban factions in the form of the National Resistance Front (NRF) the Taliban are facing an insurgency. Recently, the NRF suffered a defeat at the hands of the Taliban in the Panjshir Valley where dozens of its fighters were arrested.

Some of the pro-Taliban analysts in Afghanistan alleged that the coalition has the covert support of Tajikistan.

"We have witnessed that in the past", says Bashir Safi, an Afghan journalist and analyst. "Families of the anti-Taliban fighters are living in Tajikistan. They often get medical treatment from there during their fight against Taliban."

Recently, ISKP launched its sixth propaganda magazine issue called "Voice of Khurasan". It has "Taliban: Guardians of Shirk" written on the cover. This is an open ideological challenge to the Taliban. In Afghanistan, ISKP attacks have intensified since the US withdrawal. Now it has begun to target Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as well.

How Secure is NATO?

Sweden and Finland dropped their longstanding neutrality to join NATO, but does it make them more secure?



By Dr. Syed Rifaat Hussain

After several decades of neutrality, Finland and Sweden seemed poised to join NATO, an American-led military alliance formed in 1949 during the heyday of Cold War, discarding their long-standing policy of neutrality, that is avoiding getting entangled in great power military competition.

On 4 May 2022, Finland and Sweden formally sent their joint application to NATO headquarters in Brussels for membership of the multilateral military alliance, citing Moscow's ongoing war against Ukraine as the threat that prompted this shift.

Finland which has a 1300-kilometer border with Russia and despite internal and external pressures had refused to compromise its policy of neutrality now stands ready to embrace NATO.

Sweden, which has a much longer history of "neutrality" going almost two-hundred years back has sought NATO's membership to protect itself against perceived threat emanating from Putin's territorial grab in neighboring Ukraine.

Moscow has warned both Helsinki and

Stockholm that their bid to join NATO would have far-reaching consequences. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that there is no intrinsic threat to Moscow from Sweden and Finland joining NATO but warned that the Kremlin will be forced to respond if the alliance installs military bases or equipment in either country.

As a first step, Moscow has decided to stop the supply of gas to Finland.

To placate Moscow, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson has categorically stated that her country "does not want permanent NATO bases or nuclear weapons on its territory." Similar statement have been made by Prime Minister Sanna Marin of Finland who said that "such moves were not part of Helsinki's membership negotiations" as they were "national decisions".

One reason why Moscow is soft-pedaling the issue of membership of Finland and Sweden is because it feels confident both countries historically have been sensitive to Moscow's security concerns and their leadership is rational enough to resist pressures from other NATO countries, and especially the United States, to assume an

aggressive military posture towards Moscow.

A related concern of Moscow is how to win its ongoing war against Ukraine that would require strategic patience and use of diplomacy. In these trying circumstances, Moscow would be least interested in opening another diplomatic front until it is able to consolidate its war objective in Ukraine.

Russian Army has already been given a bloody nose and a black eye by Ukrainian armed resistance backed up by Washington and its European allies.

So far, Washington has supplied armed drones, artillery, and anti-tank weapons to Ukrainian armed resistance that has resulted in slowing down the advance of Russian forces to gain complete control of the Donbas and Luhansk region. However, the fall of Mariupol is a strategic gain for the Russian military.

The decision of the US congress to provide USD 40 billion in security assistance to Ukraine is a good illustration of the ongoing American effort to "bleed" Moscow in Ukraine.

Why now?

One of the critical factors that have pushed Helsinki and Stockholm towards joining NATO is the role of the public opinion. Finland's pro-NATO opinion seems to have grown from 19 percent in 2017 to 53 percent in February to 76 percent in May 2022, according to Wall Street Journal.

The Ukrainian conflict seems to have played a part in nurturing this pro-NATO sentiment.

Another reason for this is the reappearance and winning of the discourse of war over peace. Peace has come to be identified with weapons, deterrence and defence not with disarmament, prevention of war, and dialogue.

The political creativity that was needed to run an independent policy of neutrality, non-alignment and global disarmament coupled with a strong belief in international law vanished years ago. In this distressingly polarised intellectual environment, it is easier to follow the herd in search of self-preservation.

Another fundamental reason is the role of media. Media, from left to right have unified around a pro-Western, non-neutral policy. The present pro-NATO propaganda is pervasive and people are being repeatedly told that their salvation lies in joining NATO. Critical voices are marginalised and muted.

"Sweden is able to have televised panel discussions where, de facto, all the participants are more or less pro-NATO" thus leaving out a large part of public opinion.

In this onslaught of pro-NATO propaganda campaign, few have pointed out the fact that "there simply exists no credible, realistic scenario that would lead to an isolated, out-of-the-blue Russian attack on either Sweden or Finland if both countries remained non-aligned as they've been for decades".

As noted by Dr Jan Berg: "One can only regret that Sweden and Finland lack the intellectual power to see the larger picture in time and space. NATO has had the time since 1949 to prove that it can make peace. We know now that it can't. Joining it, therefore, is one big gift to militarism and future warfare."

As of now, the only hurdle to Finland and Sweden joining NATO seems to be Turkey, which has raised objections on account of their support to the Kurdish rebel group PKK. But should the accession of Finland and Sweden come about, what would be the ramifications of this watershed move?

One, the Swedes and the Finns will become less secure. Because there will be harder confrontation and polarisation instead of soft borders and mediating attitudes. Additionally, at some point in the future, the two countries will be asked to host US

militarised organisation Finland and Sweden run the risk of the UN Charter being violated.

Six, both Finland and Sweden will have to allocate funds away from contributing to solving humanity's most urgent challenges such as climate change, pandemics, water, and energy. Instead they will be trying hard to meet their NATO contribution of 2 percent of their GDP. The main justification for this diversion will be Putin's invasion of Ukraine.



bases – like Norway and Denmark – and such bases will be Russia's first-order targets in a war situation.

Two, it will mark the virtual death of no confidence and conflict resolution mechanism in Europe.

Three, under article 5 obligations, Sweden and Finland will be expected to participate in wars that are not about their defence and security.

Four, as NATO members, Finland and Sweden will have to share the responsibility for nuclear weapons – the deterrence and possible use of them by NATO.

Five, NATO is human history's most militaristic organisation. Its leader, the United States, has been at war 225 out of 243 years since 1777. By joining this most

Finally, Arctic has emerged as the new site of great power competition and in this context US and NATO's access to Sweden and Finland would be to the clear advantage in the future confrontation with Russia and China there.

In the emerging conflict scenario, containing China is America's priority number one. By enlarging NATO, United States is trying to hem in the rise of China through military means. NATO is the primary military instrument through which Washington would carry out this containment in future.

Because of their strategic geography and traditional influence as neutral countries getting both Finland and Sweden into NATO' embrace is a major win for Washington, but would it make these countries becoming more secure and safe? Only time will tell.

The Fallout of Russia-Ukraine War

The drama unfolding on the edge of Europe has repercussion for the whole world **PART III**



By Dr. Khalid Bajwa

The Russia-Ukraine war has far-reaching consequences not only for the immediate neighbourhood but for the whole world. Let us take a break from the present and see what future holds for humanity in the aftermath of this war in the context of heightened tensions between China and the US.

For starters, this war has the potential to change the strategic balance among various powers that matter in shaping the world. Some of these power blocks like China and the US are evident and some more will emerge from the ashes of this war.

To understand the dynamics of this war in shaping the strategic balance of the world, we need to look at different inherent possibilities in various parts of the world.

The Europe is an interesting case and may be up for unforeseeable changes in the near and distant future. The European history is dotted with wars among European nations so there is immense burden of history in Europe.

There is a split between North and South Europe as well as between west and east Europe for historical, cultural, social, and economic reasons. The US is an outsider that looks more like an insider as it has tremendous influence with certain nations in Europe.

Considering eccentric attitude of the US towards Europe, the Europeans are very conscious of their security predicament. The NATO is tasked with defending Europe against any outside aggression especially originating from Russia.

Under the Trump administration, the faith in the US, the most important member of the NATO, was shaken as Europeans were not only lectured about increasing defence spending but were threatened to be left alone, in case they did not take up responsibility of defending themselves.

Although the US under Biden the administration is actively involved in helping Ukraine with arms and money to defeat Russia, the reality is brought home to the Europeans that

Europe needs to do much more in defending itself, resulting in increased spending by European nations on defence.

This increased defence spending along with perceived threats and likely unreliability of the US's resolve to defend Europe will result in a militarily strong Europe. In the short term, this will strengthen NATO. However, in the long run, it can transform Europe into self-assured Europe capable of defending itself on its own.

That is the time when it can start acting independently of the US to safeguard its interests on its own or in collusion with unlikely partners including the possibilities of alliances with Russia and China.

Alternatively, because of its inherent divisions mentioned above, Europe can split into various factions ending European Union and making different factions siding with different power hubs in the world. These divisions are serious enough and which way Europe goes depends on how well these are managed.

Another implication of the Russia-Ukraine war is to bring Russia and China even closer strategically. Most of central Asian states, if not all, will join this block. Pakistan is also likely to join it for all practical purposes having, may be, a veneer of neutrality.

If, somehow, India, Pakistan and China resolve their issues, where Russia can play a role, India is also likely to join the block or at least remain neutral. If this happens, it will create a huge trading and defence block. With increasing income in these countries, this will accelerate the end of the US as a sole superpower of the world. This alliance will certainly galvanise many countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

This block will consist of majority of world population, many of world's largest armies, three or four neighbourly nuclear powers, the world's biggest middle class with sharply increasing income, and a vast wealth of natural resources.

Another consequence of this Russia-China block will be its increased interest and reach in South America to balance the US's influence in Europe and the Pacific Rim, where the US's presence is uncomfortably close to Russia and China respectively.

The African continent will be another hotly contested continent where the US led block and Russia-China block will vie for influence. With the inclusion of India and Pakistan, the things will be much more conducive for Russian-China block than the US block to further its influence.

Even without India, most of African countries are likely to side with China-led economic and military block as there is already heavy presence of China in the African continent because of China's Road and Belt Initiative.

The US will try to hold on to its influence in the world and will fiercely resist the onslaught of Chinese-led block of influence. The US has an incomparable defence budget and has over 750 military bases around the world in at least 80 countries.

It is rightly said that the US is neighbour to everyone in the world. It has lots of strategic partners in almost all-important areas of the world who look after its interests. With

shrewd and effective policies, these alliances can not only be maintained but enhanced thus garnering more influence for the US.

However, the real potential danger to the US's influence comes from fast developing China which has the largest economy of the world with largest and fastest growing middle class pumping economic growth.

However, one must remember that Chinese and American economies are heavily intertwined and interdependent and Chinese development is a direct result of Western investment in China and availability of Western markets to the Chinese products.



It is in the interest of both China and the US to keep or rather enhance this interdependence to keep each other in check and for the world economy and peace.

If the US and Chinese economies are untwined, it can bring problematic times in future with catastrophic results for world order and peace. In that case, the historic turning point will be when China realises that it can sustain its economic growth without the help of Western markets.

This will free China to confront the US on the world stage in all spheres of influence and will bring final end to the supremacy of the US.

To preclude this eventuality and to maintain its status as the most powerful country in the world, the US must make sure that Chinese dependence on Western markets never comes to an end. At least this strategy can delay the onset of the Chinese era for some time.

However, wars like Russia-Ukraine war make all important countries to look at each other as foes and not as friends or partners, forcing them to decrease interdependence on each other with disastrous consequences for the world.

The best scenario for the world is each major player revisiting its strategic policies and readjusting them to harbour more peace and prosperity by bringing end to conflicts. All the nations need to realise that the present economic development is not the result of just availability of raw materials and natural resources as these have all been there for millennia but of no use. The real difference was made because of

developments in science and technology.

In the years to come, the speed of scientific and technological advancement will be breathtakingly fast. This can be used to better the lives of all people by providing them basic needs. Less and less resources will be needed for development as resources could be used with increasing efficiency.

Nonetheless, adventures like Russia-Ukraine war, the US's military adventures in recent history in the middle east and Afghanistan, Indian adventures in Kashmir, and Israeli adventures in Palestine do not let the world to divert focus away from the wars and strategic defence postures.

The consequences of Russia-Ukraine war are numerous and many books can and will be written on it. One thing is for sure: The world will change significantly in the aftermath of this war with far reaching redrawing and reshaping of economic and strategic positions.

Ukraine's Grim Path

Some wars just have to be fought – but that does not make the costs go away



By Aimen Bukhari

When Russia launched a massive invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Kharkiv and Kyiv, Ukraine's two most important cities, were expected to fall in short order. What actually transpired, however, was surprisingly different. Almost two weeks into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian military had successfully halted their foes' progress, earning accolades from Western allies.

The Russian invasion was stalled by surprisingly strong Ukrainian defences, as well as poor Russian tactics and weak logistics. However, Russia claims that it is not Ukraine attacking Russia but the United States using proxy war methods and controlling Ukraine.

It's a big game and a huge conflict, with a superpower assaulting a European country that is aligned with the United States. The involvement of the United States in the Ukraine-Russia crisis is also significant. Many commentators feel it is all about Ukraine because the United States' plan to include Ukraine in NATO as Russia's area of influence diminishes.

The Ukraine conflict has also reignited old cold war rivalries that, according to the United States, should have subsided with the demise of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. It is now clear the fault lines between the United States and Russia never went away.

Ever since Russia invaded Ukraine, US officials have made several Freudian slips regarding the conflict, including ousting Putin from power; trying Putin as a war criminal; weakening and downgrading the Russian military, particularly by killing large numbers of Russian troops, destroying the Russian economy, and impoverishing and possibly killing the Russian people through an extreme set of economic sanctions.

Western commentators consider Ukraine's performance against a numerically superior force to be the result of a combination of solid preparation, national unity, and Russian missteps. But the future is still hard to predict, and President Vladimir Putin often says that nothing will stop him from achieving his ambitions.

Ukraine dramatically boosted its armed forces following Russia's rapid invasion of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in 2014, when pro-Russia militants overran areas of the country's east. Moreover, NATO and Kyiv have created a training programme for Ukrainian special forces, which presently has 2,000 members and may be assisted by civilian volunteers.

"Ukrainians have spent the preceding eight years organising, training, and preparing to combat Russian domination," said Douglas London, a Georgetown University adjunct associate professor. Since Ukraine knows that the US and NATO won't come to its aid on the battlefield, its strategy has been to "bleed Moscow so that occupation becomes impossible," as a former CIA officer wrote in Foreign Affairs.

Apart from fighting the conflict, the United States has done everything possible to assist Ukraine. The United States has been a valuable ally to Ukraine, providing everything from weaponry and information to monetary and diplomatic assistance.

Russia also appears to have underestimated the Ukrainian troops' home-field advantage, relying on Soviet-era familiarity with terrain when Ukraine was ruled from Moscow under the USSR. This involves both geographical knowledge (especially at this time of year when trails may get muddy) and the capacity of people to defend themselves against invading soldiers.

Headed by President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has remained in Kyiv despite the risk to his life as Russia advances on the capital's borders, Ukrainians have surely shown the most fortitude in the face of adversity. Civilians have volunteered on the frontlines, usually after assuring the safety of their families in the country's west or outside its borders. Russia's blockade of Kharkiv, a key city in northeast Ukraine, may have ended because of Ukraine's counteroffensive.

If true, and if Ukrainian forces maintain their current speed, this might outflank and jeopardise Russia's significant assault in the south. While it is too early to proclaim this a turning point in the war, the Russian high command would have to transfer forces northward and fight on many fronts.

The Institute for the Study of War, a think tank in Washington that closely follows the war, says that the Ukrainian counteroffensive north of Kharkiv City has been successful in easing the pressure of artillery on Kharkiv City.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian Army has been counterattacking in the Kharkiv region for almost two weeks. On May 9, Pentagon officials stated that the Russian military had been pushed 45 kilometres (28 miles) east of the city.

While Ukraine's success represents a major improvement over the war's early days, there is a caveat: Much of the information reaching Western audiences is based on official Ukrainian statements and social media posts.

Russia shifted its focus from the north to the south, aiming to seize control of the whole Donbas region as well as vital Black Sea ports such as Kherson and Mariupol. On the other hand, Russian troops remained within artillery range of Kharkiv, often bombing it and attacking civilian targets.

Officials in the West believe that Russia would not abandon Kharkiv, which is barely 26 miles from Russia. Invading Russia, which possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal, would be a risky bet for Ukraine and would be condemned by the US and NATO.

On the other hand, Ukrainian boots on Russian soil would be the ultimate embarrassment for the Kremlin, which is not ruling it out.

What went wrong in Russia's attempted takeover of Kharkiv? "The art of war consists in always having stronger troops than the opponent at the point of assault or

the place, which is assaulted, even with an inferior army," Napoleon remarked 200 years ago. Great commanders, like Napoleon, were experts at focusing their troops on a key part of the enemy's lines while reducing their strength in other areas.

Russia's troops may have been focused on the south at the expense of the north. Moscow may not have had much choice. Its 200,000-strong invasion force is incredible until you consider that it was too small to attack Ukraine, which is the size of France and could muster 500,000 active and reserve soldiers.

If Russia's southern onslaught had been successful quickly, it would have freed up Russian reserves while potentially crippling Ukraine's counteroffensive on Kharkiv as it rushed to evacuate. However, Russia's southern thrust has halted, forcing the country to choose between advancing south and deploying troops north to deal with the Ukrainian counterthrust.

However, the future of the Russia-Ukraine war is hard to predict. It is USA vs Russia, China somewhat tilting towards Russia more, Europe and Ukraine in USA's corner and other countries looking out for their interests.

One thing, however, is certain. The people of Ukraine will pay a heavy price for this war. In the end, the only people who suffer during wars are innocent civilians who are killed, maimed, forced to flee, or forced to live in horrible conditions.



Yemen's Outside the Box Peace Initiative

The success of the initiative will bring relief to Yemenis and much needed optimism to a region panting for fresh ideas for sustainable peace



By Hamzah Rifaat Hussain

The conflict in Yemen has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crisis that the world has seen. The ousting of President Ali Abdullah Saleh due to the Yemeni Intifada of 2011 and the subsequent onslaught of the Houthi rebels, allegedly sponsored by Iran, resulted in GCC countries spearheading an assault to restore Saleh's presidency.

The resulting quagmires which emerged across the country include outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, severe malnutrition, lack of access to food, and a severe drought which compounded problems for millions of Yemeni citizens, the majority of which have languished under the poverty line.

The resumption of commercial flights in the capital Sanaa in 2022 can, however, be treated as a welcome sign with cautious optimism guiding the outlook for the future.

The truth is irrefutable. Yemen alongside Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia is among the most protracted military conflicts of the

21st century. The scale of the damage and the resilience of the Yemeni people has been repeatedly tested by proxy warfare sponsored by both Riyadh and Tehran with other countries such as the United Arab Emirates supporting secessionist organizations such as the Southern Transition Council.

These rival proclivities, preferences, goals and agendas from sovereign states in close proximity to Yemen has resulted in the absence of peace, dialogue, and deliberation as tools for stability. Rallying cries by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations Human Rights Council, for example, have been unheeded with disproportionate attention being paid to the Ukraine crisis by all international stakeholders of peace.

In light of this, the truce agreement reached in April 2022 between the rebel forces and the Saudi government constitutes the only bulwark against further aggression.

It is within this context that United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres' Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg has expressed gratitude for the constructive role that the Jordanian government has played to facilitate flight operations from Sanaa to recommence.

This was critical in ensuring that Yemen's transportation network which had been subjected to severe brutality during the war, was finally given some respite. The trickle-down effect of the promises of commercial flights also come in the form of jobs provided by the flailing aviation industry as well as access to the international market and safe passage for refugees, the displaced and ravaged by the residual and permanent effects of the conflict which dates back to the Yemen Intifada of 2011.

The commercial flight also allows the largely desolate state of Yemen to finally reconnect with the globe as well as the region which includes countries such as Oman and Saudi Arabia as well as the

wider region such as Turkey and Jordan of which the latter have hosted numerous refugees and provided them a transit point for Europe and beyond.

For those desperately seeking jobs as unskilled migrants, resumption of commercial flights also allows for greater access to job markets across the gulf region.

As per one of the truce commitments, the aim is to increase trust and bridge misunderstandings to ensure that political processes result in the end of the conflict. It is important to note that incremental but meaningful steps allow for greater space for political manoeuvrability as compared to peace efforts that are hastily imposed and result in greater resistance.

This is especially true given that a sense of alienation creeps in from victims of knee jerk reactions which in this case would be the Yemeni government fighting for legitimacy while proxy actors seek to maintain the status quo with an expansionary agenda against Sunni majority Muslim states.

The Houthi rebel agenda has rested on the basic principle of expanding the Zaydi sphere of influence. The Zaydis are a subset of Shia Islam with alleged support and backing from the Ebrahim Raisi regime in Tehran.

This has resulted in countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE eschewing peace initiatives for a more hard handed approach and has prevented both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh from restarting negotiations with Iran. The residual effects of decades of tensions have made the conflict intractable, and Yemen has been disproportionately affected as a result.

Hence, the resumption of aviation activities in conflict zones such as Yemen is a step in the right direction as it promises better security, greater access to amenities and freedom of movement for the displaced, vulnerable, and diseased.

This flight from Sanaa also potentially marks the commencement of numerous infrastructural projects which could provide vital linkages from the capital to other capitals and cities in the region. This includes the opening of roads in the south-western city of Taiz where all parties to the conflict are being encouraged to partake in investments which could result in tangible differences for average Yemeni citizens.

The recent flight carried 137 passengers which includes patients needing medical help. According to Al Jazeera's Mohammed Al Attab, some 300,000 patients were in the queue for the resumption of flights given the dilapidated state of the domestic health infrastructure.

Additionally, Yemen's government has also allowed citizens in rebel held areas to travel on Houthi issued passports which is a welcoming sign given that it removes obstacles standing in the way of flights, transportation, connectivity, and exchanges.

According to the United Nations, more than 150,000 people have died since the war commenced with millions having been displaced. The truce, however, came to the fore on April 2 when Yemen's Saudi based President transferred power to a leadership council which then held talks with disgruntled elements and rebels.

The results have brought optimism where fuel tankers into the port of Hodeidah also constitute an integral part of the agreement. This marks a significant step given that the Norwegian Refugee Council claimed that the blockade resulted in tens of thousands of medical patients being stranded domestically. This initiative can result in thousands of lives being saved, prevention of deaths and support to the economy.

For a country such as Yemen, such constructive approaches are precisely what is needed and it is a welcome sign for the Middle East that the region has finally thought beyond power play and engineering and focused on the people instead.



The Snake Oil of Cheap Russian Oil for Pakistan

Pakistan neither has the hard currency reserves to spend on the purchase nor the refining capacity to refine the crude



By Azeem Waqas

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's coalition government does not find the option of importing petroleum from Russia a realistic option for Pakistan at this point, The Truth International (TTI) can report.

Minister for Power Division, Khurram Dastgir, while talking with The Truth International (TTI) has termed the former energy minister Hammad Azhar's letter just a wish list having no logical agreement between the two countries.

He said that Pakistan is unable to buy Oil and LNG from Russia after the EU sanctions because we have to take care of our banking system as well. However, the government has started exploring other options to buy cheaper energy, he said.

Minister Khurram Dastgir added that Pakistan cannot get oil and gas from Russia merely by writing a letter. "You have to make an agreement which Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government failed to do completely. PTI in its tenure failed to buy even one barrel of

oil and one MMCFD of gas from Russia."

PTI says its government was in discussions with Russia in late-March to purchase LNG under a long-term agreement.

Minister of State for Petroleum, Senator Musaddik Malik told The Truth International, "Russia has not replied to Pakistan's request letter to provide oil and gas. Pakistan will definitely follow it up if it gets any indication from Russia. However, there is no such agreement between Russia and Pakistan".

Malik further said, "Pakistan will consult with international companies about the recent sanctions against Russia, either these will be also applied on Pakistan or not, if Pakistan buy from Russia".

During the background discussion with the officials of the Energy Ministry, it is learnt that Last year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov confirmed on 7 April 2021 during talks in Islamabad

that three Russian companies were ready to provide LNG to Pakistan upon a deal being reached.

While answering the questions Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that "some time ago now, there was a mutual interest in the supply of Russian LNG by Gazprom, Rosneft and Novatek. Appropriate proposals have been put forward. We are waiting for a response from our Pakistani partners".

However, the officials said the PTI government could not send solid proposals to capitalize on the opportunity in a year.

Energy expert and officials are of the view that Russian Oil deal is a sensitive matter as it involves our foreign relations as well.

They say European countries will have zero interest in bankrolling Pakistan's purchase of Russian gas and would not hesitate to revoke Pakistan's GSP status thereby crashing whatever little export earnings it has.

An Energy Expert explained, “Purchasing Crude Oil and LNG are not viable for Pakistan. Pakistan does not have capacity to refine the Russian oil. LNG will be costly as it will take one month to reach a cargo of LNG”.

Energy experts believe that Russia is not a solution to Pakistan’s energy crisis due to many reasons. Pakistan should stay away from Russian energy. We are in close proximity of Qatar and Saudia.

Former Energy Minister Hammad Azhar had drawn attention of Russian Energy Minister Nikolai Shulginov to an Inter-Governmental Agreement (TGA) which was in force between the two friendly countries since 2017 on cooperation in the sphere of liquefied natural gas (LNG), through a letter.

He write, “As a start, we propose supply by Russia of two to three cargoes of LNG per month, each cargo containing 140,000 cubic meters LNG.”

In the official correspondence, it was stated that Pakistan was also keen to enter into a long-term agreement with a nominated entity of the Russian Federation for supply of crude, diesel and motor gasoline through

state owned PSO, on G2G base, on concessional terms.

Azhar said that our ambassador in Moscow was tasked and was actively in touch with the Russian officials regarding this issue, and PSO had proposed two transaction structures, and that Imran Khan as PM chaired two meetings on the subject and we were aiming for purchasing first cargoes in April.

However, the new power minister says there is no evidence of communication with Russia over purchase of discounted oil or gas.

Energy experts asked how PTI government was planning to pay for the Russian oil & gas after US sanctions. Obviously, the USD cannot be used and Pakistan has no direct currency agreement with Russia, unlike India and China. Besides a payment mechanism, a strategy to avoid sanctions is likewise nonexistent.

Washington Post reported that despite the European Union’s drastic measures to wind down imports of Russian oil, Moscow still has plenty of buyers — and at prices steep enough to keep government revenue high and its coffers flush.

Before the war with Ukraine, Russia sold about half of its 7.85 million barrels a day of crude and refined oil to Europe. But with the war and the EU’s abrupt vow to end its reliance on Russian oil and gas, the Kremlin has been benefiting from high world prices while looking for new customers and reorienting its export strategy toward Asia.

India, which abstained from votes condemning Russia at the United Nations, is one of the few countries willing to purchase Russian oil, and it has been able to do so at deep discounts of more than USD 30 per barrel.

India’s purchase of Russian crude soared in April. It bought 627,000 barrels a day of the benchmark Russian Urals crude, compared with 274,000 barrels a day in March. The April daily figure was 20 times India’s daily average for Russian imports in 2021. In addition to China and India, discounted Russian barrels are going to Turkey, Georgia and some African nations.

On the other hand, it reports say even after taking into account the discounts on crude oil, Russia is still selling crude at about USD 70 a barrel — higher than official prices charged for most of the past eight years.



Can Technology Help Manage Judiciary's Caseload?

The pros and cons of harnessing technology to help with more efficient administration of justice



By Asadullah

Over the last many years, Pakistan's judiciary has been unable to deal with a huge backlog of over 2 million cases despite resorting to different methods. Pakistan's ranking is deteriorating in the Rule of Law Index and now technological advancement is the only hope for clearing the backlog.

As per the statistics of the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan (LJCP), headed by the Chief Justice of Pakistan, there are about 2.2 million cases pending before the Supreme Court, Federal Shariat Court, federal and provincial high courts, and the district judiciary.

Judiciary is one of the most significant pillars of the state. In a democratic political system, accountability of everyone is the one perk that other political systems lack. The masses look forward to the judicial system to seek their rights.

But in Pakistan an individual wishes to stay away from the courts of law as much as possible. Pakistan stands at 130th position out of 138 in the Rule of Law Index.

The Rule of Law Index is not based solely on the performance of the judiciary. It takes

into account various aspects of the government and behaviour of the masses as well. However, the courts being a key component cannot be ignored in degradation of ranking because it is directly related to enforcement of law.

Following the success of restoration of judiciary movement, the powerful Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry could have revolutionised the judiciary and was in the position to make drastic changes as during his stint from 2009 to 2013, he forced the parliament to amend the Constitution to give him final say in judicial appointments.

However, ironically, he concentrated more in accumulation of powers in the office of Chief Justice of Pakistan and did not pay attention to the lower judiciary.

This may be the reason why the top jurist including the sitting judge of the Supreme Court Mansoor Ali Shah and Chief Justice of Islamabad High Court (IHC) Athar Minallah have termed the judicial system as "obsolete."

The judicial system of the country is outdated and drafted by colonisers, Justice Mansoor Ali Shah said during a conference on Technology for Justice.

The number of pending cases is 2.2 million while the number of judges in the country is 5000 which includes the judges of the Supreme Court, high courts and district judiciary.

Delay in cases is the biggest challenge to the judicial system. The trials take years. So what causes this delay in cases? Justice Mansoor Ali Shah pointed out some of them "poor case management technique, training of judges not effective, lack of communication between the three tiers [of judiciary], and lack of technology".

Absence of tech in the court system remains the major issue which needs to be dealt with.

In the past, Pakistan's judiciary has taken some initiatives to resolve the issues, such as IT driven automation to save time and money. This drive provided computers to type orders. Various courts set up their websites where their orders were posted.

Other improvements include an SMS service for lawyers to find out what and when cases are fixed, a database to categorise cases, and mobile apps of different courts.

Although it had some pros, this idea of automation didn't work because all the work on the back end was done like judicial branch officers were putting cases for fixation. There was no intelligence based system in courts.

Another initiative, an application about live streaming of courts, was approved by the apex Court and IHC became the first court to implement it.

It is high time to re-design the judicial system of Pakistan. Key steps to transform the system are the need of hour. What can be some recommendations?

For one thing, people should not have to rush court for everything, masses need to take alternative dispute resolution (ADR) like arbitration and mediation into consideration to resolve cases.

As justice Shah observed "shelf life of cases needs to be reduced to one year".

The whole case needs to go through an electronic system to reduce time. Synchronised hearing, requiring the presence of all parties concerned for the court proceedings to take place, has to be dropped. The presence of all parties should not be mandatory. If someone cannot make it to the court, they should be able to send his video or audio statement to the judge. This will save a lot of precious time.

Secondly, there should be a database of courts so the performance of the court can be supervised. Artificial intelligence (AI) is required, which would note the urgency of cases. These steps would certainly make access to justice easy.

Justice Shah said that the traditional system has become obsolete owing to the fact the backlog in the courthouse has piled up over the years. He used the term 'courthouse' to encompass the district judiciary, high courts, and the Supreme Court.

"Delays in cases are the biggest challenge our criminal justice system faces, it devastates families and litigants," said Justice Shah.

He emphasised on transforming the way we hear cases through technology to deal with over 2.2 million cases pending before the courts. "We need to reduce delays, expedite court procedures and strengthen alternate dispute mechanisms."

The apex court judge also endorsed online hearing for all courts and live streaming of the court's proceedings to ensure transparency.

It may be mentioned that Justice Qazi Faez Isa has requested for live streaming of hearings on cases related to purchase of properties by his spouse. The Supreme Court bench rejected the petition but Justice Shah dissented with the majority view and ruled in favour of the request.



Chief Justice Islamabad High Court, Justice Athar Minallah on the other hand revealed that the high court of federal capital has already initiated steps to transform and digitalise the courts in Islamabad.

The IHC administration has held high level meetings with the relevant stakeholders to equip the courts with the latest technology and has already started livestreaming hearings of selected cases.

He stressed the need for a "movement towards reimagining the justice system according to the technological requirements of the 21st century". He said that the country's judiciary is still being governed by over a century old criminal procedure code.

Commenting on the initiatives taken by the IHC, Chief Justice Minallah added, "Islamabad High Court was the first court to

introduce e-court proceedings during Covid-19, and upload all interim court orders on its website."

Highlighting the importance of district court, he regretted district judiciary had never been the priority of the state. He said the district court must be the focus, not always high courts and the Supreme Court.

Efforts of IHC to build district court complex have been fruitful as work on this

project is underway. Justice Minallah said it was the IHC's first priority to shift district courts to a decent environment.

A young lawyer, Barrister Sardar Taimoor Khan appreciated the efforts of introducing the technology for courts. He was, however, of the opinion that the lawyers who are important stakeholders of the judicial system should be trained to use the technology.

He further said that livestreaming might play havoc with the privacy of the citizen if allowed in the family cases and it would adversely affect the shares of a corporate entity when the shareholders watch the arguments of the regulator in streaming.

According to him, the judiciary should consider such factors before streaming the proceeding of court cases of varied nature.

Muslim View of the End Times

A look at Muslim Eschatology and its impact on world affairs PART II

By Azmat Mumtaz Saqib

Quran, hadiths and apocalyptic writings serve as an inspiration for better times and the eventual triumph of Muslims over infidels. The most severe struggle is against the state of Israel. It is obvious in the Hamas Charter of 1988. The Charter includes lengthy sermons on the evils of infidels and the occupiers.

The message is that the infidels will transgress but if Muslims are steadfast, the evil will be eliminated. Hamas Charter links the liberation of Palestine to the End times. It reiterates that the rightful status of Palestine has been established through Islam's military conquest, and now Palestine will remain legally an Islamic territory till the Day of Resurrection.

"[Peace] initiatives, the so-called peaceful solutions, and the international conferences to resolve the Palestinian problem, are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement". For, renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of the religion. The nationalism of Islamic Resistance movement is part of its faith.

The movement educates its members to adhere to its principles and to raise the banner of Allah over their homeland as they fight their Jihad: "Allah is the all-powerful, but most people are not aware."

From time to time a clamouring is voiced, to hold an international conference in search for a solution to the problem. Some accept the idea, others reject it, for one reason or another; demanding the implementation of this or that conditions, as a prerequisite for participating in it.

But the Islamic Resistance Movement does not believe that those conferences are capable of responding to demands, or of restoring rights or doing justice to the oppressed.

Article 15 of the charter discusses the involvement of the Crusaders to seize Palestine for the Jews; the Crusaders have engaged in both military aggression and ideological trickery to weaken and conquer the Muslims.

The answer, according to the Charter, is religion.

"We must imprint on the minds of generation of Muslims that the Palestinian problem is a religious one, to be dealt with on this premise" (Article 15)

The Charter directs that members of Hamas pay particular attention to the education of the young in the traditions of Islam.

Concurrently, however, they must also study the ways and means of the other side. This conscientious vigilance includes not only modern science, but also a constant monitoring of any groups associated with Zionism, including Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, and pervasive spy networks.

Article 22 offers a detailed explanation of the long running



conspiracy of unbelievers, both in the democratic West and the communist East, who take turns victimizing Muslims. The Balfour declaration, the League of Nations, WWI and WWII were all manifestations of the conspiracy that is alive and well today.

Finally, Article 31 states plainly that Hamas is not hostile toward other religions. Indeed, it states that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism can peacefully coexist, but only under the enlightened rule of an Islamic regime.

In conclusion, writings of radical Muslim apocalyptists have clearly influenced and motivated the founders of Hamas. Sensational apocalyptic writings lend credence to the idea that the Palestinian conflict is a sign of the impending end of history.

The urgency and drama of the conflict cause many frustrated Muslims to turn to the apocalyptic writers to find meaning and hope for the future.

Ahmadinejad and agenda for Iran in end times

Dr Mahmoud Ahmadinejad served as the sixth President of Islamic Republic of Iran from 2005 to 2013. He was known for his hard-line views and nuclearisation of Iran. He wanted his nation to act and pave the way for the Imam Ghaeb (Imam in occultation) to appear in the World and lead them to the final End times global dominance.

His speech to the general Assembly of the UN in 2005, concluded his address with a religious observation and prayer:

"Dear Friends and Colleagues,

From the beginning of the time, humanity has longed for the day when justice, peace, equality and compassion envelope

the World. All of us can contribute to the establishment of such a world. When that day comes, the ultimate promise of all divine religions will be fulfilled with the emergence of a perfect human being who is heir to all Prophets and pious men. He will lead the world to justice and absolute peace”.

“O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, the perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace.”

He expressed his singular devotion to the Imam Ghaeb claiming that it was Iran’s duty to pave the way for his arrival. Ayatullah Misbah, the founder of Hagani School of the Shia, teacher of the likes of Ahmadinejad, openly supports Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Of greater concern is the teaching that the Imam will be revealed following a period of catastrophe and chaos – interpreted by some to mean a nuclear war.

There was grave concern that the President may be following a messianic, apocalyptic agenda that includes several key components:

1. Acquiring nuclear weapons while deceiving the infidel nations with public denials;
2. The violent eradication of Israel, seen to be the epitome of evil in the world, which would cause international war and chaos; followed by
3. The revelation of the hidden Imam and Jesus Christ, who will then usher in a period of justice and peace.

These issues are at the heart of internal political power struggles within Iran and underline Iran’s troubled relations with the West and Israel. He has suggested that solution to Iran’s economic woes is a “culture of martyrdom,” his call to remove

These issues are at the heart of internal political power struggles within Iran, and it underlines Iran’s troubled relations with the west and Israel. He has suggested that solution to Iran’s economic woes is a “culture of martyrdom,” his call to remove Israel is a sustained security stand-off with Israel.

Conclusion of the study

1. While Judaism, Christianity and Islam might have much in common, their prophets also offered visions of a potentially violent path to the end state – a path calculated to exclude those who wandered from orthodoxy.
2. It is the schools of interpretation that give rise to the fundamentalist – that is, those who believe in the literal interpretation of the prophecies – and each also give rise to more moderate followers who treasure and respect the ancient predictions but who allow room for a more ecumenical, peaceful and optimistic interpretation.
3. Because these faiths were so influential in the state ideologies that underline the political realities of our day, their disparate views of the end of history continue to influence the world.

4. In general, the multifarious descendants of Abraham today organise themselves into two opposing camps. One invests in the establishment and focus on improving the world and ameliorating the dour circumstances of poverty, war, disease, crime and hatred. The other despairs of the world and clings to the hope of divine intervention, foreseeing the inevitability of heavenly violence to eradicate unbelief.
5. Those nations, states, and religious groups that experience success tend towards a moderate and optimistic way of interpreting prophecy.
6. Believers in those nations and religious groups that face foreign domination, marginalization, or failure tend toward a fundamentalist interpretation of prophecies.



logical interpretation are alive and well in our world, and that they effect how nations, states and groups interact, perceive each other, and either cooperate or engage in conflict.

Understanding the perspectives and ramification of both moderate and fundamentalist eschatology is crucial to effective communication in conflict resolution.

Ghuzwae Hind, end times war of Muslims with Hind (India) influences and motivates Jihadis and Islamic activists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. A couple of traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) are narrated without commentary:

“Two groups amongst my Ummah would be whom Allah has freed from fire. One group would fight against India and the second would be that who would accompany Isa Ibn e Maryam (A.S)” (Musnad Imam Hambal)

“Abu Hurairah says, Muhammad (PBUH) promised us of Ghazwa-e-Hind. If I get a chance to participate in it, I would spend all my energy and wealth in it. If I get killed, I would be considered among the greatest martyrs. And if I come back alive, then I would be a freed Abu Hurairah” (Sunan Imam Nasai)

Where Water Stress Will Be Highest By 2040?



By Shahmir Niazi

Water stress occurs when the water demand exceeds supply. Clean and safe water is required for agriculture, industries, and domestic uses. The supply of clean water is ensured by surface water bodies such as rivers, lakes, and reservoirs – and groundwater such as aquifers. The degree to which a region is water-stressed is measured by taking into account the water quality, accessibility, and seasonal changes.

Pakistan is likely to become one of the world's most water-stressed countries by 2040 at the rate its consumption is increasing, owing to the rapid growth of population, companies, and agricultural farms. As more people migrate to urban centers, water supplies will get further strained. However, climate change is not only affecting Pakistan, although it's one of the most severely affected. Globally, countries have become more vulnerable to climate change due to the lack of seriousness on part of the leaders who have historically neglected this issue.

In the next few decades, the water demand is likely to further increase. While some places will experience

droughts, others are likely to face the wrath of floods. The World Resources Institute (WRI) in its analysis noted with concern that 33 countries will face extreme water stress by 2040. It's also pertinent to note that fourteen of these countries are in the Middle East region. The most vulnerable include Israel, Palestine, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Lebanon, and Kuwait. All these countries are dependent upon groundwater resources and desalinated seawater. As groundwater levels rapidly decrease in the region, the need for alternate sources is at an all-time high.

On the other hand, in large economies such as the United States, China, and India, water stress is likely to remain lower. Only specific areas of the U.S. and China will face water scarcity, for example, southwestern U.S. and Ningxia province of China. Both these regions will face an increase in water stress by 40-70 percent.

Chile, Botswana, and Namibia are impacted by a different combination of factors. Chile will face water stress in 2040 due to the rising temperatures and irregular cycles of rainfall. Botswana

and Namibia are affected by other extreme weather conditions such as floods and droughts. Overall, South Africa will likely become drier in the coming years. Water demand will increase by 40-70 percent as per Aqueduct projections.

In 2010, on a scale of 0-5 with 5 being extremely high-water stress, Botswana had a ranking of 1.48, Chile 2.89, Estonia 1.59, and Namibia 1.74. In 2040 the same will increase to 3.00, 4.45, 3.91, and 3.18 respectively. All falling in high to extremely high categories. "Any numbers out there have to be taken with a grain of salt," says Upmanu Lall, a Columbia University professor about the measurements of groundwater.

According to UNICEF, almost four billion people, close to two-thirds of the world's population currently experience water scarcity for at least one month each year. Similarly, it notes with concern that half of the world's population could be residing in water-stressed regions as early as 2025 which could have a ripple effect, resulting in 700 million people being displaced by 2030.

Causes of Water Scarcity

Water scarcity is caused by ecological and economic conditions. Both factors are intertwined. In some places, there is adequate rainfall but a lack of water storage facilities. In other countries, e.g., Oman and South Western U.S., there is a lack of rainfall but sufficient storage facilities. The third case is where both rainfall and storage facilities are absent. Such countries are classified as the most water-stressed even though water scarcity remains an issue in all three cases.

The Democratic Republic of Congo serves as a case in point for the first scenario which reflects economic scarcity. The country receives plenty of rainfall but is still water scarce. The problem is the lack of modern water storage infrastructure that could prevent rainwater from getting wasted.

“Almost always the drinking water problem has nothing to do with physical water scarcity,” says Georgetown University’s Mark Giordano, an expert on water management. “It has to do with the scarcity of financial and political wherewithal to put in the infrastructure to get people clean water. It’s separate.”

In some countries, water wastage remains a huge issue. There are no national, state, and local level institutions that could govern and ensure water supply. In the U.S. there are multiple agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) which regulate clean water and protect the citizens from water disasters.

Way forward

The time is ripe for the global community to respond decisively to climate-induced crises such as water scarcity. Governments must come together under the framework of the Paris Agreement on climate, which aimed at limiting global temperature to a maximum of 1.5°C above preindustrial levels. This single move will substantially alleviate many of the water-stressed regions, including Southern Africa and the Mediterranean.

Moreover, wastewater recycling should be practiced to reduce the burden on the limited water resources. Recycling sewage water into drinking water is commonly practiced in Namibia for many decades. Similarly, developed countries like the U.S. and China use the byproducts of

wastewater treatment in fertilizer.

70% of the world’s clean water is used in Agriculture. This sector requires technological intervention that includes employing state-of-the-art innovative methods for conserving water. Crops can be bioengineered to survive in low water, making them more productive and resilient.

Finally, afforestation can help reinvigorate groundwater resources. Stormwater can only be managed by plantations. Vietnam has invested towards this end in a bid to prevent floods and improve its water security.

In the next few years, climate change will likely exacerbate water stress worldwide, as rising temperatures lead to more unpredictable weather and extreme weather events, including floods and droughts. Countries that are projected to fall under high to extremely high in terms of water stress by 2040, immediately need to take measures to conserve their water resources and expand their storage capacities. Water stress will affect industries, farms, and the larger public. National water security and economic growth go hand in hand.



Wheat is Our Only Ticket to Food Security

All is not well with the production of the nation's staple food grain – and the implications for our food security are grave



By Naqi Akbar

The estimates of wheat production are in for Punjab and Sindh – accounting for 92 percent of wheat production between them, the talk of an impending wheat shortage are already making the round in the concerned circles.

Punjab and Sindh respectively produce 77 percent and 15 percent of the nation's wheat, the number one staple food of the country.

Given the economic crunch, which likely to make the exchange rate even further weak, the resultant pressure on imported factor input costs and likely pressure on the government to complete its strategic stocks to avoid any awkward political and administrative situation can potentially land the system and the government in dire straits.

It may be recalled that given the importance of wheat as a staple grain, the government intervenes heavily at every step of the production cycle. Whether it is availability of the key fertiliser inputs, ensuring the supply of water, the government's long- and short-term planning is largely shaped by that concern.

Traditionally, wheat is an irrigated crop in Pakistan. On average, 90 per cent of the wheat cultivated in the immediate aftermath of rice and cotton crops in Punjab and Sindh starts in late October and early November. It is the time of the year when rain bearing weather systems do not cross over the area constituting Pakistan.

These systems usually enter the area in fall (December or early January). As a consequence, the barani or non-canal cultivation is mostly situated in the northern flank of Punjab.

During the recent years, there has not been a major shift in natural factors, like melting of glaciers or timing of the rainfall. However, the man made factors like availability of the fertilisers, pricing issue, the exchange rate as well as mechanisms to subsidise the same and make the funds available to them through various assistance initiatives have been the wanting factors.

These wanting factors have affected the wheat production trends in their own way, leading to a fall in the area under wheat cultivation. Although the governments has

taken great pains to offer the best support price for the farmer and even ensured supply of jute bags to the farmer in the field, the overall inflationary spiral has very clearly dampened the farmers' will to sow wheat on the land.

As the consequence, as the harvest estimates pour into the government as well as economic analysts' databases, a serious scenario is being contemplated. Irrespective of the political government at the helm; it looks like to be a national crisis in the making.

Given the fact that the next few months' estimates will be the deciding factors about calculating the extent of the crisis, a few factors will be staring the key economic managers on their faces. They are, firstly, the international scenario and the regional scenario.

The war between two major wheat producing countries, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, has already pushed wheat prices in the international market up. Countries in the Middle East are already facing the heat of that war.

Wheat shortage as well as rising prices have concerned the respective governments to look out for remedies. Iran, whose exchange rate to buy from the international market is deeply compromised, is already facing a dire situation, which has all the potential to blow out into food riots and possibly regime change.

Given the fact that Pakistani exchange rate is spiralling down rapidly and even if there is a bailout plan from IMF in the near future, it is a foregone conclusion that the IMF will continue to advocate a market-based valuation for the rupee. Such a strategy will mean that Pakistan's ability to import wheat will be undermined.

Any analyst only needs to do some calculations and visualise the developing scenario is the next few months. Expected wheat shortage will force any government to take concrete steps be it the incumbent one or the one likely to assume control after a fresh general election.

If new election dates have been announced or in case Pakistan spirals into another long bout of political instability; the type the country witnessed in 1968/69, 1970/71, 1977 and finally in 2007, the question of feeding our people will be a great concern.

The question of food security with meagre foreign exchange resources and a bad reputational risk for the country in

mobilizing credit from abroad for making import payments are likely to combine to create maximum pressure on the state and the government.

With confidence gap widening between the governed and the governing, whether civil or the established order, there is increased likelihood that if the government and the state fails to address the issues on the war footing, it runs the risk of sending Pakistan in a deeper crisis.

If, on the hand, the government responds to the crisis on war footing, the costs of the management will be exorbitant to say the least.

Pakistan has to good fortune to be situated on a fertile alluvial plain dependent upon canal water, a legacy of British colonialists. For that matter, irrespective of the foreign exchange crisis and other aspects, the issue of food security had never propped up or bothered anyone.

Traditionally an agricultural economy, the agricultural social system has been a buffer or a shock absorber for the economy, and the food grains have never been in shortage throughout the recorded history of the country.

If viewed philosophically, the transition from an agricultural economy to a monetarist economy, where the purchasing power

decides the level of happiness for a family or an individual has been a painful one.

The reason for this is that the society has been encouraged to jump into the bandwagon of consumerism without the presence of the basic requisites for such a transition.

The perils to our food security have been in part created by bad management of the pricing mechanism and the authorities' failure to reach the doorstep of the farmer. The farmer for decades has been left to fend for himself.

It is imperative that the mechanisms of growth and production relations especially in the domain of agriculture are addressed and revisited. It goes without saying that agriculture sector growth is the cheapest and the most reliable insurance of food security.

Manufacturing and service sectors no doubt generate employment opportunities. However, without a robust agriculture sector, any development paradigm is fraught with grave dangers.

Especially now, with Pakistan facing an economic crunch combined with deepening political crisis, any production of supply hiccup concerning wheat, the nation's staple food grain, is fraught with unimaginable consequences for the market, economy and possibly the polity.



Manchester City's Dream Run



By Ali Abdullah

Manchester City won their fourth title in 5 years but this victory was more chaotic than any other league final. The first five minutes were nothing less than a nightmare for Manchester City fans. Conceding two goals and missing a chance in the first 5 minutes of the game was not expected at all, though this chaos was totally worth it for the next 90 minutes.

The 37 matches, 3,400 minutes, and 96 goals that went before in the league meant the title race came down to just a single game, a single point, and eventually a single crucial strike from Ilkay Gundogan.

After being down 2-0 it did not seem like they were under any pressure. Instead, they were at their best; Pep Guardiola's side was unstoppable, possessing control and quality that has seen them surpass 90 points for a third season under his watch. Liverpool could have won their third title if they were just 1 point ahead of Manchester City.

"We are legends," the City boss said after clinching the trophy. "When you win the Premier League in this country four times in five seasons, it is because these guys are so, so special. We will be remembered." He added that they have been through a lot in the recent past and this will bring a change in the dressing room as well as for the fans.

In tight title races, Guardiola insists that it is the small margins that make a difference. Gabriel Jesus' winning goal at Chelsea changed the story after three quick defeats to Thomas Tuchel's team at the end of the previous season. Rodri's incredible challenge to stop Fabinho's late winner at Anfield. The Spain midfielder's injury-time winner at Arsenal on New Year's Day. The fightback against West Ham when it looked like the match was slipping away on the penultimate weekend. And, of course, the ridiculous final day against Aston Villa, when they were 14 minutes away from letting the title slip away, only for them to storm right back.

How ironic that it was the character and personality on the final day that dragged them over the line, something that has been challenged by a host of former players and angrily rejected by Guardiola.

When City fell to a calamitous double strike against Real Madrid in the Champions League semi-final, many believed they would also fall under the Premier League pressure from the relentless juggernaut of Liverpool steaming up behind them.

From a 14-point lead in December – albeit having played two games more – they dropped below Jurgen Klopp's side in the final weeks of the season. But City has been beaten only once in the Premier League since October, and not away from the Etihad Stadium since the opening day at Tottenham.

The English striker who was present in the stadium is expected to play for Guardiola's team. But when they refused to match Spurs' huge asking price, City went into the season without an orthodox striker.

Finishing with a tally of one less than a century is nothing short of an extraordinary achievement but critics will only judge by just looking at the amount used for the player's transfer rather than looking at his stats.

It shows the tactical ingenuity of Guardiola to rearrange his side and maintain their deadly nature, as well as the desire and intelligence of his players.

To hold off a team with the awesome firepower of Liverpool without a recognized center-forward could be one of Guardiola's greatest coaching achievements in his extraordinary career.

Kevin De Bruyne, who was known as assist king ended up being the top scorer with 15 league goals, earning himself the Premier League Player of the Year award.

‘Spread Optimism and Love’, Says Michelle Mumtaz

Meet the gutsy, brainy beauty who considers television drama her home

By Pavan Manzoor

Remember the girl who starred in the drama “Dard Ka Rishta”? Yes, Michelle Mumtaz, who has since appeared in a number of drama series, including Nalaih, Dil Tanha Tanha, Zara Sambhal Ke, Romeo Weds Heer, and Main Khwab Bunti Hu.

Michelle Mumtaz, who began her acting career in 2017, is a great young Pakistani model and actor of outstanding acting ability. Known for her performance in serials, she has to her credit several Hum TV, ARY, and GEO Entertainment dramas.

If you look closely enough, it is clear Michelle has had her share of struggles in the Pakistani entertainment industry, but what really matters is that the girl is determined to keep going. We at The Truth International (TTI) recently put her some questions – and we think you have a right to know her answers.

TTI: How did it come to be acting?

MM: It was due to my passion. I’ve always loved performing and wanted to be a part of the drama profession since I was a child. I was constantly praised by my family for my acting abilities, and I used to practice in front of a mirror.

Once, a production house contacted me for modeling and acting, but I couldn’t make it due to my educational commitments. Education have always been my priority. I wanted to graduate first and then make it in the industry, so I refused.

After some time, I received another call. They offered me a great and leading role. I was a little nervous at first, but because I enjoy trying new things and accepting challenges, I accepted – and it turned out to be a wonderful experience.

TTI: Which field did you want to join first after graduation?

MM: I’ve always wanted to work in television, and I’ve known it since I was in elementary school, when I used to participate in extracurricular activities such as plays. After graduation, I knew I wanted to work for a TV channel.

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

MM: I would be a banker if I wasn’t an actor, or I had to be something related to public speaking in the end.

TTI: How often do you watch Pakistani Films and Dramas?

MM: It happens far too frequently! I watch movies and dramas anytime I have free time away from work. Everyone requires a break from their daily routine. I relax by watching movies and dramas and listening to music.

TTI: Would you like to work more on television in future?

MM: Yes, of course! Television is my home. It has given me recognition as an actor. Why not? If you have a good script, a great team, and a great environment, why not? I will always love working on Television.

TTI: What kind of scripts do you like to sign?

MM: The way the story is narrated should be edgy and appealing to a large audience. Yes, it’s great if something



works and has a positive response, but I have a specific taste and want to be a part of projects like this.

TTI: Acting or modeling, what would you prefer given the choice?

MM: Of course, I enjoy acting, but when I don’t feel like putting myself into lot of work and effort, I go for modeling.

TTI: What has made you stronger as a person?

MM: Good people make me strong. Doing good to others makes me strong. Working out makes me strong.

TTI: When are you planning to tie the knot?

MM: No plans yet. I am more focused on my career and my life goals.

TTI: What would Michelle be doing in next five years?

MM: I have no idea, to be honest. I have no long-term plans. I prefer short-term objectives. My focus is always on the fact that everything I’m doing should give me inner satisfaction. I am a workaholic who enjoys experimenting with and developing new things. I can’t say where I’ll be in the next five years, but I can guarantee that I’ll still be acting.

TTI: Do you have any message for social media trolls?

MM: They don’t think about what the other person is going through while trolling them on social media. I feel that by using the same social media, we can promote goodness, but we don’t. There is already a lot of negativity and anger in the world, so why not use this tool of social media to spread optimism and love?

TTI: Please leave a message for your fans?

MM: My fans have always poured love on me. They’ve always been supportive, and I hope they continue to value my acting abilities.

Strutting the Cannes' Red Carpet

Meet the Pakistani artistes who have stormed the Cannes Film Festival as part of their projects

By Kaukab Jahan

Cannes Film Festival is one of the Big Three major European film festivals, alongside the Venice Film Festival in Italy and the Berlin International Film Festival in Germany. Based in France, it is a reflection of the flamboyant French culture, and hence considered the glitteriest extravaganza among the three.

This notion proves itself true at the red carpet of festivals, which most of the time receives more media attention worldwide than the films screening at the festival.

Appearing on the red carpet of Cannes is considered almost on a par with strutting the Oscars' red carpet. Celebrities get busy in the planning for their looks and styling weeks in advance of the actual event. Their appearances and dressing are covered by the media globally and rated in best and worst categories in publications all over the world.

Yes, this is the same Cannes Film Festival, where recently a young Pakistani filmmaker made all Pakistanis proud when his film *Joyland* received standing ovation at its screening and went on to win jury prize in the #UnCertainRegard category, at the 75th edition of the annual event that took place from 17 to 28 May 2022.

The film is written and directed by Saim Sadiq and features Rasti Farooq, Alina Khan, and Sarwat Gilani in leading roles while Sohail Sameer and Sania Saeed, Salmaan Peerzada, and Ali Junejo in strong supporting roles. The film has the stalwart of Pakistan Sarmad Khoosat as one its producers.

So as we discussed earlier, every participant in the Cannes Film Festival entered through a red carpet and so did our stars. As the *Joyland* is the first Pakistani movie selected for screening at Cannes, it naturally took along the whole team from Pakistan to the festival.

Here we are discussing top attendances at the Cannes Film Festival and becoming headlines of international news.

Team Joyland

Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* is the first Pakistani feature film and one of the 14 films that were screened in the 'Un Certain Regard' category at the festival.

This is not the first time that Sadiq attended the festival. He also made it in 2019 with his directorial project, a short film *Darlings*.

The stars mostly appeared in eastern outfits whether it was the red carpet or the screening event of the film. Sarwat Gillani's yellow long shirt with dupatta, Sania Saeed's emerald green Gharara and Aila Khan's red sari were much appreciated by their fans at home.



Iram Parveen Bilal

In 2019, the last Cannes Film Festival before Covid-19 pandemic, the Pakistani-American filmmaker Iram Parveen Bilal was invited with her film *Wakhri*, in the acclaimed 'Cinefondation L'Atelier' program of the festival.

Bilal explained *Wakhri*, the story of a female teacher who believes in education for girls, creates an avatar called 'wakhri' to promote the cause she believes in.

Mahira Khan

The Pakistani ace actress Mahira Khan made it to the Festival De Cannes not with any acting project but she gave her glamorous debut there in 2019 as an official spokesperson for L'Oreal Paris in Pakistan. It was the first time that the renowned international French brand chose to invite its Pakistani ambassador to Cannes.

As the diva was there more to present a fashion brand, she mostly appeared in western outfits to show up at various events.

Armeena Rana Khan

Another beauty from Pakistan and the co-star of Mahira Khan in hit *Bin Roye*, Armeena Rana Khan made it to the Cannes Film Festival in 2013 for 'Writhe', a short film by British director Sheraz Ali.

Adnan Siddiqui

Many of us know that Adnan Siddiqui has worked in the international project *A Mighty Heart*, along with Hollywood stars Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. But little did we know that the veteran Pakistani actor also appeared at the Cannes Film Festival for the premier of the film in 2008.

This makes him perhaps the first Pakistani actor in recent years to make it to the glitzy festival with a project.





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