

Fortnightly

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15th - 30th April 2023**Fear Factor in Politics**

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Pakistan is far away from the battlefield but facing unbearable heat of war

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The Court Crack

By Hammad Ghaznavi



That's how the chessboard looks: PTI chief Imran Khan wants immediate elections in Punjab and KP, as necessitated by the constitution. The PDM government is adamant on having national and provincial assemblies' elections on the same date somewhere in October this year, citing economic crisis and rising terrorism as reasons for the delay. The Supreme Court, rejecting the election date in October given by the Election Commission of Pakistan as "unconstitutional", has given a ruling to hold the provincial elections on 14th May. The government doesn't look in the mood to accede. Parliament, controlled by the PDM government, has passed a resolution rejecting the Supreme Court ruling. To put it mildly, it's a mess!

Despite many of its controversial decisions in the past, the court has never been defied in this fashion by a sitting government. The PDM government has gone to this extent for a simple reason – the Supreme Court is a divided house. The court has been mired in serious controversy for some time but now it's out in the public eye. There is a Bandial group and a Qazi Faiz Eesa group. The division is reportedly 8/7, in favour of the Chief Justice Umer Ata Bandial's group. The senior judges in Bandial group include Ejazul Ahsan, Munib Akhtar and Mazahar Ali Naqvi. These are the judges who have been on all benches formed in the last couple of years to entertain constitutional and political

matters, while the Qazi Faiz Eesa group's judges have been kept out of these important benches. The CJ's role in the reference against Qazi Faiz Eesa has been considered unclean by many, deepening the divide in the court. As long as the Establishment was hand in hand with the CJ, the resistance from the independent judges was discreet. With the military taking a step back, the two sides are openly fighting a no-holds-barred battle. Adding spice to the court saga, politicians are taking sides openly and ferociously. Imran Khan is vehemently supporting the CJ, declaring him the ultimate protector of the constitution, while the PDM parties are pro Qazi Faiz Eesa, the man who will enter the CJ office in September this year.

The genesis of the present controversy lies in a suo moto notice taken by the CJ regarding the elections schedule. A nine member bench was formed, two judges recused, and two decided that the suo moto was unjustified. The CJ constituted a new 5-member bench which generated further controversy as two judges on this bench also disagreed with the suo moto. Was it a 4/3 decision or 3/2? The opinions were divided. In response to this the government passed a law in Parliament clipping the CJ's discretionary powers to take suo moto notice and distributed the said power among three senior judges of the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Justice Qazi Faiz Eesa hearing another case ordered that all suo

moto cases shall be frozen until the fate of the new law is clear. The CJ retaliated and invalidated this order, first through a circular of the Court's registrar and then by a six member bench comprising like-minded judges.

After all this hullabaloo, the elections are nowhere in sight. The 14th May is approaching fast while the government is continuing with its delaying tactics. What next? There are some scenarios being discussed among the court watchers. If the Supreme Court's order on the election date is flouted, it can start contempt proceedings against the election commission and the government. The new law on suo moto powers will become effective in a couple of days. Commentators opine that the law is likely to be struck down by the CJ, declaring it ultra vires. On the other hand there are rumors that the government is contemplating a reference against the CJ, while the CJ may try to axe Qazi Faiz Eesa through some stratagem. It's a shambolic state of affairs.

There is a silver lining as well. Insiders insist that there are elements in both the camps with the realization that if this fight goes even a notch higher, it may get out of everyone's control, pushing the polity into an uncharted territory. This is sane attitude. Saner voices on both sides of the political divide are getting louder, emphasizing the need for talks. We can't agree more. That's the only sensible solution for all stakeholders.

A Constitutional War across Constitution Avenue

Parliament, SC asserting powers defined in Constitution; matter of ECP funds spins between two top institutions

By Sarfraz Raja

Alongside the well-known and historic Constitution Avenue of Islamabad, two uniquely designed adjacent buildings are the center of everyone's attention for the last several days. Parliament and the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the constitutional bodies and two important pillars of the state, the legislature and judiciary, are asserting their constitutional powers defined in the Constitution of Pakistan, turning the country's political crisis into a potential constitutional war to earn supremacy of authority.

What's going on in Supreme Court?

The ruling parties' alliance, PDM, and some political commentators blame the apex court's decision for the current political turmoil. Since an in-house change in the Lower House of the parliament last April when Imran Khan was removed from power through a no-confidence motion, an intense political crisis is developing in Pakistan for the first time in the history of the country.

Although the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan was voted upon through a Supreme Court decision when the then deputy speaker of PTI had rejected the opposition motion of no-confidence, calling it a move backed by a foreign conspiracy. The apex court of the country took a suo motu notice and rejected the ruling of the deputy speaker, declaring it unconstitutional. This decision was welcomed and praised by the opposition parties, while criticized by PTI and Imran Khan in their reactions. Later, another decision that was blamed to be the root cause of the present political crisis by the ruling alliance, is the interpretation of article 63-A of the Constitution by the SC bench.

After securing power in the center, PDM was also able to establish its government with the help of 25 PTI dissident lawmakers. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf took the matter to the



Supreme Court for interpretation of article 63-A, under which the Constitution of Pakistan defines the disqualification of a Member of Parliament on grounds of defamation. It says that a Member will be disqualified if he or she votes or abstains from voting in the House, contrary to any direction issued by the parliamentary party to which he or she belongs, in relation to the election of the prime minister or chief minister, a vote of confidence and no confidence, or money bill or constitutional amendment bill.

The Supreme Court interpreted this article saying that the votes cast against party direction "cannot be counted and must be disregarded; and this is so regardless of whether the party head, subsequent to such vote, proceeds to take, or refrains from taking, an action that would result in the declaration of defection".

This judgment dealt a blow to the PML-N calculations in the Punjab Assembly where the fate of the newly elected chief minister Hamza Shehbaz, who had clinched power by peeling off lawmakers from PTI, hung in the balance.

Consequently, PTI was able to form its government in the largest province of the country, and later on the directions of PTI chief Imran Khan, the then

provincial chief minister Pervaiz Elahi dissolved the Punjab Assembly which triggered political chaos, followed and accumulated by the dissolution of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Assembly.

Conducting elections in these provinces became an issue when governors of both provinces refused to give an election date to the Election Commission of Pakistan for announcing a schedule accordingly.

Again the apex court involved itself in this matter via the case involving the transfer of the Lahore police chief: two Supreme Court judges sent the matter of elections in Punjab to the chief justice of Pakistan for taking a suo motu. This case actually defined a divide within the ranks of the highest court of the country. Chief Justice Umar Atta Bandial initially constituted a nine-member bench to hear the case including the two judges who had referred the matter for suo motu.

After expressions of mistrust of these two judges by the PDM, the former recused from the bench. Two other judges, in line with their view of the non-maintainability of the case, left the decision of their inclusion in the bench to the CJP. After two days of the hearing, the other five members with a divided verdict of 3/2 called the elections within 90 days according to



the constitutional timeframe. The law minister immediately called it a decision of 4/3 including the note of two other judges who had put their note earlier.

Initially, with the consultation of the president, the ECP issued a schedule for the election in Punjab announcing April 30 as the polling day. But later after consultative meetings with ministries of finance and defense, it postponed the elections till October 8, on what it said finance and security grounds.

PTI again took the matter to the apex court, which constituted a three-member bench including two judges who were distrusted earlier. PDM openly opposed the bench and demanded a full court to hear the case which was turned down by the court. Besides that, the debate of 2/3 and 3/4 was raised again and as the dissenting note of other judges surfaced, they clearly called it a decision of 3/4.

Apart from the debate what is the actual decision, a clear divide emerged among the SC judges. The crack further widened when in a separate case, a three members bench of the court under Justice Qazi Faez Isa, the senior-most judge after the CJP, ordered the suspension of all suo motu cases under Article 184/3 of the Constitution, until amendments were made to the Supreme Court rules governing the chief justice's discretionary powers.



jurisdiction; and this order violated the rules laid down by a five-member bench. In response to the registrar's circular, Justice Isa asked the Establishment Division to recall its officer serving as registrar to prevent him from damaging the reputation and integrity of the Supreme Court.

Response from parliament

After all these happenings in the apex court, the top legislator body in the neighboring building swung into action. The government took the matter before the elected body to respond to the court's verdict and in a resolution passed by the National Assembly, called the three-member bench decision in favor of elections in Punjab, a 'minority verdict.'

Also, both Houses of Parliament passed the Supreme Court Practice and Procedure Bill: transferring the chief justice's powers of suo motu and constitution of benches, to a three members committee of three senior judges.

President Dr. Arif Alvi refused to sign the bill from becoming an act of parliament and sent it back to the parliament. The government immediately in a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament, got the bill approved again, which would now become a law. On the other hand, this law is also challenged in the Supreme Court where the petitioner has called it an 'unconstitutional legislation' before it formally becomes law.

Where this crisis leads?

The crisis which is actually stemming out of the elections in Punjab is deepening with developments taking place in the two iconic and adjacent buildings on Constitution Avenue -- Parliament House and the Supreme Court. But could elections be held on time, seem uncertain as the government and PDM parties are openly expressing their view against early elections, and a resolution is also passed by the parliament to hold elections simultaneously in the country.

The matter of providing Rs 21 billion to the ECP for election expenses as directed by the SC, has been refused by parliament; and ECP has submitted its requisite reply to the SC. So this constitutional matter is spinning between constitutional institutions alongside Constitutional Avenue. For legal and constitutional experts, the divide within the top court is unfortunate and alarming.



Justice Isa's verdict prompted a circular issued by the registrar of the Supreme Court, in which the chief justice noted that observations made by the majority judgment were beyond the matter fixed before the court and invoked in suo motu

The NA resolution said the House rejects the minority decision of the three-member bench and binds the prime minister and the cabinet not to implement 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' decisions.



Fear of defeat: PDM writing despicable political history by escaping elections

Internal threat severe than 1971 debacle; by escaping elections PDM wants to escape accountability; efforts going on to disqualify IK, put him behind bars

By Tahir Niaz

Pakistan's political landscape at present is too obscure to predict anything happening in the near future. Clearly visible, political developments are occurring fast. The nation, I believe, was hardly aware of this aspect of the Pakistani politics. Overseas Pakistanis and people in other countries are reaching perplexed conclusions about the course of the Pakistani politics, keeping in view the current situation in the country.

The country continues to face internal and external conflict; and this time, the internal threat seems to be even more grave than ever since the 1971 debacle. Intolerance, lack of prudence, vested interest, denying space to political opponents, suppressing contrary views and deviation from the rule of law, are key factors behind the situation Pakistan finds itself in these days. All these developments are threatening the country's prospects of economic and political stability and most importantly, the social cohesion.

The question is how we reached here? The answer is quite simple: it would not have been so messy at the Supreme Court, nor there would have been such a divided opinion on a simple constitutional matter, had the PDM government not opted a retraction from its constitutional obligation of holding general elections within 90 days of the dissolution of the Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Assemblies. What should have been a smooth sailing, has been turned into a political, legal, and constitutional chaos.

'No funds, no security' remains a simple and only reply by the ruling PDM to the question of holding elections for the two Provincial Assemblies. Whether it is the federal government, the Election Commission of Pakistan, the governors, the caretaker governments or the bureaucracy--all are on 'one page'. And whether it is the PML-N, the PPP, the JUI-F the ANP, or other PDM components-- all



are united in their efforts to postpone elections for Provincial Assemblies, until people change their minds towards the ruling parties.

Never ever had the Pakistani nation witnessed such a unanimity among the state institutions and political parties, which are citing security concerns and lack of funds as hurdle in the way of holding the elections. Actually, they are demonstrating cowardness and lack of will on their part by adopting such disgraceful tactics to escape elections; and by escaping elections, the PDM alliance wants to escape accountability.

The situation in the political arena would have been a bit better, had the PDM government not decided to run away from elections under one excuse or the other. Former prime minister Imran Khan was ousted from power through a vote of no confidence moved by the then opposition. PTI leaders termed the occasion a 'black day, while those linked to the government celebrated the move as 'toppling the one-page regime.'

On February 11, 2022, Pakistan Democratic Movement, the incumbent coalition government comprising PPP, PML-N, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and others, announced moving a no-confidence

motion against Imran Khan. In a National Assembly session that went on for more than 12 hours, the PTI chairman's prime ministerial term came to an early end as the opposition's no-trust motion against him succeeded an hour past midnight on April 9, with 174 lawmakers out of 342 voting in its favour. Imran Khan alleged he was ousted through a foreign conspiracy.

The PTI chairman has since launched his 'Haqeeqi Azaadi' (real freedom) movement against the ruling alliance. In a video address marking one year of his ouster, Khan told his party workers and supporters to be prepared for every kind of the situation. He also vowed to throng streets if the government attempted to 'run away' from elections by 'dividing the judiciary.'

PTI claimed the government plunged the country to low levels of humanity, foreign relations, governance, public relief and economy. It says the last one year is marked as worst year for the country due to inabilities of the current government.

Protest demonstrations that started immediately after Khan was sent packing, still continue across the globe. Marking the regime change a year back, as black day, Dutch Pakistanis demonstrated at the International Court of Justice at The Hague. PTI also blames the incumbent



government for grave human rights violations. A letter by a senior member of the USA Congress Foreign Affairs Committee to Secretary Blinkin, shows growing concerns of the international community on the HR abuses in Pakistan.

Amid a hostile situation, there is no space for dissenting voices within the political parties. The PPP sacked Latif Khosa for saying elections should be held as per the Constitution. Dissenting voices as Senator Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar and Aitzaz Ahsan were earlier expelled from the party.

Pakistan saw peaceful political transitions after the 2013 and 2018 elections. However, as the country prepares for anticipated elections in 2023, it continues to face stiff resistance from the 'champions of democracy'.

Irony of the situation is that the ruling alliance is violating the Constitution in the name of defending it. Interestingly, the year 2023 marked the 50th anniversary of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, a landmark document that laid the parliament of Pakistan. The ruling PDM started month-long celebrations on April 10, 2023, exactly one year after ex-prime minister Imran Khan was voted out through a parliamentary move. PTI marked April 9 as 'black day' while PDM celebrated it as 'one year of its achievements,' suggesting polarization at its peak.

The Shehbaz-led PDM ruling alliance is resorting to disgusting modes to escape elections--out of fear of defeat. PTI chief said the PDM was fleeing from elections as it could not face the masses, and everyone is now asking when the elections would be held.

Law and order situation and the economic meltdown are the two issues, government is banking on to build its case in order to postpone elections, even beyond its constitutional mandate. This is for the first time in the country's history that a democratically-elected incumbent government is resisting elections, rather using its failures as a ploy to extend its rule.

To meet what can best be described as 'unholy' objectives, the ruling parties have also resorted to unprecedented contradictions. The PML-N leaders, including Interi-

or Minister Rana Sanaullah, Khurram Dastageer Khan, Maryam Nawaz, Ahsan Iqbal are on the record suggesting PTI to dissolve the Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Assemblies if it wanted snap elections. Once PTI dissolved the Assemblies, PDM took a U-turn to argue that the Assemblies' dissolution was not in line with the 'spirit of democracy.'



PDM had been insisting that PTI must remain part of the democratic process and return to the parliament. However, in a big U-turn, speaker National Assembly Raja Pervez Ashraf accepted the resignations of PTI legislators when the latter's leadership announced going back to the National Assembly. PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari asserted that former prime minister Imran Khan may not have any political future if he continues to ignore the democratic path.

Maryam Nawaz mocked Imran as she asked her father Nawaz Sharif to lend some 'courage' to the PTI chief. Maryam ridiculed Khan when she asked Nawaz Sharif, who is staying in London for the last four years and evading court appearance, to lend some of his 'courage' to the PTI chief who had allegedly escaped from his residence Zaman Park fearing arrest.

PTI leader Fawad Chaudhry suggested Maryam to shun double standards as on the one hand, she was talking about holding elections during public meetings without any fear, on the other, the ruling coalition was running away from the much-awaited polls.

PDM parties are exploiting all possible avenues, whether legal or illegal, to delay elections. Also its leaders can be heard saying that 'no democratic party can run away from elections and they were ready for polls.' On her part, Information Minister Mariyam Aurangzeb is telling public that it was Imran Khan who was running away from elections.

The federal government cannot arrange funds worth Rs 21 billion and on the other hand, it is doling out billions of rupees to the party legislators and for different schemes aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the voters.

Pakistan is facing the issue of terrorism for the last over 20 years but it held elections in 2008, 2013 and 2018 when security and law and order situation was much more fragile but the PDM government is now presenting the security situation in the country as one of the main reasons for delaying the polls.

Meanwhile, efforts are going on to disqualify Imran Khan, let it be the case of Iddat of Bushra Bibi, shatter his political base and put him behind bars. This is the strategy the government is pursuing now after having met failure on all other fronts to prevent masses gather around Imran Khan.

Fearing defeat, the PDM alliance has invented a novel method of using its failures to achieve its 'unlawful' objectives of delaying elections. It is hardly aware of the fact that it is opening the door of unconstitutional extensions in the rule. It seems the PML-N never thought about how it reached this point? Why is Imran Khan popular among masses? It might have thought that chastising IK on media would serve its purpose, but it is no more the case.

Defiance of apex court orders by the ruling alliance is quite obvious. It might have thought that defying the Supreme Court order would give it a new narrative. The Supreme Court has also taken notice of the same and summoned the ECP high ups and Ministry of Finance to explain why the court order was not met. Imagine the ruling parties were in the opposition and the incumbent government denying the elections. This is how the PML-N being the major partner in the ruling alliance, could resolve the issue.



Judges: 5 or 7? Days: 90 or more?

The CJP needs to wave his sword at every person or authority that has refused to implement the judgments

By Aitzaz Ahsan

In a time when tempers fly high sanity takes a backseat. When swords and sabers are drawn, the voices of reason are silenced. It is thus a mercy to see sanity and reason even where the battle is thick. The battle cry was given by the PML-N's Information Minister demanding that the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) resign. The demand was eagerly endorsed by her namesake and senior vice president of PML-N. The CJP appeared to them to be mortally wounded because these two ladies thought his opponents on the Court had defeated him 4:3. They smelled blood and wanted it to flow.

Thank God sanity and reason also had seats on the table. The entire issue was reviewed by the Core Committee of the Pakistan People's Party under the joint chair of President Asif Ali Zardari and Chairman Bilawal Zardari Bhutto. A strong message went out from them. Mr Qamar Zaman Kaira, spokesman for the meeting, later told the press that the PPP did not support the demand for the CJP's resignation nor the proposal to file references against the judges. There will obviously now be a cooler re-think of the matter by PML-N, JUI-F and other hawkish parties. When reflected upon with cool minds, PML-N may find that the facts are not what appear to it to be. The following are the main issues and their answers:

1. Five or seven judges:

- i. Only five judges heard the final arguments on the final three days of hearing.
- ii. The bench was admittedly 'reconstituted' as per the footnote in the note contributed by Mr Justice Mansoor Ali Shah.
- iii. The opening sentence which the learned CJP read out on 1st March, 2023, in open court in the presence of all the 4 other judges was to the effect that "by a majority of 3:2 we"
- iv. As such admittedly this was a decision of a five-member bench and not seven members.

2. The final judgement:

The final judgment is therefore, the judgment dated 1st March, 2023, and it is conclusive, requiring the holding of elections as mandated by the Constitution. No judge who was not a part of the reconstituted bench can subscribe his personal opinion to reverse a judgment by the Supreme Court.

3. Mr Justice Athar Minallah's note:

- i. The essence of the minority's opinion (Mandokhel and Shah, JJ) is not that jurisdiction under Article 184(3) is unavailable altogether. Instead, they opine that it ought not to be resorted to in the circumstances of the case. Hence it is a matter only of propriety.
- ii. Two other learned judges (Afridi and Minallah, JJ) have, while not being members of the bench that finally heard the arguments addressed to the Court, purported to contribute their opinions to the same effect.



iii. Justice Minallah critically points out in Para 19 of his note, "The premature and preemptive proceedings before this Court at this stage is likely to delay the enforcement of the judgment of the Lahore High Court, leading to infringement of the Constitution by exceeding the time frame prescribed *ibid.*"

In fact, he proceeds to claim rightly so that, "This [is] also obvious from the opinions of my learned brothers Syed Mansoor Ali Shah, Yahya Afridi, and Jamal Shah Mandokhel, JJ who have also dismissed the petition on this ground i.e. pendency of the same matter before the competent High Court."

It is evident therefore, that all the above four justices agree that timeframe provided in the Constitution which is 90 days as per Articles 105(2) and 224 cannot be infringed.

4. In Article 105(2) it is provided that the election shall be held not later than 90 days from the date of dissolution of the assembly. Article 224 provided for this election within 90 days of the dissolution. Hence, Mr Justice Minallah, if he has to be counted on the bench, which the opposition does not admit, his quotation above shows that he unreservedly concedes that the 90-day period provided by the Constitution is mandatory and cannot be infringed. In fact, even a juridically approved extension beyond 90 days would be taking recourse to the Doctrine of Necessity, which he does not approve.

Moreover, Article 189 of the Constitution provides that "Any decision of the Supreme Court shall, to the extent that it decides a question of law or is based upon or enunciates a principle of law, be binding on all other courts in Pakistan." Article 190 states "All executive and judicial authorities throughout Pakistan shall act in aid of the Supreme Court." Thus, Mr Justice Minallah's voice adds to that of the three who were a 3:2 majority on 1st March, 2023. This was the final decision of the Supreme Court and awaits implementation for more than a month while a Lahore High Court judgment awaits implementation since 10th February. The CJP needs to wave his sword at every person or authority that has refused to implement either judgment of 10th February or 1st March. After the Justice Minallah note there is no scope now for any dithering or delay.

Courtesy Tribune



Pakistan on verge of collapse?

Alternate political, economic agenda a need of hour; security forces paying price of IK's TTP strategy; top one of Pak population holds more wealth than bottom 70%

By Farooq Tariq

Pakistan is facing one of worst economic and political crises at present. The political crisis is best manifested by the fact that almost half the National Assembly (Lower House of the parliament) members have resigned while two of the four Provincial Assemblies dissolved a year before the elections otherwise due in October this year.

The two Provincial Assemblies, in the provinces of Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, were dissolved by the former prime minister Imran Khan. His party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) held majority in these two Houses. Khan had hoped the dissolution of two Provincial Assemblies would force the federal government to announce early general elections.

The caretaker governments in these two provinces have refused to call the elections, otherwise due within 90 days of Assemblies' dissolution. This delay is in violation of the Constitution of Pakistan. The pretext for the delay in elections is the lack of funds. But a popular perception is: the delay is a 'manipulation by the army' that fears a PTI victory in elections. Ironically, in 2018, the same army was accused of rigging elections to secure victory for Imran Khan.

There is a great political maneuvering going on at the judicial level. The chief justices of Supreme Court and Lahore High Court are purportedly Imran Khan's supporters. This has been manifested by the verdicts issued by the judges in several political cases.

Every time, the PTI moves the court, everyone knows the 'verdict in advance.' For instance, a Supreme Court bench consisting of three judges, known for supporting Imran Khan, ordered on April 4 to hold elections in the Punjab province on May 14 this year. However, this three-member bench initially included nine judges. Those not supportive of Imran Khan were removed through maneuvering. The Supreme Court judges are issuing



contradictory statements. The judiciary is as divided as any other institution in the country.

The federal government and Punjab caretaker government have rejected the Supreme Court's decision regarding elections on May 14. A public conflict between the Supreme Court and federal government is aggravating the political crisis.

The state institutions are stuffed with pro-PTI as well as pro-Muslim League elements. The Muslim League, controlled by Sharif dynasty, is presently ruling in coalition with Pakistan People's Party (the party of Bhutto dynasty).

The Supreme Court has the power to remove the present government on the charge of contempt of court. But the question is: who would take over a collapsing Pakistan?

The specter of military takeover is often in discussions. Pakistan's turbulent political history is marked by 32 years of direct military rule ever since independence in 1947. When not in power, military controls from behind. At present, the military establishment is posing to be "neutrals".

In fact, as stated above, the 2018 general elections that brought Imran Khan to power was rigged by the military establishment in his favor. When the military establishment withdrew its support from Imran Khan in early-2022, his government collapsed.

Imran Khan tried to find scapegoats for his downfall by blaming, firstly, the USA, then the military establishment and many others in his ever-changing narratives. He is ridiculed as a man of "U-turns". His every new speech contradicts his previous one.

Imran Khan was replaced by a coalition government of Shahbaz Sharif, heading the Muslim League (after his elder brother and thrice prime minister Nawaz Sharif was banned from politics in 2018). When Sharif tried to implement conditionalities of the IMF, Imran Khan regained popularity, by gaining negative support.

The IMF has become quite unpopular among the Pakistani masses. Whenever, there was an unprecedented price hike announced by the government, IMF was cited as the reason behind. The only pretext to justify the IMF conditionalities by the PML-led coalition government is: 'if we do



not meet the IMF conditions, Pakistan will go bankrupt'. Masses have already gone bankrupt, so is the state in real terms but a formal announcement is being delayed in this regard.

Coupled with severe political crises, a new upsurge of religious fundamentalism is visible. For example, terrorist attacks by the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have increased manifold. The TTP is an off-shot of Afghan Taliban. They are attacking the police and military forces. They have safe havens in Afghanistan under a very helpful Taliban government.

Imran Khan in his last days of power, released hundreds of arrested Pakistani Taliban, apparently, in his bid to hold peace dialogue. In fact, known as Taliban Khan, he and some of his military-backers sympathize with the Taliban. Now the security forces are paying the price of this strategy.

The economic crises are far more severe than the political crisis. The coalition government is implementing the anti-people conditionalities of IMF by raising prices of oil, gas, electricity, general sales tax and every other consumer item.

The Pakistani rupee is losing value almost daily against the US dollar and other foreign currencies. On 7th April, a dollar was fetching over 290 rupees, up from 150, a year ago. There are hundreds of containers full of imported goods lying at the Karachi Port waiting to be cleared. The government has refused to clear the dues to be paid in dollars for these imported items.

There has been series of indirect taxation on almost all edible goods and daily consumer items during the last six months. There have been several min-budgets imposed on people, sometime announced without any prior notice.

Masses are collapsing so is the state of Pakistan under the huge economic burden, with no raise in wages or any other compensations. Pakistan is trying its level best to fulfill conditionalities of the IMF to fetch the last instalment of 2 billion dollars of a 6 billion dollar loan negotiated by the previous Imran Khan government in 2019.

This is the 23rd time, Pakistan has taken a loan from IMF. Pakistan's external debt servicing rose by 70 percent in the first two quarters of 2022-23. The country paid USD 10.21 billion in external debt servicing during this period-- at a time when Pakistan witnessed worst climate disaster during the year 2022. Instead of suspending the debts

because of climate calamity, the IMF increased its pressure to pay more than the last year.

Country's foreign reserves are at historic low. Pakistan's central bank foreign exchange reserves have dropped to \$4.2 billion due to recent external debt repayment. To please the IMF and meet the conditionalities, Pakistan has increased interest rate to record 21 percent. The wholesale inflation is at an unprecedented level: 37.5 percent, highest since 1973. The result is real disaster for working class and middle-class Pakistanis.

Inequalities are at historic high in Pakistan. Deregulation, privatization, liberalization, and lower progressive taxation contributed to this extreme inequality. According to a survey, the average income for the richest is more than 16 times the average for the poorest. According to an OXFAM report, the country's top one percent holds more wealth than the bottom 70 percent of the population.

Pakistan's economy is expected to grow only 0.4 percent in the current fiscal year ending June 2023. By all measures, Pakistan performs poorly compared to other South Asian countries.

There is no hope among the people of Pakistan that things will improve. The ruling elite of the country has miserably failed in solving basic problems of masses like free education, health and employments. An alternative pro-people political and economic agenda is need of the hour. Progressive forces are weak but trying to fill the gap in some working-class areas.





Pak terror group on image building drive

TTP forms committees to hear public complaints in bordering regions

By Mehmood Jan Babar

Under pressure from the Afghan government, a notorious terror group known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has launched a campaign among scattered tribal communities it influences in Pakistan's bordering regions with Afghanistan.

The TTP and its allied groups have killed tens of thousands of Pakistani citizens in retaliation to Islamabad's controversial decision to join the so-called US war-on-terror following attacks in the USA in September 2001. The TTP wants to Islamize Pakistan on the pattern of new Afghan government which has enforced strict Islamic code which in all fairness has dramatically brought down social crimes and restored peace except for terror attacks by the ISS or Daesh.

Islamabad alleges that the current Afghan Taliban government was providing shelter to TTP which carried out a deadly terror attack killing nearly 100, mostly police men, at a mosque in police headquarters in Peshawar in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan few weeks back.

Following the terror attack, the TTP came under intense pressure from within its ranks and files and more importantly from the Afghan government to cease terror attacks against Pakistani security forces. The Taliban government in Kabul purportedly has a soft corner for the TTP, which supported Afghan Taliban in their armed resistance against the US-led NATO and ISAF forces which pulled out of Afghanistan in mid-August 2021.

Under the new strategy, the TTP would skip targeting security forces in places where the risk of collateral damages involving common citizens, would be high.

After the January 30 horrific terror attack on Peshawar Police Lines there were reports of differences between terrorist organizations on the issue of attacks on religious places in the region.

Reports also suggest that the TTP has included 'war with the state of Pakistan and protection of Pakistani masses,' in its fresh



Pakistan strategy. TTP has also formed 'committees' to provide justice to local populations where it holds influence. These committees are aimed at taking action against TTP functionaries on the complaints of the locals.

Local tribal sources familiar with this development revealed that TTP considers it necessary to begin a kind of 'damage control' exercise in order to reduce pressure from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and to improve its reputation among common Pakistanis. The TTP committees, according to the tribal sources, would probe complaints and charges by the local business community and common Pakistani citizens against the outfit's operatives, and take action accordingly.

A local tribal resident who complained to one of these committees about a threat from an alleged TTP-linked individual from some Afghanistan cell number, said the TTP assured him of pertinent action and no such worry in future. He confirmed that later TTP took action against the intimidator.

Zabihullah Mujahid, the deputy spokesperson of the Afghan Taliban, told this correspondent the Afghan government stands by all promises made to the

Pakistani authorities; and cannot allow anyone to attack Pakistan. "Our strategy is to end terrorism in the region especially in Pakistan; and not to allow any attack from our soil to succeed that would hurt the people of Pakistan."

Zabihullah Mujahid was contacted with regard to a recent Pakistani delegation's visit to Kabul. This delegation held detailed meetings with the Afghan authorities to seek Afghan government's help to prevent terror attacks in Pakistan. This Pakistani delegation was led by Defense Minister Khawaja Asif and it included DG-ISI Lt Gen Nadeem Anjum and the then special representative of Pakistan for Afghanistan Mohammad Sadiq.

Zabihullah Mujahid contended that no one from Afghanistan could do such acts because it is completely prohibited from our side. The Islamic Emirate is trying to solve such problems and eliminate terrorism in the region, he added.

Muhammad Sadiq, who was part of the delegation that dashed to Kabul on February 22, resigned from his post a few days later due to personal reasons, but he confirmed this when contacted by this correspondent shortly after the visit. Sadiq said that Pakistan has received considerable



assurance from Afghan Taliban on its security and other matters. He refrained from giving more details but appeared satisfied.

The visit took place at a time when the Afghan administration had closed the Torkham border for alleged refusal by the Pakistani authorities to allow an Afghan patient to enter Pakistan via Torkham border crossing which remained closed for all types of traffic for the next four days.



Later, the border was reopened after Pakistan addressed complaints by the Afghan government. The Kabul visit was approved in the meeting of the Pakistani Apex Committee held in Peshawar immediately after the terrorist attack on Peshawar Police Lines. The Apex Committee discourse suggested that after failure of negotiations between the TTP and the state of Pakistan, talks with Afghan Taliban were vital.

After this dreadful attack on Peshawar Police Lines, for the first time policemen staged a pretest march against terrorist attacks, as reaction to which 'disciplinary' action was taken against some police personnel.

Earlier, during the previous Pakistan government, there were prolong negotiations between the state of Pakistan and the leadership of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in Afghanistan, for securing peace in Pakistan. But due to subsequent attacks on TTP leaders coupled with the death of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in a Kabul drone strike by US, these talks were suspended and ceasefire reversed.

During a conversation with media in Zaman Park, Lahore, former prime minister Imran Khan confirmed that during his government, on the demand of the Afghan Taliban, certain number of TTP men were allowed to return to Pakistan from Afghanistan. Khan contested it was necessary to bring these Taliban fighters back to Pakistan. Khan's statement came out at a time when a man named Iqbal Khan, an accused ex-TTP member, emerged on the

scene as one of Imran Khan's security team member at IK's Zaman Park residence.

Later during a press conference in Khwaza Khela, Swat, Iqbal denied being a TTP member, saying he was only part of Tehreek-e-Nafaz Shariat Muhammadi (TNSM) that strived for implementation of Shariat in Malakand; and that now he was only a worker of PTI. Adversaries of Tehreek-e-Insaf, especially the coalition government in the centre, had accused Imran Khan of amassing militants for his personal protection.

Mohammad Khorasani, the spokesperson for Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, said that his colleagues were already in Pakistan and got vast areas to live and move. He said that Imran Khan's claim to have brought back TTP men to Pakistan was completely baseless. "Of course, it is possible that the families affected by the military operation who had fled to Afghanistan, might have returned."

To the question about Afghan Taliban putting pressure on TTP on the demand of Pakistan, Khorasani said that it is an

internal matter of the two countries, "but we are continuing our war on the Pakistani soil; so on behalf of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan nothing has happened to us."

Secondly, he said, that those who intimidate common Pakistani citizens, have nothing to do with our movement. "We have repeatedly released contact numbers of the people of our 'complaint commission' and if ever a complaint has been received, we have resolved it in time."

In response to a question about the Afghan Taliban giving a clear message to stop attacks on mosques and madrassas, he said that mosques and madrassas are among sacred places of Muslims. Our policy in this regard is very clear which we have repeatedly expressed; that mosques, schools and public places are not included in our targets.

To a query about Afghan fighters joining TTP in its Pakistan attacks, Khorasani said that our Mujahideen have a large number and they do not need to use people from other countries.

Asked whether the TTP has taken action against any of its members or commanders who have committed acts against common citizens, Khorasani said that the organization has its own system of punishing such people. "Our complaints commission identifies such people and then the system of the commission punishes them." He confirmed that action has been taken against many people after receiving complaints, but he refrained from giving details of those punished.

According to Khorasani, there are two types of people against whom action has been taken: first are those who are related to the Taliban movement and second who show false relationship with us. "We take action against our men, and warn those who make fake affiliation with TTP."

On the other hand, there have been reports in some top Pakistani media that differences have surfaced within TTP due to heavy loss of life in robust military operations by the Pakistani security forces. And that the Taliban of Malakand, along with the former tribal district of Momand and Bajaur, have also joined hands to part ways with the central organization.

According to Rasul Dawar, a tribal journal-



ist, Imran Khan's statement of bringing back the TTP men to Pakistan is unfounded. TTP will not return at Khan's request or at the request of any other government; they have their own strategy, organization and decisions. Yes some one might have had gone to Pakistan during talks, as it had happened in Swat, but this chapter is closed now, Dawar said.

Dawar confirmed the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has urged the TTP to stop attacks in Pakistan; that Pakistan and the world as well are complaining to Afghan Taliban. But not all Afghan Taliban want an end to TTP operations. Even common Afghan Taliban fighters and Jihadis stand with TTP. A few months back, some fighters of the Afghan Taliban themselves, entered South and North Waziristan, up to the Tal region to join TTP fight against state of Pakistan and are continuously coming, Rasool Dawar continued. "All of them operate in the districts of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan and they also have their eyes on big targets in Punjab and other areas. Now it is to be seen which place they will target."

When asked whether all the Taliban agreed not to attack mosques and madrasas in Pakistan, Dawar said there is no remorse within the TTP regarding attack on the Peshawar Police Lines; they are happy that they attacked what they called the 'enemy house' and that no common man was targeted. However, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as a government is unhappy with this type of action as it has to face reaction from Islamabad and the world.

According to information about presence of Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan, after the start of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan in June 2014, most of the local and foreign Taliban fled to Afghanistan, mostly to eastern Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan, while a large number of local Taliban abandoned operations and went underground, known as the Punjabi Taliban. The head of Ismatullah Muawiyah group had announced to go for preaching.

After withdrawal of US and allied forces from Afghanistan and Taliban's capture of Kabul, and under the Doha Agreement, Afghan Taliban brokered negotiations between Pakistan and the TTP. It is believed that during this time taking advantage of the ceasefire, a large number of TTP

men moved to Pakistan. Parallel to that TTP operatives released from prisons and those who remained quiet locally, became active again and started their operations in Pakistan.

Since the end of ceasefire with the state of Pakistan, there have been reports of attacks and serious losses to each other from both sided. Though TTP has carried out multiple attacks in Pakistan but have not claimed responsibility, ie the capture of Bannu CTD, targeting of police in Lakki Marwat and surrounding areas, attack on Peshawar Police Lines and killing of an ISI brigadier during a clash in Waziristan.



Residents of the tribal districts have confirmed that TTP was no longer able to hold sway over all its breakaway groups and to bring them back in its folds. Splinter groups have started harassing the common people in the society in their day-to-day affairs. Worst hit in this case are the people helping the government institutions who have been explicitly targeted and executed.

Regarding economic situation after the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the rapidity of TTP operations, some tribal leaders told this correspondent that the worst hit were local folks whose businesses have come to a halt. New business outlets and factories could not be opened and only some government people were earning money. If the government, they say, does not help them economically the situation may go from bad to worse.

Tehreek-e-Taliban is the largest militant organization in Pakistan which is fighting

against the state of Pakistan. After 9/11, when the United States and its allies attacked Afghanistan and when Pervez Musharraf's government in Pakistan became an ally of the United States in this war, the TTP came into existence against the policies of the Pakistani government.

The origin of this organization is attributed to Naik Muhammad Wazir in Abdullah Mehsud Orwana Tehsil of South Waziristan. He incited people against the US forces fighting Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan. And then TTP started its operations in Pakistan.

Baitullah Mehsud is considered to be the

first official Emir of the TTP, followed by his close associate Hakeemullah Mehsud, and then by Mullah Fazlullah, the Emir of the Taliban in Swat. Now Mufti Nooruli Mehsud is the Emir of this terrorist outfit.

TTP founder Nek Muhammad Wazir was killed in a drone strike in Wana on June 18, 2004. His successor Abdullah Mehsud blew himself up with a hand greened in Zob on July 24, 2007, after being besieged by Pakistani security forces.

Abdullah Mehsud was succeeded by Baitullah Mehsud who was killed in a drone attack in South Waziristan on August 5, 2009. Following Baitullah Mehsud's death, Hakeemullah Mehsud took the TTP command, but was killed in a drone attack in Miranshah on November first, 2013. Post Hakeemullah's death the TTP shifted to Mullah Fazlullah, who hailed from Swat and was not a tribal Mehsud. Fazlullah was also killed in drone strike in Kunar province in Afghanistan on June 2018.



Trump and other cowards surrender to courts



By M A Niazi

You might like Donald Trump or not, you might think his politics is your cup of tea or not, and you might consider him a racist and a misogynist, but you would never have thought he was a coward. Well, that's what he showed he was, by tamely surrendering before the court and entering a plea.

On the other hand, we have Imran Khan, who refused to surrender to the minions of the oppressive apparatus that overthrew him, neither at Zaman Park nor at the Judicial Complex Islamabad. Surely Trump could have got some of the luminaries who attacked the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, to appear for his court appearance. He could have made it clear that wearing a Viking's headdress was not compulsory, and thus made sure that more people would flock to the courtroom where he was to appear.

There are two other luminaries who are running away from the law. Rahul Gandhi has actually been convicted of libel and turfed out of India's Parliament. He is a perfect example of why Imran shies away from receiving the indictment even more than a horse stung under its tail by a wasp. Kangaroo courts can convict, and then there you are, banned from Parliament. Of course, Rahul has shown that he too is a coward. Surely there are enough Congress supporters to prevent the court from a pronouncing sentence.

I don't know what Imran is worried about. He would always get bail. He has been, which has got the Parliament so upset that it passed a resolution against the Supreme Court. Even though the Constitution itself forbids Parliament from discussing the courts. The Speaker was not down upon the offending members like a ton of bricks, expunging the offending remarks.

Another coward is Benjamin Netanyahu, who is running breathlessly ahead of a criminal Trump surrenders to court; proves he's a coward, Netanyahu is actually being tried and has not succeeded yet in reforming the judiciary. True, Imran doesn't have to deal with judges who are, like the Israeli Supreme Court, under the influence of the left-wing, the press, and the opposition, which is out to get him. Netanyahu is accused of accepting bribes and gifts to help donors in their business endeavors. Maybe he's trying to find solace from his legal troubles by ordering the forces into Al-Aqsa mosque. That has virtually become an annual event for Ramadan: raiding Al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan. It's an annual fixture, like the bombing of the Gaza Strip.

Actually, the Supreme Court should go according to the law, rather than its convenience. The learned judges should keep in mind the fate of all those who favored Imran, like Jahangir Tareen, Aleem Khan, and Gen (retd) Qamar Javed Bajwa. But despite what the parties might say, I'm sure

the Court is deciding according to the law and Constitution. I don't want to be subject to contempt proceedings, so I apologize in advance for anything and everything, including being born.

It continues to be a mild Ramzan, though I notice that finally, the weather seems to be heating up. Of course, heat is not something to mention in Bangladesh, where there was a massive fire in Banga Bazaar, Dhaka's main cloth market. What added urgency was that shopkeepers had just stocked up for the Eidul Fitr sales. A Lot of Bangladeshis are going to have to make do with last summer's clothes. Imagine if that were to happen over here. Imagine Azam Cloth Market going up in flames in Lahore. Or the Bara Market in Rawalpindi. Or the Zainab and Empress Markets in Karachi.

What the fire was not, was a celebration of Bangladesh's win in the one-off Test against Ireland. You know, Bangladesh is the team everyone plays to create a record. To take one example, Australian pacer Jason Gillespie scored a double hundred against Bangladesh. His next-best score was 54 not out against New Zealand. However, Bangladesh seems to have found its Bangladesh in Ireland. I don't think any records were broken by the Bangladeshis, but for once, they won. That gives a feeling that beats being cheerful in defeat.

Horrors of Ukraine war-Pakistan starts facing threat of economic collapse

Govt officials predict energy shortage as lasting reality, rationing as only option; Pakistan depended on foreign energy supplies, wheat from Ukraine, Russia

By Umer Farooq

In Pakistan's political history and culture, war is an overly romanticized concept. We always had very tense political and military relations with our eastern neighbor, India—a relation which was seated in deep social, cultural and religious antagonism. Our generations have grown up romanticizing our animosity with much larger India. In this process of romanticization of hatred and war, we just conveniently forgot what the war actually cost in material terms.

The literature and historical fiction we produced, still depicted war from medieval conflicts where hand to hand combat was the norm. While we spent fortunes on building state of the art modern military in our country, our technical understanding of war didn't go beyond conflicts in the medieval period. The popular fiction about war we produced, reduced the technical comprehension of the phenomenon as hand-to-hand combat between two masses of people armed with spears, swords and daggers.

Our encounters with war as a concrete reality in 1965 (September war), 1971 (East Pakistan war) and 1999 (Kargil conflict) didn't do much to change our perception of war. In all the above mentioned three wars, both the Pakistani and Indian militaries desisted from attacking each other's urban centers. So, we didn't experience horrors of war in any meaningful war. In our west, our neighbor, Afghanistan experienced 40 years of continuous horrors of war. But as far as we are concerned, Afghanistan remained a good news story and a source of continuous flow of American aid into our coffers. War remained a source of revenue and not horror, thus reinforcing the convenience of perceiving war as a glamorous outcome of political conflicts.

Perhaps the Ukraine war—a conflict in far off land of Eastern Europe—is first



war in our historical experience when we as a society were exposed to the horrors of war. The Ukraine war has introduced Pakistan to a new security threat. This new threat dwarfs the military threats that have captured our focus over the past 70 years. The threat from a militarily superior enemy is simpler as far as its implications are concerned, and its countermeasures are within our grasp.

The threat of a shortage of essential food items or the threat of a stoppage of oil supplies to our industry or to our domestic consumer is something we have not yet started to contemplate. The Ukraine war has brought home the reality that these shortages could become a permanent reality in our national life, or the value of our import bill could touch such heights that we would not be able to pay for our basic requirements.

Already, government officials dealing with energy supplies to our industry and our domestic consumers, have started to predict that a shortage of energy could become a permanent reality of our national life, and in such a situation, rationing would be the only option available to us. Thousands of miles away, two countries are fighting a modern war and yet Pakistan, a

country which has nothing to do with the conflict at the military, political or strategic level, has started to come face to face with the threat of economic collapse and consequent social and political chaos as a result of a situation, which is the outcome of military conflict in the far-off region of Eastern Europe.

Like many countries in Europe and Middle East, Pakistan was dependent on foreign energy supplies and wheat from Ukraine and Russia. Pakistan was the largest importer of Ukrainian wheat after Indonesia and Egypt. The oil price hike in the international market hit Pakistan hard and its import bill went up by 85% in the fiscal year 2021-2022. At the conclusion of 2022, its trade deficit crossed \$50 billion—a fact that forced the Sharif government to impose a ban on import of 800 non-essential luxury items in May of the same year. The financially and politically stronger Western European nations have secured for themselves limited supplies of LNG and ironically weak countries like Pakistan have been shut out from the spot market.

President Putin is facing the possibility of Western European nations boycotting energy supplies from Russia. In such a situation when Pakistani

officials approach Russia for opening a supply line to Pakistan, the Russian government takes solace from such requests primarily because it makes Russia feel that they are still not isolated.

Ukraine is thousands of miles away from Pakistan and South Asia, and yet military conflict in that part of the world has created a crisis-like situation for our country. As a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine more than a year ago, both the United States and United Kingdom stopped all oil and gas purchases from Russia, many Western countries followed suit. Media reports say as a result panic buying started, “and as a result, oil prices soared to a 14-year high of USD 140 a barrel on 7 March 2022 in the international market.” Pakistan’s economy was among the worst hit. Oil price increases in the international market have eaten away our foreign exchange reserves, which touched precariously low limits last month. We don’t produce anything and we don’t export much.

Our foreign exchange reserves are dependent on external loans from international financial institutions or bailout packages from our political and ideological friends. In such a situation, subsidies on oil appear just beyond our capacity. In layman’s language, subsidies will amount to a scheme where we take loans from our friends and international financial institutions and squander them away in the form of subsidies to our industry—which are still not internationally competitive and grants to our middle classes and rich whose extravagance is exemplary.

Here, all of this translates into a political problem for our major political parties, who are in a contest for power to control Islamabad. The Pakistani masses don’t seem to care much about details and mechanics of IMF programs, and why it is interested in forcing the government of Pakistan to withdraw subsidies for oil and electricity. They seem to be in a mood to punish everyone who is ostensibly responsible for withdrawing the subsidies.

These middle classes are the most vocal and most visible presence in the political discourse going on in the country. These middle classes are also addicted to state

sponsored subsidies for their middle-class lifestyle. An oil price rise in the international market and subsequent rise of oil prices in the domestic market, followed by withdrawal of subsidies by the Sharif government have generated massive amounts of discontent. If public opinion polls are to be believed, this discontent is forcing the middle classes in central Punjab to part ways with their ‘beloved leader,’ Nawaz Sharif. Remember that the Punjabi middle classes in central Punjab have always voted for Nawaz Sharif in the period from 1993 to 2013.

For the first time, Gallup’s polling, which is generally considered pro-Nawaz Sharif, in its latest survey, showed Nawaz Sharif among the figures who are on the receiving end of negative sentiment among urban population of the country. Ironically, Imran Khan is riding the wave of this popular discontent. Little do the masses in our country realize that this was the man they would have been cursing if the no confidence motion against him would not have been successful.

If Imran Khan had still been in power, he would have been forced to take the same decision Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif has taken under IMF pressure. If not, he would have taken the country on the path to default and bankruptcy. Cashing in on the discontent that the withdrawal of subsidies has generated, is itself a kind of moral bankruptcy. Your political capital is based on a reality that is fast changing and could be equated with the reality of shifting sands. How long will it last? It will last as long as you are out of power and as long as another international crisis hits world politics.

This should come to us as a wake-up call. If war in a far off land could cause us so much trouble, what would happen if we experienced a war close to our border close to our coast. Everything is calm on the surface right now. And US President Joe Biden’s comment that he won’t allow competition with China to turn into a conflict is heartening for people overly worried about the commencement of the new Cold War.

But the fact that both the United States and China are preparing for this imaginary situation turning into reality couldn’t be overstated. American military experts see

the South China Sea and Korean Peninsula as possible arenas of military conflicts between the two superpowers. And any possible military conflict in the South China Sea would make the US and Western naval forces block Chinese oil and raw material supplies passing through the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

This will be when Gwadar and the Chinese presence at this southern port of Pakistan would provide China with the required base that Chinese military literature so readily mentions in its latest writings. Politically the world is far away from such a point or situation of conflict. The Chinese are on very friendly terms with the South Koreans—the American military ally on the Korean Peninsula—and both see eye to eye on many issues relating to North Korea’s sabre-rattling. This minimises any possible point of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. The South China Sea is no less calm—even minor incidents of Chinese ships trying to check American ships in the sea didn’t raise alarm bells.

But American military experts have been discussing a scenario where conflict in the South China Sea will lead to clashes in Arabian Sea. Pakistan and its coast will become overly important in such a strategic conflict between the rising power and the existing superpower. Any conflict in the Persian Gulf or its surrounding could make life in Pakistan miserable, even if Pakistan is not directly involved in the conflict.

Two other scenarios of war in our surrounding could be equally dreadful for our economy and our political stability. One, the war between Iran and Saudi Arabia—this conflict is now less likely after the Chinese arranged a peace accord between the two middle eastern rivals. But the sectarian map of the Middle East is just like a powder keg and could lead to prolonged conflict in our neighborhood. This conflict could be devastating for the Pakistani for more than one reason. Economy, it will be severely affected and sectarian conflict in our society will sharpen. A conflict between China and India in our region could be another devastating war for Pakistan. We should work out a plan to conduct anti-war diplomacy incessantly.

Severe rain, hailstorms damage 5 to 6 percent of wheat, harvest worth Rs 23b

Windstorms, wet periods torment several districts, cause 50% of standing crops to lodge; entire output loss stands at 236,000 tonnes; of 16.014m acres of land planted in wheat, 0.8m acres partially damaged, 30,000 acres completely destroyed



By Anum Akram

Last year many other crops were ruined by disastrous floods and the extreme heat wave impacted wheat production. Now this year, wheat crops were destroyed by heavy rains and hailstorms. Only one month before it was supposed to be harvested, the wheat crop was completely destroyed by strong winds and rain. According to estimates by the Punjab agriculture authorities, recent severe rains and hailstorms in numerous districts of the state damaged 5 to 6 percent of wheat harvest worth Rs 23 billion.

In March and first week of April, windstorms and wet periods tormented a number of districts, causing about 50% of the standing crops to lodge (fall to the ground). Yet, farmers peg the lodging ratio as high as 70%. When crop stems are permanently displaced from their vertical position due to stem buckling and/or root displacement brought on by strong winds during rain and hailstorms, this is referred to as lodging. The farmer's anxiety escalated in numerous regions of Punjab.

Punjab Crop Reporting Service

Director Dr Abdul Qayyum says the worst-hit districts were Sheikhupura and Nankana Sahib, where crop losses were estimated to be around 40 percent. These districts were followed by Muzaffargarh (14.8 percent), Sahiwal (14 percent), Toba Tek Singh (12.9 percent), Okara (12.5 percent), Bhakkar (10.5 percent), and Pakpattan (10.2 percent), while losses in five other districts were less than 10 percent and in other places insignificant.

In partially damaged areas, his office estimates a 20 percent productivity loss, resulting in a decrease in average output from 1240 kg per acre under normal circumstances to 960 kg per acre. He projects that the entire output loss, based on the data now available, will be 236,000 tonnes, or Rs 23bn (at a rate of Rs3,900 per 40kg).

Unseasonal rains have resulted in signifi-

cant losses in some locations while causing less harm in others. Already, Pakistan is losing food. The agricultural industry requires special consideration. According to data from the agriculture department, up until March 30, 2023, of the 16.014 million acres of land planted in wheat, 0.8 million acres were partially damaged and 30,000 acres were completely destroyed by bad weather. On April 2, more hailstorms hit certain south Punjab areas.

A catastrophic wheat crisis that would have far-reaching effects on Pakistan's economy and society, could arise sooner rather than later if heavy rain spells persist in April, the key month for harvesting, threshing and storage of wheat. The poor and vulnerable sectors of society may be disproportionately impacted by price increases, inflation and food insecurity as a result of the wheat scarcity. Additionally, it might result in lower exports, which would worsen Pakistan's balance of payments status and competitiveness on the world market.

Farmers also claimed that the damage were more than the officials estimated damage. President Kissan Ittehad Khalid Mahmood Khokhar says that he has noticed flattened wheat crops throughout several districts as he travels from Multan to Islamabad. According to Kissan Board Pakistan President Chaudhry Shaukat Chadhar, as compared to previous year, the crop was performing reasonably well and that the favorable weather helped the grain to mature.

Yet, the recent rains and windstorms have wrecked wide stretches of fields, crushed the dreams of the farming community to reap a big harvest, and helped deliver nitrogen from the atmosphere to the plants, making up for the brief application of phosphorus fertilisers. In the view of Shaukat Chaddar, the lodging of the crop would rob the plants to supply food to grain, causing them to shrink thus leading to a low yield.

Dr Javed Ahmad, the director of the Wheat Research Institute, Faisalabad, said if plants survive even at 30pc angle to ground, there is no much to worry about but if the plants are totally flattened to the wet ground, then they begin to decompose. He also said that the worrying time for the crop was during the last week of January and first week of February when the average temperature this season was 5.9 degrees Celsius more than the average temperature during the same period last year.



Climate change is a global issue and Pakistan is one of those affected countries. While wheat was impacted by early rains last year and by late rainfall this year, the weather has been changing. Along with the damage to the maize, mustard and bream crops. Researchers and policymakers are becoming increasingly concerned about how much economic disruption or perhaps civil war climate change may cause globally.

In Pakistan, extreme hydrological and meteorological events like drought, extreme temperatures, floods and storms have increased many times in frequency and severity over the past three decades,

going from 16 between 1926 and 1990 to 105 between 1991 and 2022, according to data maintained by the International Disasters Database (EM-DAT). More than the global average temperature increase of 1.1 degrees Celsius, Pakistan's yearly average temperature increased by 1.68 degrees Celsius between 1901 and 2021.

Crops were harmed by climate change. Balochistan, Sindh, and Punjab experienced above-average rainfall while Kashmir, Gilgit and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa experienced below-average rainfall. This year, March saw 42 percent more rain than usual. Several crops, especially corn and wheat, were impacted by this change in the weather pattern. The weather may change in the next days, causing the temperature to rise. In April, the temperature reached 40 degrees, the extreme heat impacting the cotton crop.

The difficulty of Pakistan's changing weather patterns must be handled seriously in order to avoid issues for Pakistan's agricultural, general economy, and populace. Now, the changing weather pattern is having an impact on all crops, including wheat, cotton and others. This climate change will have long term impacts on the economy of the country and also give rise to more flour crisis. Pakistan's government and populace must pay attention to the state of the country's agriculture if it is to be saved.



IMF OR NO IMF?

By Dr. Ashfaq H. Khan

Having been trapped in IMF's big arms for over 34 years, Pakistan will never be able to break free from the debt trap in the next 50 years too if its leadership does not change its mindset.

First of all, we need to understand that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is not just a financial institution but it is also a part of global politics. The major shareholders of the IMF have a lot of interest in world affairs and employ the institution as the most effective foreign policy tool, a harsh reality known to the whole world. Therefore, the IMF lends money only to those countries who tend to meet its strict requirements whether they like it or not.

I have dealt with the IMF for about 11 years. Believe it or not, we had to fulfil and implement all its 32 conditions just within a period of ten months in 2000 under the Standby Arrangement and that was the most difficult programme for Pakistan to execute. Although the current program was initiated in July 1, 2019 the then government was implementing the prior actions some nine to ten months earlier. As an economist, I don't think the IMF has ever given such a tough programme to any country.

I had the opportunity to study at better school and from better teachers than many of the IMF staff members handling Pakistan, therefore I can understand how their policies are hurting Pakistan's economy. IMF has four policy instruments in its pocket. These policies remained invariant with respect to time and geography. These four policies are as under.

First, tighten the monitoring policy, second devalue the currency, these two are counterproductive, and third is to take austerity measures. Then it comes to increase the prices of utilities, e.g. electricity and gas. The price increase is not reform. Reform exercise leads to the improvement process but the current slew of measures are not reforms by any means. Honestly speaking, any government can straightaway increase the prices, then what is the need of the IMF for this?



Greece, for instance, is a member of the European Union. However, if it were a non-European country like Pakistan, its fate would not have been different either. The IMF has so much capacity to destabilise any system as it has already done with Pakistan's. The former finance minister believes that we have no other option left but to reschedule our outstanding loans. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also recites the same mantra without realising the fact that Pakistan's Paris Club has already been rescheduled. These facts are well-documented in Pakistan Economic Survey. Paris Club debts amounting \$12.5 billion were gone through the stock rescheduling in October 2001. Nobody in the government informed the Prime Minister that there is no scope for Paris Club debt rescheduling. The Paris Club debt of \$12.5 billion had two components: one was Official Development Assistance (ODA), amounting \$8.8 billion with an average interest rate of 1.3 percent while the remaining \$3.7 billion was non-ODA with an average interest rate of 4.3 percent, which was a bit expensive. Under the Paris Club agreement, the ODA amounting \$8.8 billion was rescheduled for 38 years including a grace period of 15 years, while the non-ODA debt amounting \$3.7 billion was rescheduled for 23 years including a grace period of 5 years. Knowing the fact that the rescheduling of the Paris Club debt has been done till 2039, then what kind of rescheduling are the people in the

government talking about? Also, the debt given in terms of Non-official Development Assistance has been rescheduled for 23 years and will now be payable in 2024. The bulk of our debt is such that they cannot be rescheduled. For example, our bilateral debt amounts to \$26.2 billion or only 21 percent of the total external debt and liabilities as on end - December 2022. Multilateral debt alongwith IMF debt, commercial banks loans and sovereign bonds totaled \$71.1 billion or 56.3 percent of the total debt and liabilities – much more than the bilateral debt. These multilateral debt (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank, the IMF and the AIIB) cannot be rescheduled as they are known as "Preferred Creditors". As far as foreign commercial banks and sovereign bond debts are concerned, their rescheduling is very complex and very risky. Pakistan should not ever attempt to do so without the active support of the G-7/G-20 countries as well as the United Nations.

What can Pakistan or other low-income developing countries do to handle their debts? Presided by Japan, the G7 Summit is going to be held in Hiroshima from May 19 to May 22. The debt relief for low-income developing countries will be a part of the Summit's agenda this year. The Asian Development Bank Institute, headquartered in Tokyo, is basically a think-tank of the Asian Development Bank. Being a

member of its advisory council, I am the first Pakistani to be a member of the Institute since its inception. Japan asked them to make a policy brief for the G7 Countries. Since I am in its advisory council and they know my professional credentials as the founder as well as the Director General of the Debt Office of Pakistan, they invited me to join their drafting committee and I accepted the invitation wholeheartedly.

I have suggested ways that could be effectively employed to provide a much-needed debt relief to low-income developing countries including Pakistan. As things currently stand, the debt rescheduling can never take place unless approved by the G7 Countries and the United Nations. Other than the Paris Club liabilities, there are many more non- Paris Club bilateral loans as well, and the countries to which we owe money should defer loan repayment for up to 10 years to give us a chance to breathe. Secondly, I have pointed out that the G7 Countries should be concerned about education, health, SDGs, environment and climate change development in developing countries by consolidating their loans into health and education loans swap.

Given that the multilateral loans cannot be rescheduled, I have advised them to suspend such loans for around 8 to 10 years. Now with regard to the bondholders, the International Institute of Finance (IIF), which is based in Washington, deals in the bond market.

They have to be brought on board and only the G7 platform can make it happen. Suppose Pakistan has a bond which has

been sold for five years, then as per its payment schedule the principal amount of the bond along with interest will also be paid in 5 years. I have suggested extending the payment for a period of 10 years. I have named it Comprehensive Debt Relief Initiative, and they liked it very much and made these recommendations a part of their agenda.

Taking a loan is not a bad thing. If taking a loan was a bad thing, there would not have been a banking system in the world. However, when we borrow, we put a burden on our shoulders and that's why we have to strengthen our shoulders too. Unfortunately, we don't pay attention to it and just keep adding the burden. To resolve the crisis, reforms are inevitable. People usually question me about my strong reservations against going to the IMF. I advised the former prime minister against it but they approached the IMF, maybe out of compulsion. From July 2018 to December 2022, today it has been four and a half years and the people in the finance ministry are still applying IMF conditions on us. As of now I have not added January and February because their numbers have not been revealed yet.

Due to the depreciation of the rupee, we have added twelve and a half trillion in rupees or \$75 billion without borrowing a single dollar. In addition to that, we have increased the interest rate up to 20 per cent, which was 6 per cent when we approached the IMF. So, we imposed about 4,277 billion rupees on our country in the form of interest payment which becomes 26 billion in dollars.

The currency devaluation and interest rate hikes have added \$101 billion to Pakistan in the form of interest charges and public debt. Be that as it may, we have to learn the art of living on our own and have to fix our own house in order.

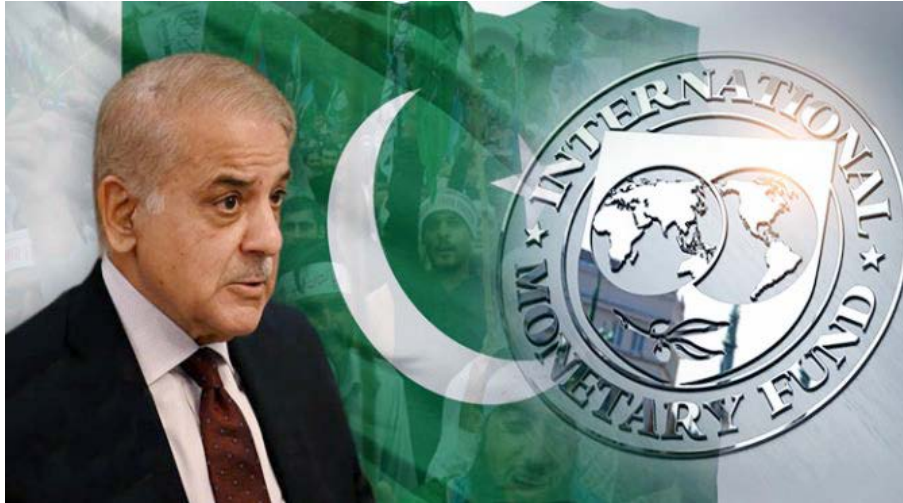
Better to say, we have accepted the defeat mentally. Our elite class is also a mentally bankrupt lot and cannot imagine that we can live without the IMF. Deng Xiaoping of China gave an interview to the American media. The American journalist asked him how he changed the mindset of the Chinese people that in 1980 China was a poor country, but it has now become a major economic power of the world. So, he was asked what his biggest challenge was. Deng Xiaoping said that his biggest challenge was to change the mindset of the Chinese leadership and the people that they can move forward. Pakistan can also emulate China's example to move forward and survive without the IMF. In my opinion, an ecosystem has developed in Islamabad and Lahore, as when the new government come to the power these ecosystems become very active telling the people of Pakistan that we cannot survive without the IMF's assistance. There are about 20 countries like us that are caught in the debt web of the IMF. On the other hand, there are many countries in the world which are faring well without the IMF's support. Having been trapped in IMF's big arms for over 34 years, Pakistan will not come out from the cobweb in the next 50 years as well if its leadership is not able to change its mindset. Pakistan has a lot of potential and it can stand on its feet without anyone's help. For this, we first need to trust ourselves.



Is the government deliberately delaying the IMF bailout program?

The International Monetary Fund further reduced the real GDP growth rate of Pakistan to 0.5 percent from the earlier estimate of 2 percent growth for the current fiscal year

By Javed Mahmood



Economic uncertainty has deepened further as a mystery shrouds the resumption of the IMF program for Pakistan. This is also evident from the constantly growing value of the US dollar in the country. Though Pakistan has completed all the upfront requirements of the IMF, except the last one, this did not give any support to the falling rupee value. Last week, Saudi Arabia gave its guarantee to the IMF in writing about its lending to Pakistan in the ongoing fiscal year. Now the United Arab Emirates and China are the two friendly countries that will follow the path of Saudi Arabia. How is it possible that China and UAE are providing financial assistance to Pakistan, but they are not willing to give a guarantee to the IMF in writing?

However, there is an impression that the PML-N-led coalition government was deliberately delaying the resumption of the IMF loans with the aim to avoid early elections demand. It is believed that when the government realized that the risk of holding early elections is over, it will sign the staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund. Interestingly, the former finance minister Miftah Ismail said that his successor Ishaq Dar must have obtained the IMF loans in October last year

to avoid colossal losses to the rupee value and the national economy as well. However, this never happened perhaps due to the wait-and-see policy of the coalition government amid growing pressure to hold early elections. Delay in the resumption of the IMF bailout package and the ongoing economic crisis can be used as an excuse to delay the general elections in the country.

Nonetheless, how much the economy and the consumers have suffered in the past year due to the wait-and-see policy of the government, can be imaged well from the example of the rupee slaughtering. Importantly, from April 2022 to April 11, 2023, the Pakistani rupee has lost a massive value against the US dollar and other major currencies. The coalition government inherited the dollar-rupee exchange rate at Rs 175 in April 2022. These days, this exchange rate is hovering around 288 rupees in the inter-bank and beyond 292 in open market trading. This could have been averted had the coalition government secured the next IMF tranche in Oct last year.

IMF trims Pakistan's GDP growth to 0.5% in FY23

The International Monetary Fund further reduced the real GDP growth rate of Pakistan

to 0.5 percent from the earlier estimate of 2 percent growth for the current fiscal year. The IMF has reported this development in its latest World Economic Outlook (WEO) report released on April 11. The IMF downgraded the economic growth of Pakistan just a few days after the World Bank and Asian Development Bank curtailed the growth rate to 0.4% and 0.6%, respectively. However, for the next fiscal year, the IMF has anticipated a 3.5 percent GDP growth in Pakistan. According to the IMF, inflation in Pakistan would be around 27.1% in FY23 and it can decline to 21.9% in FY24.

Meanwhile, the current account deficit has been projected at 2.3% and 2.4% in FY23 and FY24, respectively. Pakistan's economy has been struggling to recover, with record high inflation in decades. Many mega manufacturing companies have either reduced their operations or suspended production citing the economic troubles.

Dar skips IMF-World Bank meetings

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar has skipped the annual meetings of the IMF and the World Bank in Washington. Dar told the media that the Prime Minister has asked him to stay in Islamabad because of the deepening political crisis. Ishaq Dar was supposed to participate in the IMF-WB meetings that started on April 10 in Washington. Now the Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan Jamil Ahmed and two federal secretaries are representing Pakistan in the meetings. In other words, Dar's absence from the IMF-WB would further linger on the signing of the staff-level agreement.

Depreciation of the Rupee & Inflation

A simple way to evaluate the intensity of rupee depreciation on consumers is an increase in the cost of imports. For example, in February this year, the imports

of Pakistan remained at around \$4 billion. Keeping in view the rupee devaluation, the importers paid Rs 440 billion extra money in February alone. And if we take into account the total impact of rupee devaluation on imports/consumers _ it will be much higher than Rs 3000 billion in a year's time. Also, the increase in prices of essential consumer items _ petrol, electricity, gas, cooking oil/ghee, sugar, flour, fruits, vegetables, and many more are in addition to the impact of rupee depreciation. The 46 percent short inflation, on a week-on-week basis and 34 percent on a year-on-year basis demonstrate the miseries of the masses and bad governance.



Falling reserves and the CAD

The foreign exchange reserves of Pakistan have fallen to below \$10 billion _ from \$16 billion in April-2022 when the regime change plan materialized. A good development is that the current account deficit of Pakistan has dropped to the bottom _ of \$74 million only in the month of Feb 2023. In the month of February 2023, CAD narrowed by 86% YoY and 67.8% MoM, to \$74 million compared to \$519mn in February 2022 and \$230mn in January 2023. Pakistan posted a current account deficit (CAD) of \$3.8 billion in 8MFY23, improving by 68.03% YoY as compared to the same period last year.

The State Bank of Pakistan reported this in its latest balance of payment position. The trade deficit in goods narrowed by around 19.4% YoY and 1.34% MoM to \$1.73bn in February 2023 as the import of goods declined by 22% YoY while on monthly basis, the import bill remained relatively flat at \$3.93bn. The trade balance in services also remained negative, down by 90% YoY to clock in at \$39mn. To note, in January 2023, the trade balance in services witnessed a surplus of \$18mn. The worker's remittances fell by 9.47% YoY while on monthly basis, the remittances increased by 4.96% MoM to \$1.988bn. On a cumulative basis during 8MFY23, remittances by overseas Pakistanis moved down by

12.17% YoY to \$20.18bn from \$17.99bn recorded in 8MFY22.

Remittances again surge to \$2.5 billion in March

The State Bank of Pakistan today reported the inflows of workers' remittances at US\$2.5 billion during Mar 2023. In terms of growth, during Mar 2023, remittances increased by 27.4 percent on m/m when compared with the inflows in February this year. In February 2023, the remittances fell to \$1.98 billion. Remittances, nonetheless, decreased by 10.7 percent on a y/y basis, when measured with March 2022 data when Pakistan received \$2.8 billion.

In the first nine months of the ongoing fiscal year, Pakistan has received US\$ 20.5 billion in remittances, 10.8 percent less than the corresponding period of the previous fiscal year. The inflow of workers' remittances was 27% higher compared to the prior month of February; however, it was 11% lower compared to March 2022, according to the latest data of the State Bank of Pakistan. The increase in remittances for the month of March is a positive sign for the economy. The inflows mainly came from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, with Saudi Arabia being the largest contributor at \$563.6 million.

According to the SBP, the remittances inflows during March 23 were mainly sourced from Saudi Arabia (\$563.9 million), the United Arab Emirates (\$406.7 million), the United Kingdom (\$422 million), and the United States of America (\$316 million). The notable upsurge in remittances can primarily be attributed to the month of Ramadan and the upcoming Eid festivities, during which the Pakistani diaspora has demonstrated their affection for their loved ones by sending money back home. This trend has been a significant contributor to the overall increase in remittance inflows to Pakistan.

Significance of Foreign Financing for Pakistan

Pakistan's economy faces multiple challenges including slowing growth, high inflation, and large financing needs. This all is coming on the back of devastating floods. Discussions are ongoing between IMF staff and the Pakistani authorities toward a Staff Level Agreement on policies to complete the ninth review of Pakistan's extended Fund Facility. The IMF said this in a recent statement issued in Washington. The authorities are committed to implementing the necessary reforms. They've started to implement decisive actions to stabilize the economy and restore confidence. The IMF officials believe that without securing the required foreign financing, the bailout package of the IMF will not be adequate to save Pakistan from a default-like situation.

The inflation crisis

A complex mix of economic, political and climate-induced catastrophes has compounded the inflation crisis in Pakistan

By Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri

The WB, ADB & ministry of finance' recently released reports only confirm what millions in Pakistan continue to grapple with; a multi-decade high inflation and sinking economic growth (stagflation). One can argue that life could have been slightly easy had the governments not adopted an inconsistent approach to meet their commitments with the IMF. After taking politically motivated popular decisions, we did reverse them leading to a sharp depreciation of rupee and high energy tariffs. However, it was too much, too late: too late for an instant revival of IMF programme and too much for people. The World Bank has reminded that in the absence of public transfers that cover income losses or mitigate the impact of higher prices, an additional 3.9 million people will be pushed into poverty as this fiscal year. However, it is a chicken-egg situation; providing such public transfers is difficult until the IMF programme is restored. It is quite clear that the IMF, whose modern mission is to backstop countries in distress, is failing to provide any relief to the people in distress in those countries. No doubt, it is the governments of these countries that have let their people down through their bad policies, making them endure a double whammy of inflation and economic contraction. However, it can be argued that the IMF, too, has let these people down. While justifiably penalising reckless governments, it should spare the millions below the poverty line in those countries who have to make both ends meet amidst such stagflation.

In their recent reports, the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Ministry of Finance (MoF) have confirmed the alarming state of inflation in Pakistan. As millions in the country continue to grapple with inflation's daily impact, it has been revealed that the inflation rate has reached a multidecade high. There are various methods to measure inflation, including core inflation (that looks at the change in prices of goods and services excluding energy and food), headline

inflation (that measures change in the prices of everything, including energy and food), cost-push inflation and demand-pull inflation. Regardless of the approach taken, the conclusion remains consistent: inflation in Pakistan is surging and appears to be persistent in the foreseeable future.



The possibility of a drastic economic growth slowdown in the current fiscal year has compounded the inflation crisis in Pakistan. The ADB's latest Asian Development Outlook projects Pakistan's GDP growth to decline sharply to 0.6 percent in the current fiscal year (which ends on June 30), down from 6 percent in the previous fiscal year. The World Bank's forecast for Pakistan's economic growth is even more dismal, with a projected growth rate of just 0.4 percent in the current fiscal year. This combination of high inflation and low growth, known as stagflation, is adding to the hardships faced by the people of Pakistan.

Let us look at how entrenched inflation is.

Average inflation is projected to more than double from 12.2 percent in the last fiscal year to 29.5 percent this fiscal year. Headline consumer inflation jumped to 25.4 percent from July 2022 to February 2023. After easing slightly, both urban and rural energy prices recorded a sudden hike in

February, reflecting the recent fuel and electricity tariff adjustments, reaching 37.1 and 37.5 percent, respectively. Inflation for transportation (55.2 percent) and food (32.2 percent) more than tripled in the first half of the current fiscal year compared to the same period last fiscal year. Transportation

cost increased due to an increase in energy prices which are expected to remain high after OPEC Plus countries' recent decision to cut crude production by 1 million barrels per day. Likewise, food prices are expected to remain high as the agricultural output in Pakistan is projected to contract for the first time in more than 20 years due to the impact of floods. In addition, the higher global food prices, together with the weaker exchange rate have added to domestic food and fuel inflationary pressures.

Now consider the three major expenditures of the majority of households in Pakistan; food, energy and transportation. Most Pakistanis have to pay a far higher share of their inelastic income for a near-inelastic consumption of food, fuel and transport. It has particularly severe impacts on poorer households that lack savings to preserve consumption amid higher prices. This is happening when economic growth (income and employment opportunities) in every sector is shrinking.

The World Bank has projected a contraction of agricultural output due to climatic factors, and the high cost of inputs. Likewise, the industrial output is expected to shrink with supply chain disruptions (lately, due to import restrictions), weakened confidence, higher borrowing and energy costs, and depreciation of the rupee. Lower industrial activities are expected to spill over to the wholesale and transportation services sectors, which account for more than 50 percent of services output. Resultantly, the economic growth is sinking, and with it, income and employment opportunities too.

The free wheat-flour distribution has taken ten precious lives so far. The government should have made direct cash transfers making the best use of the national socio-economic registry of the Benazir Income Support Programme.

One can argue that life could have been slightly easy had the governments not adopted an inconsistent approach to meet their commitments with the IMF. Unplanned and unbudgeted new subsidies and an informal exchange rate cap, saw the depletion of foreign exchange reserves, increased the budget deficit and put the IMF programme in limbo. To revive the IMF programme, the government did try possible course corrections, reduced subsidy spending, further increased energy tariffs and allowed the exchange rate to float, leading to a sharp depreciation and alignment between the interbank and open rates. It was too much, too late: too late for an instant revival of the IMF programme and too much for the consumers, producers and investors. Resultantly, consumers lost their purchasing power and investors and producers lost their confidence.

Mindful of people's miseries, the government started supply of free wheat flour to households earning up to Rs 60,000 per month in the Punjab and the KP. It also announced cross-subsidisation of petrol for two/ three wheelers, and small car owners. Awaiting IMF's staff level agreement, the timing may not have been right. The government may have to withdraw this to proceed further with the IMF. The free wheat-flour distribution has taken ten precious lives so far. The government

should have made direct cash transfers making the best use of the national socio-economic registry of the Benazir Income Support Programme.

At the macro level, Pakistan's economic resuscitation depends on the revival of the IMF programme. However, such revival is hindered by politically-driven slippages in fiscal policy in the context of upcoming elections, constraints on foreign exchange liquidity and uncertainties around external funding inflows, rising levels of public debt and political instability. The World Bank has warned that if the current IMF programme is not completed, and additional financing flows are not secured, a macroeconomic crisis could materialise.

Such a "macroeconomic crisis" will have huge negative implications for the poor households who are already negatively impacted by the effects of last year's flooding and shrinking employment opportunities, including in the agriculture and the textile industry.



The World Bank has reminded that in the absence of public transfers that cover income losses or mitigate the impact of higher prices, poverty measured at the lower middle-income poverty line (\$3.65/day Rs 2,017 per capita) is projected to increase to 37.2 percent in the current fiscal year, pushing an additional 3.9 million people into poverty as compared to last fiscal year. These additional millions are on top of some 8 million who were assessed to be pushed below the poverty line after last year's floods.

However, it is a chicken-egg situation; providing such public transfers is difficult until the IMF programme is restored. It is quite clear that the IMF, whose modern mission is to backstop countries in distress, is failing to provide any relief to the people in distress in those countries. IMF's focus on reforms to provide much-needed macroeconomic sustainability is well acknowledged. However, such macroeconomic sustainability should not be at the cost of people living below the poverty line. According to a recent report, at least seven of the 21 debt-troubled countries have been waiting more than a year for an IMF deal since defaulting. Pakistan is one among those twenty-one.

No doubt, it is the governments of these countries that have let their people down through their bad policies, making them endure a double whammy of inflation and economic contraction. However, it can be argued that the IMF, too, has let these people down. While justifiably penalising

reckless governments, it should spare the millions below the poverty line in those countries who have to make both ends meet amidst such stagflation. If the world is still serious about achieving sustainable development goals, "leaving no one behind," then it should think of a new social contract between the developing and undeveloped countries and the multilateral institutes such as the IMF.

Courtesy The News

Privatize SOEs, please

By Sardar Ahmad Nawaz Sukhera

Nobody can deny the economic and financial turmoil Pakistan currently finds itself in. Yet, the country's decision-makers are shy of taking hard decisions to stabilize the troubled economy.

One policy option available to policymakers is to take an in-principle decision to get the government out of any business for which a competitive market exists. This would save the government over Rs1,000 billion annually which our State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are losing, besides ushering in economic efficiencies. One only has to look at the privatized banks or the growth of the telecom sector after privatization of PTC as evidence for this. However, this policy option isn't being exercised.

History is witness to the failure of each successive government in Pakistan to appoint the right experts on the boards of SOEs. Political compulsions, cronyism and low board fee structures are the main reasons for not attracting the best professionals. The board has to give strategic vision to the company, appoint CEOs and top management, approve plans for running the company, including restructuring if required, and hold the management accountable for its performance.

If the quality of the board is compromised, the performance of the company will reflect that too. Yet, hardly ever has a quality board been appointed by the government. Obviously, exceptions are there, but such examples are, unfortunately, an exception to the rule.

Another unfortunate fact is that seldom have the best in industry been appointed as CEOs of SOEs. Even if the government goes past political compulsions and cronyism, the best professionals are not attracted by the salary structure offered to them. MP-1 scale enables a monthly salary of about RsRs800,000 and SPPS about Rs1.5 million. Compare these emoluments to those in the competitor industries and one understands why top professionals are not spearheading the desired turnaround of these loss-making enterprises, which in most cases are much bigger than their counterpart private-sector companies.



And one is not even mentioning another put-off – the subsequent pressures from the political and bureaucratic bosses for favours or subsequent fears of NAB reprisals. Another alternative to hiring from the private sector often employed is placing officers from the civil or military bureaucracy as CEOs. This too has hardly ever succeeded as they are either not experts in that field or are simply cronies of the political bosses placed there on vested interest basis.

SOEs are usually constrained to adhere to the Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) rules for all procurements of goods and services. This mostly results in the lowest quality of procurement, at a much-delayed time. How can any company compete with competitors that can procure the best quality of goods and services from the open market at the most competitive cost, and at the earliest?

A much simpler solution is to remove this constraint for the SOEs and focus only on their annual financial performance. What is procured, and how it is done, should be left to the procurement policy developed by the boards, and the boards in turn should be answerable to the government for the financial performance of the companies.

For the above-mentioned reasons, it is difficult to take seriously any promises from any political party, however well-intentioned, to restructure the SOEs and turn them around.

The role of parliament is very crucial. Whenever a serious attempt is made at privatizing a loss-making SOE, parliamentary committees quickly take up the issue on the pretext of saving national assets from being sold for pennies and to protect the employees. The record of parliament would bear out how the privatization of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM) was filibustered at the last minute in 2015.

Perhaps, parliament needs to first decide whether SOEs are national assets or employment bureaus to hire cronies, and whether the government can continue financing SOE losses perpetually. And if it comes to the conclusion that these are national assets and that the government is not able to finance their losses and inefficiencies anymore, only then can a doable programme be devised to deal with them.

Not surprisingly, one only needs to look at the types of employees in any SOE to realize that most employees are unskilled, non-technical and non-essential, for example, peons, gardeners, drivers, clerks, etc, usually hired on the basis of political affiliation.

The Privatisation Commission Ordinance, 2000 affords several options to structure privatisation transactions. Sec 25 of the ordinance provides for: (a) sale of assets and business; (b) sale of shares through public auction or tender; (c) public offering

of shares through a stock exchange; (d) management or employee buyouts by management or employees of a state owned enterprise; and (e) lease, management or concession contracts, etc.

If the government or parliament feels that employees are more important than the entity, then perhaps the Privatisation Commission can be directed to prepare a transaction structure to enable an employees' buyout as a first option, and if that fails to materialize only then to go for the other modes. But continuing with massive losses and not doing anything about it is certainly not a policy option anymore.

Privatizing for the sake of generating money is not the best reason for selling off these state assets. However, increasing profitability of the already profitable ones and stopping the bleeding of those in loss is certainly a better reason. Either way, economic efficiency gains would accrue to the economy, if privatization were done in a fair and transparent manner.

A country steeped in debt and in a financial quagmire can't afford to delay immediate corrective actions, like privatizing the big loss-makers like PIA, PSM and the five DISCOs. However, the rot will stem only if the government decides that it won't be in the business of doing business in every sector for which a competitive market exists.

One wonders if there would be any difference in the lives of an ordinary citizen if the government doesn't run PTV, Radio Pakistan, PIA, PSM, make cement or even cornflakes. Wouldn't the insurance sector be better off with the privatization of the State Life Insurance Corporation, and many more SOEs like it? Wouldn't the depth of the stock market improve if it were done? Shouldn't the money saved from the SOE losses be used for debt retirement and poverty alleviation? Will the political parties commit to where they stand on the subject through their election agendas?

In my previous piece in the pages ('Privatize SOEs, please', April 1), I had endeavoured to establish the need to aggressively and urgently privatize SOEs to save over a trillion rupees annually, besides unlocking their potential, to help an economy on the ventilator. This article suggests ways to do that – and do it better.

Let me begin by sharing my experience of how international investors view Pakistan. On multiple roadshows at major global financial centers, one was always asked the following question right at the beginning: 'why should we invest in Pakistan and not in any of the more stable economies of the region?' This was followed by a discussion on the IMF's latest review, since we were in an IMF programme then. It was only afterwards that they would discuss the transaction we were offering.



Now that the economy is really struggling, and we are not in an IMF programme, it will be an even bigger challenge to attract long-term, quality investors, perhaps even domestic ones. Assuming the government would increasingly find it difficult to sustain the losses of the SOEs, there is perhaps no other realistic option but to think of privatization. But to do that, we need to examine the privatization ecosystem and fix the weaknesses quickly.

Lets first look at the legal framework provided by the Privatisation Commission (PC) Ordinance, 2000 as the biggest impediment starts from not following the dictat of this law. The Privatisation Commission is the sole federal government body designated to privatize government assets. It is empowered to plan, manage, implement and control the privatization programme. Any transaction by virtue of which any property, right, interest, concession or management thereof is transferred to any person from the federal government or any enterprise owned or controlled, wholly or partially, directly or indirectly, by the

federal government, is called 'privatization', and is to be carried out by the Privatisation Commission. However, one regularly notices various ministries undertaking such activities. In some cases, an SOE is on the privatization programme approved by the cabinet and yet this goes on. And this is despite the fact that the requisite expertise may not be available within the ministries. This is not just legally inappropriate but also usually results in suboptimal outcomes.

The Privatisation Commission is often blamed, unfairly, for a long and tedious process. However, it is often forgotten that a privatization transaction is often a culmination of several prior actions. It may include advising the federal government to ensure monopolies are not created in the process of privatization; preparing the sectoral ecosystem for a deregulated market, through changes in the policy and regulatory environment, including licensing and tariff rules; proposing and setting up sector regulators, like NEPRA, OGRA, and the PTA, and advising the federal government in the selection and appointment of the head and members of regulatory authorities; corporate restructuring of the SOEs, which in many cases has to be done through legislation; approve and decide and perform all acts to implement pre-privatization restructuring; and advise the federal government on how to improve public-sector units till their privatization. To enable the Privatisation Commission to play an effective role, the Privatisation Commission Ordinance lays down that the commission's directions to any enterprise or

Continued on page 30




Ramzan Dramas 2023

*Thrilling Blend of Romance,
Comedy, and Action*

Ramzan holds a special place in the hearts of Pakistanis, and it is incomplete without the inclusion of light-hearted comedy dramas. These dramas have become an integral part of the Ramzan culture in Pakistan, with people eagerly anticipating their favorite shows every year. The comedy dramas provide a much-needed respite from the seriousness of the holy month, allowing people to unwind and relax after a day of fasting. In fact, the popularity of these dramas has reached such heights that they have become a staple of Ramzan entertainment in Pakistan. People from all walks of life thoroughly enjoy these shows, making them an essential aspect of the Ramzan experience in the country.

As Pakistani Ramazan dramas continue to gain popularity for their lighthearted humor, portrayal of domestic relationships, and heartwarming romance, it is no surprise that this year's offerings are highly anticipated.

1. **Chand Tara (HUM TV):** Starring Ayeza Khan and Danish Taimoor
 2. **Heer da Hero (Geo Entertainment):** Starring Imran Ashraf and Amar Khan
 3. **Fairy Tale (Hum TV):** Starring Hamza Sohail and Sehar Khan
 4. **Teray Ane Se (Geo Entertainment):** Starring Muneeb Butt and Komal Meer
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management of an SOE on the list of privatization are legally binding on the SOEs.

It is easy to fathom that the commission is mandated to take all operational decisions on matters pertaining to privatization. However, it is seldom allowed to exercise these powers as the ministries usually endeavor to stall privatization efforts. SOEs are treated as ministerial fiefdoms to extract personal benefits, therefore, it is difficult to let go of them. To change this environment, I suggest initiating the following three steps in earnest.

First, to enable the Privatisation Commission to effectively play its legally mandated role, it is essential to build the commission's capacity to perform the role envisioned for it. It is unfortunate that in its present shape it is not able to do so. Though the commission has one of the better boards in the public sector, it is shackled by posting of regular government officers in it, usually with hardly any sectoral expertise or corporate skills. More importantly, there are very few senior consultants hired to perform the expected role. They are being used only as transaction managers (or mere coordinators). Moreover, the Privatisation Commission has to be led by a minister and secretary who have at least a strong background of finance or economics, preferably with strong corporate experience. It is imperative that the minister is a strong and senior person, who can cut through the anti-privatization bias and develop strong political will to support the privatization programme.

Second, the commission is currently only coordinating the hiring of Financial Advisory Consultants, who do the due diligence on an SOE and recommend options of the privatization transaction structure, and market the sale, while the concerned ministries keep taking all the operational decisions. They retain the files and carry the stick and the carrot for SOE management. This results in the SOEs complying with the ministries' directions rather than of the Privatisation Commission. It is recommended that once an SOE is placed on the privatization programme, all related files and personnel in the ministry should be placed at the disposal of the commission. Only then will it be able to play any meaningful role.

Third, while one is all for transparency and accountability, investors as well as the commission's staff and board are all very wary of subsequent reprisals in the garb of accountability by the investigation agencies and the parliamentary committees. Investors and commission staff have to be ensured the comfort provided by the Privatisation Commission Ordinance, which clearly states that: "The federal government or any of its agencies authorized by it, may...., scrutinize or investigate any privatisation transaction within one year of the completion of the privatisation. (2) After the expiry of this period, the Federal Government or any of its agencies shall not be empowered to carry out any such scrutiny or investigation."



However, instead of employing provisions of the ordinance for dealing with the alarming issues of SOEs, the government first set up a public-private authority, by enacting the Public Private Partnership Authority (Amendment) Act, 2021 "to create an enabling environment for public private partnership by streamlining the project approval process and providing an effective framework for policy guidelines". It then recently enacted an Inter-Governmental Transactions Act, 2022 "to provide for a mechanism to carry out a commercial transaction under an inter-governmental framework agreement to promote, attract and encourage foreign states to have

economic and business relations with Pakistan".

The PPP Act is an understandable initiative as it basically aims at facilitating green-field projects, while the Privatisation Commission basically deals with brown-field projects. It is less understandable why the need for the Inter-Governmental Transactions Act was felt. It has been alleged to have been done to facilitate quick sales of assets like the RLNG plants. It is yet to be seen how this Act will enable individual ministries to conduct these sales with foreign governments, when in actual effect it's commercial entities of foreign governments, which actually are the potential buyers. Additionally, one wonders why enabling provisions weren't added into the Privatisation Commission Ordinance to conduct such transactions, given the comprehensive legal framework provided by it.

However, one is surprised to see the PPP Act being used to outsource the airports. Even if one ignores the institutional resistance of the air force for this, as it also uses these for defence purposes, it would be worth seeing how the Aviation Division manages these transactions. But one is certainly surprised that the Privatisation Commission, which had strong institutional memory on this issue, has been kept aside.

Privatization is a time-bound strategy, and should not be an option in perpetuity. Many SOEs have been on the privatization list for three decades, like the DISCOs. This indecisiveness has seen most of our SOEs go from profitable enterprises to an in-distress state, where they can't continue operations without heavy subsidies. One can think of PIA, PSM and Roosevelt Hotels as examples. How long can the government continue with this? Will potential investors, or even quality financial advisers continue to be interested?

To end, in the words of Dr Atif Mian, "Pakistan's 'nervous system' is fundamentally broken – that combination of administrative and political structures that guarantee a certain level of confidence in the economy. The country must begin to build a functioning nervous system... somehow"!

Courtesy The News

The political economy of the regime change

By Naqi Akbar

One year has passed since the vote of no confidence against the PTI government led by Imran Khan succeeded in dislodging the government and ushering in the government of the sitting opposition as on April 9, 2022, PPP and PML N cobbled together in PDM.

Pakistan has been traditionally used to such regime changes since the revival of democracy after the exit of the late General Zia-ul-Haque in 1988. The political parties were apparently restored to contest the elections and form the government. However, the return to parliamentary democracy was not without the compromises forced down the throat by the establishment, which was in fact the successor of the late dictator. The winning party in the 1988 elections the PPP was not handed over the government, which was once enjoyed by the PPP founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, rather it was the proverbial 'moth-eaten democratic order' to borrow a phrase from the late founder of the nation Quaid Azam, for what he termed as Pakistan handed down by the British in 1947.

That type of politics; rather a ruthless brand of politics has been characterized by the fact that the opposition political party is ever ready to cooperate with the establishment of the deep state to upstage the treasury benches as and when the signal for the same is communicated.

The tug-of-war between the PPP and PML N during the period from 1988 to 1999 has been characterized by that politics. The opposition party organized long marches as and when there were signals from the establishment. Once the opposition was willing to cooperate with the establishment; all the tags of the traitor, corrupt, etc. were erased to make the newly launched government completely 'fresh from the farm'.

That musical chair ended only when the 1999 coup sopped the process for the next 9 years. With the gradual return of democracy in 2008, the first two five year tenures of PPP (2008-2013) and PML N (2013-2018) were characterized by unusual accommodation between the warring factions of 1988 to 1999.



However, the establishment had other plans in the store. The first salvo of street power via establishment was fired by the Tahir ul Qadri PAT, which organized a long march to bring in a revolution. Its ability to organize a political circus emboldened the PTI to repeat the performance in August 2014, teaming up with Qadri PAT and MWM. What happened during the 126 days of Khan's long march and Dharna in Islamabad actually opened the doors for gradual but regular interventions by the establishment to have its own players in the corridors of power.

The 2018 elections actually ushered in what has been termed the 'one page' or 'hybrid' model of governance, where the face is 'civilian' but the voiceover is 'military'. The PTI government was able to do many things which could have been termed a no-go area for any political government, not having the support of the deep state.

The roots of conflict of the current crisis over the so-called regime change can be safely traced back to the 2018 formation of the government in the center and other tiers of governance. The hybrid model was launched in the hope that apart from the political usefulness of the model, it will be able to solve the problems of a failing economy, bad governance, and a restive population. The makers of the model forgot

that the governance issues are deeply embedded in the human factor, the leadership factor, and the cascading impact of the policies adopted.

What happened after 2018 was the air of fear of accountability with the revival of the economy given a back burner importance? In Pakistan in 2019, it was not safe to invest, as anyone earning more was liable to be called to account for his prosperity. It was in fact an EBDO in civilian clothing, aimed to scare away any opposition to the hybrid system. Many journalists were forced to go offline. Disappearances were a norm. Any person could be framed under laws primarily written for national security and now implemented on civilians.

Given the fact that dictatorships live on economic prosperity, like Zia and remittances etc. the period under Imran Khan had little to offer to the average Pakistani. The stage was set for the creators to make an exit from the scene and allow the other political groups to have their go for correcting the system.

At that point of time; as the establishment failed to account for the human factor for the success of their 2018 experiment. This time, when undoing the experiment, it failed to appreciate that the dislodging will even be more devastating.



On the count that it was not the regime changes of 1988 to 1999 period when the political parties quietly reconciled to live for another day. This time the fifth-generation comrades were not in the mood to lay down arms. Rather what was to be witnessed by the public was a complete counter-revolution. The Vote of no confidence, which otherwise could have been hailed as a democratic way to dislodge a government was now treated as a coup, which had to be fought tooth and nail by the PTI cadre.

Given the fact that the economic downward slide has been initiated during the PTI years, it was only a political miscalculation on part of the PDM to take into its hand, an exploding projectile, called a stagflation

economy. Coupled with taking the government when the economic going was all-time bad; faced with the PTI counter strikes, which evaporated any hopes for economic revival; it is precisely a catch-22 situation, not for the PTI or PDM alone.

As things stand, the regime change of April 9, 2022, which was perceived as a routine affair by the powers to be; has turned out to be a nightmare, not just for the Pakistanis, but rather for the establishment itself. It has in fact turned out to be the beginning of the trouble. The late scholar of Muslim Institute UK, an expatriate Pakistani Dr. Kalim Siddiqui, in his periodical Crescent International of 1981 issue once prophesized that the establishment would be

defeated on the streets of Pakistan; this seems to hold true.

Despite the fact, that the revolutionary vanguard, trained by that very establishment is imperfect to the core, having no planning or impressive record anywhere in the past, the only way out is in fact the undoing of the 'established order'.

Conclusively, Pakistan is at the crossroads of its existence. Apparently, a frivolous political fight seems raging; yet the timing of that fight is so precarious that for the country, its populace, and the responsible people; it is a great debate moment; where does the country go from here? Leaving it to the esteemed readers.



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Land Reforms

By Afzal Ali Shagri

After its struggle for independence from the Dogra rulers and its accession to Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan faced a difficult situation when it was accorded the status of a disputed territory of the state of Kashmir under the Karachi Agreement. Due to this situation, Gilgit-Baltistan became an uncertain region under a law-bureaucratic structure. Due to its geographical location and being a remote region, this region may have been unimportant in the beginning, but when the neighboring country When China started the construction of the Karakoram Highway, the strategic importance of these areas came before the world.

Historically, Gilgit-Baltistan has been a region of Tibetan and Central Asian civilizations, the effects of these great civilizations and religious teachings have been prominent in Gilgit-Baltistan, after the partition, the inhabitants of Shimla and Mussoorie also came from educated GB settlers. Jarde who migrated to Pakistan after 1947. Along with the increase in the knowledge consciousness of the local population, economic prosperity also started, for which the measures taken by Aga Khan are also worth mentioning. With time, the educated local population realized that after gaining independence from the Dogars by force, all the lands and natural resources are now their property and the past agreements between the Dogars and the British rulers regarding the ownership of the region are no longer there. have been disabled.

Land ownership rights is a very sensitive issue but there has been no serious attempt to address it in the past. It should be remembered that the laws of the Dogars are highly traditional and discriminatory, with a tendency to compromise the rights of the weaker sections.

The common land within the dimensions of Gilgit-Baltistan was vaguely called the Khalsa Sarkar. In 2017, when a small area of land declared by the Khalsa government was allotted for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, the people were not compensated and this situation led to a lack of peace.



For the first time, the Government of Pakistan realized that the problem of land ownership and use could not be solved through the existing system. The Muslim League (N) government formed a Land Reform Commission, but no clear reforms came out. All credit goes to the present Chief Minister who tasked the Chief Secretary to draft a comprehensive law to ensure a transparent mechanism for establishing equitable rights of indigenous peoples over usable land. Secretary Gilgit-Baltistan formed a team of young, committed, and qualified officers posted in GB to work on various aspects of the existing legal framework for land management. While interacting with a range of stakeholders and assessing constraints, the team also explored local traditions that determine common land use boundaries.

For the first time in the history of the region, a special two-day conference was held to prepare comprehensive recommendations regarding land reforms, in which the commissioners of the three divisions of Gilgit-Baltistan and the deputy commissioners of all the districts participated. Prior to finalization of the instrument, all

concerned officers should review the existing Acts and Rules, historical and critical analysis of the legal and institutional set-up of Gilgit-Baltistan and land settlement using modern technology keeping in mind the public interest. An opportunity was given to make recommendations regarding measures to modernize the record system.

The central team has prepared a draft law to deal with all aspects of land management in record time. The 41 sections of the Bill comprehensively cover all the major concerns of GB residents. Section 2, which deals with definitions, has done away with all vague and ambiguous steps open to exploitation.

Addressing the main challenges as well as the proposed legislation divides land into two broad categories 'Participatory' and 'Neutral'. By defining government land, the bill curbs the problem of common misuse of the term 'Khalsa Sarkar' to deprive indigenous people of their land rights. Likewise forests, riverbanks, lakes, glaciers, mountains, common road networks and common recognized land.

SBP further increases interest rate

Economists grill SBP policy to control inflation by raising interest rate; IMF's raising interest rate policy fails across world

By Azeem Waqas

The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) has further increased interest rate from 20% to 21%, ahead of Staff Level Agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), accepting more conditions to revive \$6.6 billion loan program.

Millennials and less income are bearing the brunt of the SBP's aggressive interest-rate hikes. The federal government has already welcomed several conditions of the IMF, including hike in electricity and gas prices, tax burden of Rs 170 billion, but, despite all the efforts of the government, IMF program has not been restored. Pakistan has also complained to the United States that the attitude of the IMF is very strict.

Economists have criticized the SBP policy to control inflation by raising interest rate and industrialists are of view that it is unviable for them to run businesses at 21 % interest rate in Pakistan.

Former finance secretary Younis Dhaga, who negotiated the current loan program with the IMF, has said that it appears that the current government is blindly accepting all conditions of the IMF. The IMF program cannot bring Pakistan out of economic misery, Argentina and Egypt which took one loan program after another, but they got stuck in debt are such examples. He said that reviving IMF program may be a temporary relief, but Pakistan needs to restructure its debt to fix its economy.

Economic expert Abdul Rahman Najam says that basically this is the condition of the IMF. Inflation in the country has reached 35%, the IMF wants interest rate to be increased to curb the demand in the country so that the imports can decrease.

Younis Dhaga said that the government economic team has technically failed to communicate with the IMF, and the government has failed to realise the



IMF that raising interest rates in countries like Pakistan does not bring down inflation. This policy is failing all over the world, Brazil, Chile, Hungary, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, and South Korea also tried to control inflation by raising interest rates, which failed.

"In Pakistan, inflation is cost push, it has nothing to do with demand, curbing demand will not reduce inflation State Bank should revise its policy", Dhaga said.

Younis Dhaga, the head of advisory board of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce, in a letter written to the State Bank, said the central bank's policy of reducing inflation by increasing the interest rate is useless.

Due to this policy, the country's economy is destroy and the business community is also suffering from serious problems. Increasing the interest rate will further increase the inflation in the country which will be difficult to control with the policy rate. From January 2022 to April 2023, the interest rate increased from 9.75 percent to 17 percent, but during this period inflation increased from 13 percent to 35 percent, raising questions on the State Bank's policy, FPCCI explained in letter.

Former president of Islamabad Chamber of Commerce, Zahid Malik, who works in the oil and gas sector, says that

every industrialist, investor, manufacturer and businessmen takes loan from the bank. Unfortunately, the interest rate is high; it is increasing after every two months and it is expected the interest rate will go up to 24% in the next one or two months. Under these conditions, no more investment can be made in the country, so which business will give 24% profit?

He said that the government should give some breathing space to the business community; all these measures of the government are not temporary but permanent. At least, the government should give hope that when the country's economic conditions will be favorable.

Former chairman Association of Builders and Land Developers, Mohsin Sheikhan says that business industries are being given loans at 22 percent interest, now businessmen and industrialists will withdraw their money from industries and invest in sectors where there is no risk like T-bills etc.

Less wealthy individuals also took a greater hit to their net worth as borrowing costs surged. Wajid Ali, a citizen shopping at the Sitara Market in Islamabad, is worried about the price hike. He said that in the last one month, dry milk for children has become expensive up to Rs 600 per kg and pampers up to Rs 500 per packet. I used to take two or two boxes, now I am taking one by one.

Economic expert Abdul Rahman Najam says the increase in interest rate will fuel inflation and unemployment in the country. Higher interest rate will increase debt burden. The government has to pay local debt of 30 to 35 thousand billion rupees, which will further increase, if the interest rate remains at 19 to 20 percent for one year.

Due to higher interest rates, some industries will be affected, with automobile affected the most. And 30 to 40 percent of people in the country buy vehicles on bank finance, if the interest rate increases, cars and motor-cycles will become more expensive. 75% of the cost of the factories is borrowed from banks.

Economic Coordination Committee has imposed a surcharge of Rs 3.40 paisa per unit to eliminate the revolving credit of electricity and the electricity consumers will pay an additional amount of Rs 335 billion in this regard, this will adversely affect the steel industry.

Experts believe that higher interest rate will bring hot money into Pakistan. Abdul Rahman Najam said that when the bank starts getting good profits, people stop buying dollars. It is expected that foreign hot money will come to Pakistan and foreign exchange reserves will increase.



Also in 2019, the government increased interest rate to 13.25%, which fetched hot money up to three billion dollars. When I came to Pakistan, the economic conditions in foreign countries were not so good. Therefore, it is expected that in the next three to six months, hot money of one to two billion dollars will come into Pakistan.

As interest rates increase, people deposit their money in banks instead of spending it, which leads to demand. Imports fall, which stabilizes the exchange rate. Pakistan has the highest interest rate, according to the latest data, the interest rate is 18% in Iran, 14.5% in Sri Lanka, 8.5% in Nepal, 7% in Maldives, 6% in Bangladesh and 6.5% in India.



FBR to monitor sales production of big beverages, cement companies

By Shahzad Paracha



Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) will start monitoring sales production and stock positions of big Beverages as well as Cement companies including Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola, Lucky Cement.

Document states that FBR has written a letter to the Chief Commissioners Inland Revenue with regard to monitoring of the cement and Beverages sector under section 40B of the sales Tax Act, 1990.

FBR is pleased to post the Inland Revenue officials in the below mentioned Beverages and Cement premises to monitor production sales and stock positions.

The Beverages companies included Pakistan Beverages Limited as well as Mehran Bottlers Pvt Ltd SITE Karachi, Sukkur Beverages Pvt Ltd, Northern Bottling Pvt Ltd Peshawar, Coca Cola Export Corporation Raiwind Road Lahore, Pepsi Cola International Pvt Ltd Hattar Industrial Estate Islamabad, Coca Cola Beverages Pvt Ltd Raiwind road Lahore, Coca Cola Beverages Pvt Ltd Industrial Estate Phase 2 Multan, Coca Cola Beverages Pvt Ltd Khayali bypass Gujranwala, Coca Cola Beverages Pvt Ltd Faisalabad, Coca Cola Beverages Pvt Ltd Rahim Yar Khan, Coca Cola Beverages Pvt Ltd Haripur KPK, Coca Cola Beverages Pvt Ltd SITE Karachi, Lotte Akhtar Beverages Pvt Ltd Lahore, Naubahar bottling company Pvt Ltd Gujranwala, Punjab Beverages company Pvt Ltd Faisalabad, Meezan Beverages company Pvt Ltd Manga Mandi Lahore, Gourmet Foods Sundar and Five Star Foods Faisalabad.

Meanwhile, the cement units included Fecto Cement Limited Sangjani Islamabad, Zeal Pak cement Factory Ltd Kotri Hyderabad, Power cement Ltd Nooriabad, Dewan cement Ltd Bin Qasim Town Karachi, Dewan Hattar Cement Haripur KPK, Attock Cement Pakistan Ltd Hub Balochistan, Thatta Cement Co Ltd, Lucky Cement Ltd Karachi plant super highway, Lucky Cement Ltd Lakki Marwat and Cherat Cement Nowshera.

Sources said that FBR' team has already been monitoring the sales production and stock positions of Tobacco factories and Sugar mills due to which FBR witnessed an increase in revenue.

Large-Scale Manufacturing ("LSM") contributes a significant portion of total federal tax revenue; however, the full real federal

tax potential in LSM segments like tobacco, cement, sugar, cement, Beverages and fertilizer is yet to be realized, sources added.

Recently, FBR after the lapse of one year decided to install the Track and Trace system at the production line of each cement manufacturer despite the resistance of the cement industry.

The Document states that FBR has directed all officials to conduct initial stock taking in supervision of a senior officer and report in this regard will mandatorily be shared with the Board.

In case of beverages concentrate, daily monitoring of consumption of concentrate shall be monitored for bottlers and daily production and dispatch of concentrate for manufacturers and accordingly reported, document added.

The officials/officers are posted for a period of 30 days commencing from date of receipt of order u/s 40B of the sales tax act, 1990 and a comprehensive report on outcome of the monitoring u/s 40B (ibid) may be furnished to the Board on the culmination of this exercise.



Currently, T&T technologies across the globe are used to assist in the process of tax collection. In Pakistan, a leading AJCL Consortium is providing Track and Trace services to FBR.

It is pertinent to note that FBR awarded the project after a bidding process to AJCL Consortium not only to prevent leakage of federal tax revenue but under-reporting of production and sales of tobacco, cement, sugar, Beverages and fertilizer products.

Sources said that FBR with the help of AJCL Consortium held a number of sessions with cement manufacturers for providing technical assistance in installing and operating the system, sources added.

On the other hand, FBR has also formed IR Enforcement Units in different Jurisdictions not only to examine and authenticate Tax Stamp but verification of reports of unauthorized stoppage of production.

Courtesy Pakistantoday

Situationer: Anti-Western global order seeks to exclude US from ME

Analyst says traditional Saudi relationship with the US is now over

News Desk

The China-brokered agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia announced last month generated a huge buzz, with some observers going as far as proclaiming it a victory for international security, international media reported.

For Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the deal is about far more than normalising ties with the Saudi government in Riyadh. Instead, it is about further facilitating, along with China and Russia, the rise of a new anti-Western global order and excluding the United States from a new regional arrangement, the Foreign Policy magazine said in its analysis. Saudi Arabia this week moved closer to joining a China-led Asian security and economic bloc, having been granted the status of a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as it expands its global outreach.

China's growing role in the Middle East of late has alarmed Washington. The Beijing mediated landmark agreement between arch foes Iran and Saudi Arabia can help significantly ease Middle East tensions. Saudi Arabia also significantly strengthened its energy ties with China by announcing on Monday a \$3.6 billion deal to buy 10 percent of China's Rongsheng Petrochemical, which would see it supply 480,000 barrels per day of crude oil to the company, CNN reported. Analysts say that as the US rivalry with China and Russia intensifies in an increasingly polarised world, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern nations are choosing to diversify their global partnerships. But while states like Saudi Arabia may be getting closer to China, Beijing is far from becoming a US rival in the region, they say.

"The traditional monogamous relationship with the US is now over," said Ali Shihabi, a Saudi analyst and writer. "And we have gone into a more open relationship; strong with the US but equally strong with China, India, (the) UK, France and others."

That polarisation is the reason different parties "bring different forms of influence to the table," he told CNN. "The smart thing for the kingdom is to put in place a portfolio of strategic relations that all contribute to its security and prosperity in different ways."

Jonathan Fulton, senior non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council, says that China has a strict non-alliance policy and is unlikely to want to get bogged down in Middle Eastern conflicts. "An ally is typically someone you're aligned with against a third country or a bloc of third countries... and China doesn't want to do that," he told CNN. "They don't want to get caught up in other countries' issues, especially in the Middle East." After the surprise Saudi-Iran agreement was announced this month, the Biden administration appeared to downplay China's role. White House Spokesman John Kirby said internal and external pressure, including effective Saudi deterrence against attacks from Iran or its proxies, ultimately brought Iran to the table. But he welcomed it "regardless of what the impetus was, or who sat down at the table."

Fulton said China's mediation isn't necessarily a change in its Middle East policy. It was a "regional approach to a regional problem," he said, which regional actors saw the US unable to resolve. "Washington has been struggling to adapt to the new Saudi Arabia," said Ayham Kamel, head of Middle East and North Africa at Eurasia Group. "This creates a whole new set of challenges as US allies have begun to create their distinct Iran policy that might not align with Washington's own approach."

"Washington has been struggling to adapt to the new Saudi Arabia," said Ayham Kamel, head of Middle East and North Africa at Eurasia Group. "This creates a whole new set of challenges as US allies have begun to create their distinct Iran policy that might not align with Washington's own approach."

The kingdom has been searching for a different approach toward Iran, "to minimise security threats that would inevitably threaten Saudi Vision 2030," said Anna Jacobs, a senior Gulf analyst at the International Crisis Group. Instead of trying to isolate Iran, Saudi Arabia is now "looking to counter, contain and engage Iran," she said.

"Many experts still assume that whoever is in the White House will guide Saudi policy on Iran," Ms Jacobs said, "but that simply isn't true today." "Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arab states are focusing on their economic, political and security interests and protecting themselves from regional threats," including the potential for escalating tensions between Iran and Israel," she added. The agreement to re-establish relations could still be jeopardized or slowed by a number of thorny issues, analysts say. "This deal is a major step forward, but the hardest work is yet to come," Ms Jacobs said.

For Saudi Arabia, the move is the latest step toward rebalancing its major power relations that have been traditionally dominated by its ties with the United States. "The Kingdom is pursuing a portfolio strategy of developing a number of strategic partners to complement its relations with the West," Ali al-Shihabi, a Saudi political expert who formerly led the Arabia Foundation think tank and now serves on the advisory board of the futuristic NEOM city project, told Newsweek.

"China and the multilateral organisations it has established are an important part of that, not only in strengthening the ties with China but by allowing Saudi to benefit from China's relations with others like Iran." Meanwhile, the US has placed itself on the sidelines.

"Saudi's diversification strategy attempts to fill in the gaps left by the US' loss of interest or will in maintaining the status quo in the region," Shihabi said.

Courtesy The News

A leak of files could be America's worst intelligence breach in a decade

The classified material covers Ukraine's army and CIA reports

Desk Report

On February 26th officials from the SBU, Ukraine's security service, came to a striking conclusion. Their own agents in Belarus had defied orders and attacked a Russian surveillance plane earlier that day. American spies were listening in. They noted the morsel of intelligence in a highly classified slide on the war in Ukraine circulated by America's joint staff on March 1st. Within days that report, and 50 others, had been printed off and uploaded to the internet. It appears to be America's most serious intelligence leak in a decade.

The leaked files, which include military assessments on the war in Ukraine and CIA reports on a range of global issues, came to widespread attention when some appeared on Telegram, a messaging app widely used in Russia. Some had been published on Discord, a chat site popular with video-game enthusiasts, on March 1st and 2nd, according to Bellingcat, an investigative group. Some classified material had appeared as early as January.

After the slides circulated on Telegram, at least one was crudely doctored to inflate Ukrainian casualty figures and understate Russian ones—but others showed no obvious signs of manipulation. Several former American and European intelligence officials told *The Economist* that they thought the reports were probably authentic American documents. The Pentagon all but confirmed this. A spokesman said it was leading a cross-government panel to assess the damage. Senior officials were consulting partners and allies around the world. As the Department of Justice opened an investigation into the source of the leak, the Biden administration was taking "a closer look at how this type of information is distributed and to whom." The timing could not be worse: Ukraine is preparing a counter-offensive that could start within weeks. The leaked trove offers a remarkable window into the state of its armed forces.



Several slides provide an eye-wateringly detailed accounting of Western plans to arm and train Ukraine's army, including the status of each Ukrainian brigade, its inventory of armour and artillery and the precise number of shells and precision-guided rockets Ukraine is firing each day. If accurate, the data could allow Russian military intelligence to identify the specific brigades that have probably been tasked with breaching Russian defences at the outset of the offensive. That, in turn, could allow Russia to carefully monitor those units to assess the location of an offensive. One slide indicates that Ukraine's 10th Corps is likely to command the operation, which will now make its headquarters an obvious Russian target.

Perhaps the most damaging documents lay out the state of Ukrainian air defences. These are in dire shape, after parrying repeated Russian drone and missile strikes since October. The country's Buk missiles were reckoned to be likely to run out on March 31st based on prevailing rates of fire, though it is not clear whether this has actually occurred. Its S-300 missiles will last only until around May 2nd. Together the two types make up 90% of Ukraine's medium-range air defences. The remaining batteries, including Western air-defence

systems, "are unable to match the Russian volume" of fire, says the Pentagon, though on April 4th it announced it would send more interceptor missiles. Ukraine's ability to protect its front lines "will be completely reduced" by May 23rd, it concludes. A table sets out the date at which each type of missile will be exhausted; a map depicts the location of every battery.

However, the leaked documents hardly paint a rosy view of Russia's armed forces. Though it has devastated the eastern city of Bakhmut—the situation there was "catastrophic" by February 28th, according to Ukraine's military-intelligence chief, who is quoted in one report—its combat power is crippled. America's Defence Intelligence Agency reckons that 35,000 to 43,000 Russian troops have died, twice the number of Ukrainian casualties, with over 154,000 wounded, around 40 times the Ukrainian figure (the agency acknowledges that these numbers are ropery). Russia has also lost more than 2,000 tanks and now fields only 419 "in theatre". Another slide says that Russia's "grinding campaign of attrition" in the east is "heading towards a stalemate", and that the result is likely to be "a protracted war beyond 2023".

The documents will have wider political

consequences. One slide suggests there are 97 special-forces personnel from NATO countries in Ukraine, including 50 from Britain, 17 from Latvia, 15 from France and 14 from America. Most are probably training their Ukrainian counterparts; countries often deploy special forces with considerable secrecy. Even so, the Kremlin is likely to use the disclosure to justify its narrative that it is fighting not just Ukraine but the entirety of NATO.

The leak is also a reminder that American spies collect intelligence on their allies—a fact which caused uproar in 2013 when it was revealed that America's National Security Agency (NSA), responsible for signals intelligence, had spied on Angela Merkel, then German chancellor, among other world leaders. The latest trove shows that American agencies are snooping not only on Ukrainian generals and spooks, but also on officials in Hungary, Israel, South Korea and the International Atomic Energy Agency, a UN watchdog. One CIA report claims that the leaders of Mossad, Israel's foreign-intelligence agency, encouraged its officials, and Israeli citizens, to protest against controversial judicial reforms (these were later shelved).

More importantly, the leaks describe not only who America is spying on but also how it is doing it. The description of the SBU's assessment of the Belarus plane attack, for instance, is marked not only as top secret—America's highest level of classification—but also “si-g”. That acronym indicates material derived from particularly sensitive signals intelligence,

such as phone taps or electronic intercepts, according to officials familiar with the notation. But because many of the leaked documents describe specific communications between individuals or groups—including within Russian military and intelligence agencies—they might help the targets realise how America is obtaining the information.

measures, such as changing their methods of communication.

American allies may also hesitate before sharing secrets. A vast number of Americans have access to classified information. Around 1.3m of them, including many contractors, like Mr Snowden, have clearance for top secret files. And after the



The publication of these documents is probably one of the four most significant intelligence leaks in this century, says Thomas Rid of Johns Hopkins University, alongside the theft of files by Edward Snowden, a former NSA contractor, in 2013, and the publication of NSA and CIA hacking tools in 2016 and 2017, respectively. The damage could be severe. The leak confirms that American intelligence agencies have penetrated Russia to a remarkable degree. But Russian spies and generals are now likely to take protective

September 11th attacks, which occurred in part because intelligence was not shared quickly and widely enough between agencies, sensitive information was distributed far more widely. The result was a leakier system. Ukrainian generals were already wary of revealing their secrets for this reason. Now they might clam up at a vital moment. “If this kind of thing happened in the UK, or in Israel, or Germany, or Australia,” says Mr Rid, “the US would have stopped sharing [intelligence] completely.”

Courtesy Economist



China v America v Russia

How to survive a superpower split?



Desk Report

Caught between America, China, and Russia, many countries are determined not to pick sides. As the American-led order in place since 1945 fragments and economic decoupling accelerates, they aim to make discerning deals across divides. This transactional approach is reshaping geopolitics.

One way of capturing the sheer scale and heft of these non-aligned powers is through a Russian lens. Our sister organisation, EIU, has analysed countries based on their economic and military ties to Moscow, their diplomatic stances including votes at the UN and whether they support and implement sanctions. Although 52 countries comprising 15% of the global population—the West and its friends— lambast and punish Russia's actions, and just 12 countries laud Russia, some 127 states are categorised as being firmly in neither camp (see map).

To get a handle on what non-alignment really means The Economist has also looked at a narrower panel of the 25 biggest economies that have sat on the fence on the

Ukraine war, or wish to remain non-aligned in the Sino-American confrontation, or both. The members of this group—call them the transactional 25 (t25)—are hugely varied in terms of wealth and political systems, and include giant India and tiny Qatar. Yet they have some common ground. They are ruthlessly pragmatic and have collectively become more powerful. Today they represent 45% of the world's population and their share of global GDP has risen from 11% in 1992 to 18% in 2023, more than the EU's. Their strategy of remaining neutral on some or all of the key geopolitical divides involves big risks and opportunities. Whether they succeed will influence the world order for decades. And needless to say, both America and China will do their best to tempt them into their fold.

In the 20th century non-alignment meant different things to different countries at different times. At conferences in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 and Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1961, leaders presented a “third world” apart from the West and the Soviet bloc. From the late 1960s these countries

increasingly focused on economic inequality between the “global south” (a less loaded term for the third world) and the industrial north. A formal institution, the Non-Aligned Movement, was joined by nearly every African, Asian and Latin American state. With the end of the cold war it became, in the words of an Indian academic, “a moribund organisation in need of a decent burial”.

Today, non-aligned countries are not defined by their membership of an institution, but rather by their characteristics and behaviour. These middle powers are pragmatic and opportunistic. In a recent book Jorge Heine, a former Chilean diplomat, contends that in the 20th century countries often passively drifted into one or other of the superpowers' orbits. Today there is more “active” evaluation of the best means to achieve particular ends, he says. Some call it “minilateralism” (as opposed to multilateralism)—the use of discrete alliances or groupings to achieve results in dedicated areas, rather than lumping your lot in with one bloc.

Non-aligned countries also usually think Western leaders are hypocrites. Some \$170bn in aid was pledged to Ukraine in the first year of the war—equivalent to about 90% of all the aid spent globally in 2021 by the oecd's Development Assistance Committee, a group of 31 Western donors. To the West, such generosity shows solidarity with a fellow democracy; to others, it shows that rich countries cough up so long as it serves their interests. "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems," declared Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's foreign minister, last year.

Such stances are broadly in line with public opinion. A report by Cambridge University last year found that in liberal democracies 75% hold a negative view of China, and 87% do of Russia. But the picture is almost the reverse among the 6bn people who live elsewhere. A gap is opening up between how the West sees the world and how the rest sees it. In a poll published earlier this year by the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank, a plurality of Indians (48%) and most Turks (51%) said that the future world order will be defined by multipolarity or non-Western dominance. Just 37% of Americans, 31% of people in eu states and 29% of Britons agreed. The West thinks it is watching a sequel of the cold war; the rest of the world sees an entirely new film.

Wheeling and dealing

So who makes up the t25? The diverse group encompasses some of the world's most populous countries. It includes the world's largest democracies, India and Indonesia, alongside Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are all run by autocrats of various flavours. Large wealth disparities exist, too. In Saudi Arabia GDP per person is more than \$27,000, on a par with some European countries, while in Pakistan it still lingers around just \$1,600.

As globalisation has spread, the trade pattern of the t25 has become multipolar. Some 43% of merchandise trade is with the Western bloc, 19% with the China-Russia bloc and 30% with countries in neither of those camps (see chart). Perhaps unsurpris-

ingly given its location, 77% of Mexico's total trade occurs with the West; over 60% of Israel's and Algeria's trade also does. More than a third of Chile's is with China, a higher share than any other t25 country (but 40% of its trade involves the West). More than half of Argentina's trade, and almost half of India's, is with other non-aligned countries.

Arms imports also show a complex mesh of loyalties. India hedges its bets. Between 2018-22 its main supplier was Russia, which provided 45% of its arms, but it got another 29% from Europe and is likely to seek more self-reliance, with help from America. India's rival China, which supplies its arch-enemy, Pakistan, is out of the question. Israel, Morocco, Saudi Arabia,



and South Africa look instead to America for the vast majority of their arms imports.

There is no coherent governing body that represents non-aligned countries and their interests. None is expected to emerge. Instead a variety of disparate organisations, such as the g20, provide platforms of varying effectiveness for the major non-aligned countries. The Brics group of countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—is a forum for middle powers that wants to expand: it is discussing whether to let Iran and Saudi Arabia join. At un climate talks a broader group of more than 130 countries, including China, has negotiated together.

Despite their differences and lack of a formal grouping, the non-aligned countries share a common aim: to make expedient deals in a fluid environment. For the majority of the 21st century most of the world

sought to forge relations with the West, China and Russia (rich countries were busy embracing Beijing and trousering Russian oligarchs' cash). No longer. The West is augmenting alliances, imposing sanctions on Russia and restricting Chinese access to technology.

For many countries this is a grave threat. Sanctions on Russia saw energy and food prices soar globally, prompting a backlash across the non-Western world. More recently Janet Yellen, America's treasury secretary, has encouraged American companies to move their supply chains into friendly states. Investment shifts are under way (see chart). Beijing and Moscow, meanwhile, are drawing closer together. New research by the IMF notes that since

2018 geopolitical alignment, measured by similarity in un voting patterns, has become ever more important in determining the location of foreign direct investment. Under the IMF's scenarios for fractured trade, the impact in emerging markets could be more than twice as bad as in advanced ones.

But many in the non-aligned world are betting nonetheless that they can win from economic decoupling and political fragmentation, by hedging their relations between the big powers and by asserting their own influence independently. To get a sense of how this transactional strategy works, it is worth looking at the approach of some of the big countries caught in the middle. Brazil is a good case study. It opposes what Mauro Vieira, foreign minister, calls "automatic alignments". Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who began his second stint as Brazil's president last year, sees President Joe Biden as an ally on climate

change; at their meeting in Washington, dc, in February they re-established joint environmental institutions abandoned under Lula's predecessor. Brazil is also classed by America as a "major non-NATO ally", a legal status entitling enhanced co-operation with America's armed forces.

Yet Brazil's relations with the West go only so far. Like others in its region, it has declined proposals from America and Germany to give old Russian-made equipment to Ukraine in exchange for new arms from the West. Lula's arrival in Beijing on April 14th will underscore China's economic importance. Trade between Brazil and China was nearly \$153bn in 2022, a 37-fold increase in two decades. Partly this reflects how Brazil took advantage of tit-for-tat us-China tariffs to increase agricultural exports to China at America's expense.

As well as hedging between the superpowers, Brazil is also making forays of its own. Lula will soon visit Africa to revive Brazil's influence there. During his first stint in office, trade with Africa rose from \$6bn in 2003 to \$25.6bn in 2012, and South Africa was welcomed into the brics bloc. Then Jair Bolsonaro, Lula's predecessor, made no visits to Africa. Lula evidently thinks it worthwhile to renew the effort.

India's fear of China has pushed it closer to the West in some respects. In March the prime minister of Japan, which like India, America and Australia, belongs to the "Quad", an Indo-Pacific security forum, visited Delhi in a landmark visit. In the 2021-22 financial year India's trade with America overtook that with China. Yet, despite buying more French hardware, India still purchases weapons and cheap oil from Russia and is unlikely to break its longstanding ties unless Mr. Putin's regime were to use nuclear weapons.

Practical, not partisan

Just like Brazil, India is also asserting itself more abroad. Only China imports and exports more than India does with sub-Saharan Africa. The average annual stock of FDI from India was \$0.8bn in 2004-08 (less than half of Sweden's) but \$31bn a decade later (more than Germany's and Japan's combined). Last month India hosted representatives from 31 African countries

for war games. India promises to use its chair of the g20 this year to be the "voice of the global south".

Turkey also wants to be more influential across the global south. It has security agreements with 30 African states. Its defence exports to the continent rose more than five-fold from 2020 to 2021. Advisers to Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's president, say the "New Turkey" can select its partners. That may explain its ostensible neutrality over the war in Ukraine, which Turkey has used to leverage its close ties to Russia. Turkish exports to Russia reached \$7.6bn in 2022, a 45% increase on the previous year.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has sought to reduce its reliance on its historical ally, America, by tilting towards China, which is now the kingdom's largest trading partner. Consider decisions this month and in October by the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, which Saudi Arabia dominates, to slash oil production. Last month Saudi Arabia signed a Chinese-brokered deal with Iran and joined the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, a Eurasian talking shop. China says it wants to establish a free-trade deal with the Gulf "as soon as possible".

Gulf countries' relations with Africa were once confined to energy, agriculture and the politics of the Horn of Africa. Today Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates hunt for minerals deals; dp World, a Dubai-based ports operator, is emerging as a critical logistics firm on the continent; and Qatar is playing novel diplomatic roles. Last month it was involved in brokering the release of Paul Rusesabagina, a jailed Rwandan dissident (and the inspiration for the film "Hotel Rwanda").

African countries have long looked east and west. For the continent the West has generally been the preferred source of "software": support for schooling, health and, should the African government want it, human rights. China offers "hardware": bridges, roads, ports—and the loans to build them. Between 2007 to 2020 America's main development agency lent less than a tenth of the total of China's two major policy banks (\$1.9bn v \$23bn) for sub-Saharan African infrastructure projects.

In some parts of Africa, the West's promises to ensure security have rarely seemed as hollow. "Americans need somewhere for their troops and agents to sleep. But the security relationship does nothing for development," explains a former adviser to an African president. "That's why we need China." In August the last French troops left Mali after a nine-year deployment; the Wagner Group, comprising Russian mercenaries, now helps prop up the ruling junta.

The non-aligned countries want to avoid taking sides. But the big powers, America and China, want to draw them into their orbit. Beijing sees asserting leadership of the global south as a way of bolstering its resistance to American pressure. It positions itself as a model within a broad family of developing countries. It draws a contrast with the West, which it says prefers smaller clubs (like the g7). "China shows up where and when the West will not," says Yemi Osinbajo, Nigeria's outgoing vice-president.

Eastern friends, Western pals

China is the main trading partner for around 120 countries. It has also become the lender of first and last resort for many. Between 2007 and 2020 it provided more infrastructure financing in sub-Saharan Africa than the next eight lenders combined. It will be pivotal to resolving sovereign-debt crises. Analysis of 73 developing countries by the IMF notes that in 2006 China held just 2% of this group's external debts, with the mostly Western "Paris club" group of creditors accounting for 28%. By 2020 the shares were 18% and 10%. Over the past decade Chinese bailouts have amounted to more than one-fifth of the IMF's total lending, according to a paper last month by Sebastian Horn of the World Bank, and co-authors.

Those in the West have reason to roll their eyes. China's "win-win" rhetoric masks its ruthlessness. "Banking on Beijing" (2022), by Bradley Parks of AidData, a research outfit, and co-authors, shows how China uses its economic tools for political ends. Unlike the World Bank, China often skews its funding towards incumbent leaders' home districts—and is more likely than the West to lend to corrupt and autocratic

countries. AidData also finds that a 10% increase in voting similarity with Beijing at the UN is associated with an increase in the number of Chinese projects in that country. Chinese loans come with unusually strict clauses on confidentiality and collateral. Despite the white elephants, Chinese development projects are associated with boosts to GDP per person, notes Mr Parks.

In the face of China's efforts, America and its allies are trying to recalibrate their message to the non-aligned world. America understands that the legitimacy of the international order it leads stems from the consent of other countries. "Countries don't want to choose, and we don't want them to," Jake Sullivan, Mr Biden's national security adviser, told the Washington Post earlier this year. America is pursuing more active diplomacy in places it has neglected. Kamala Harris, America's vice-president, Ms Yellen and Antony Blinken, its secretary of state, have all visited Africa in 2023. Mr Biden will soon follow.

America has also bolstered security partnerships with influential non-aligned countries. In November Lloyd Austin, its defence secretary, met his Indonesian counterpart for the fourth time; in January American and

Indian officials agreed to deepen co-operation on cutting-edge defence technologies. In total America maintains 88 defence "partnerships" (excluding formal alliances such as its one with NATO), though some are limited in scope.

Though America and the EU have in recent years launched rival schemes to the bri, the perception remains that, if you want infrastructure that can help transform your economy, your first call is to Beijing. After Ms Harris released a soundtrack featuring African artists to accompany her recent visit to the continent, one senior African official noted, dryly, that Chinese visitors bring loans and engineers while Americans bring playlists.

A political paradox

For now the Biden administration is widely seen as embracing a two-tier foreign policy. It will prioritise relations with its core democratic allies in Europe and Asia (which it hopes might one day include India)—and then try to maintain creaking global institutions in order to mediate meet the needs of a broader group of countries, including most non-aligned ones, whether on development, debt relief, security or finance.

That presents three challenges. First, it

requires Western unity to hold. Yet that is not a given. During his visit to China last week, Emmanuel Macron, France's president, said that Europe should not become "followers" of American policy towards Taiwan, nor should it "adapt to the American rhythm".

The second is that China can undermine the effectiveness of global institutions by, for instance, opting for bilateral debt relief rather than fully participating in co-ordinated efforts. Chinese creditors' obstinacy at the IMF is hampering what flexibility the fund can offer to countries struggling with their existing debt load.

The final challenge is the West does not always live up to its promises. Take climate finance, for example. In 2009 rich countries said they would channel \$100bn to poorer ones per year by 2020; the annual total has never been higher than \$85bn.

By drawing on their liberal values and shared history, America and its allies were able to rally behind Ukraine after Russia's invasion. They have shown newfound resolve against authoritarian China, too. The risk is that this coming together deepens the estrangement of the global south from the international order. It would be a tragic result if, in uniting the West, America alienates the rest.



Saudi Arabia and Iran restoring diplomatic ties, visa facilities



TTI Report

Saudi Arabia and Iran are set to restore diplomatic ties. Both countries also agreed to resume flights as well as facilitate the granting of visas to citizens. Saudi Arabia and Iran stated this in a joint statement released after a decisive meeting between their foreign ministers in Beijing, China. The move, which includes the granting of Umrah visas, was announced following a meeting between Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian during an official visit to Beijing.

Along with the resumption of flights and granting of visas, the agreement detailed the start of arrangements to reopen the embassies of the two countries in Riyadh and Tehran as well as consulates in Jeddah and Mashhad. They also agreed to implement security and economic cooperation deals signed more than 20 years ago.

During a luncheon hosted by Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, Prince Faisal met Amirabdollahian and shortly after released a joint statement. The two countries have also agreed to reestablish diplomatic ties by resuming visits by officials and private sector delegations. The

statement stressed the importance of activating the Beijing Agreement to enhance mutual trust and broaden the scope of cooperation in order to achieve security and stability in the region.

Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran held their first formal meeting in Beijing since China brokered a deal to restore friendly relations between the two regional powers. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud and his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amirabdollahian met in Beijing and discussed the bilateral issues a week ago. The FMs of the two countries agreed to reopen their diplomatic missions in their respective countries. It will encourage visits of official and private delegations and facilitate visas for Iranian and Saudi citizens. Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers also discussed the resumption of their flights.

“The technical teams will continue coordination to examine the ways of expanding cooperation including the resumption of flights and bilateral visits of official and private sector delegations and facilitating the granting of visas for the citizens of the two countries,” read a joint statement.

Iran’s Amirabdollahian said the meeting with his Saudi counterpart was “positive”. “The emphasis on stability and sustainable security” were among the issues agreed upon, he wrote on Twitter.

After years of hostility, Saudi Arabia and Iran have revived their ties. China brokered this landmark agreement that demonstrated Beijing’s increasingly influential role in the region. It also reflected the diminishing role of the United States in the region.

Meanwhile, Nasser Kanaani, spokesman for Iran’s Foreign Ministry said that a Saudi delegation has toured Iran to follow up on the matter of reopening diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad. Speaking with reporters, Kanaani noted that a Saudi delegation arrived in Tehran on Saturday and is currently working to reopen their embassy in Tehran and their consulate in Mashhad.

This is done in accordance with a recent agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore diplomatic relations. A group from Iran will also pay a visit to Saudi Arabia in the coming days, he said, to lay the groundwork for the reopening of the

embassy in Riyadh, as well as the general consulate and the mission to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Jeddah.

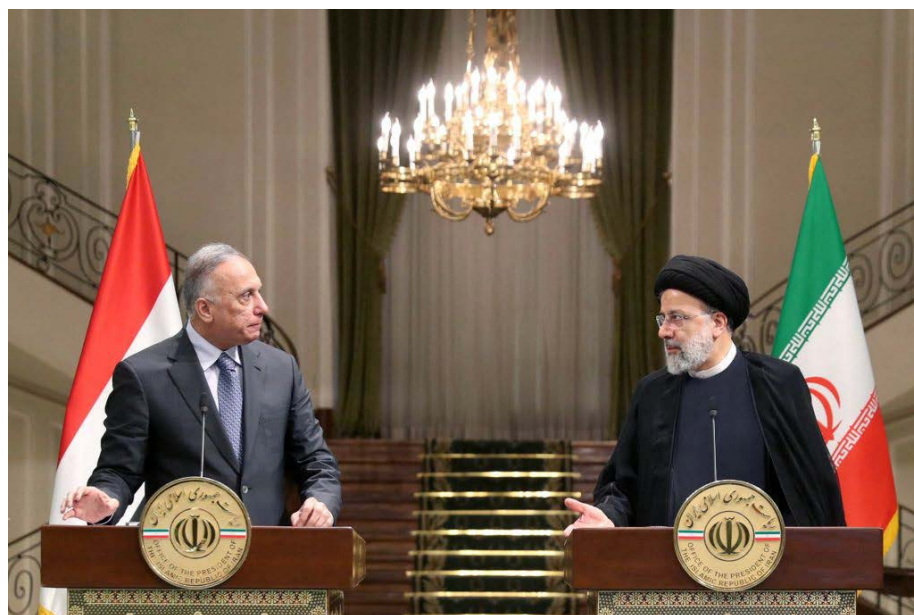
The moves to reopen embassies in Riyadh and Tehran follow a Chinese-brokered agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March and an ensuing meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries in Beijing in early April.

Iran supports political efforts to end the war in Yemen

In response to recent diplomatic efforts to put an end to Saudi Arabia's assault on Yemen, Kanaani stated that Iran is in favor of extending a cease-fire that would allow the siege on the impoverished nation to be lifted and humanitarian help to be delivered to its citizens.

"It is up to the Yemeni people to decide their country's fate and nobody has the authority to decide Yemen's fate in place of Yemenis," he added.

Kanaani went on to highlight that Iran is still active in the process of initiatives proposed by Oman for peace in Yemen and has always played a good role in this respect. The Iranian official expressed optimism that the changing regional conditions would lead to a long-term truce in Yemen for the benefit of the Yemeni people. In order to negotiate a long-term truce, Saudi and Omani envoys met with



representatives of Yemen's Ansarullah movement on Saturday in Sanaa.

With armed and logistical backing from the U.S. and other Western countries, Saudi Arabia and some of its allies began a war on Yemen in March 2015 that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Yemenis. Millions of people have also been displaced by the conflict, which has also damaged the nation's infrastructure and caused the biggest humanitarian crisis in modern history.

"Israel embroiled in own problems in occupied territories"

In reference to the recent events in Palestine, he asserted that the Zionist

regime, which is dealing with escalating crises in the occupied lands, wants to spread its woes to other Palestinian regions. He denounced the atrocities the Zionist regime committed against Palestinian worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque last week and noted that Islamic nations now have a better understanding of the Palestinian cause.

The spokesman also predicted that both Muslim and non-Muslim nations would stand up to the Zionist regime and support the oppressed Palestinian people. He added the Iranian people will participate in International Quds Day this coming Friday and once again demonstrate their sympathy for the Palestinians.

"Iran-Iraq relationship"

In regards to the ties between Iran and Iraq, he stated that the Islamic Republic has consistently worked to strengthen peace, serenity, and security in the neighboring state and has been instrumental in the battle against terrorism in the Arab nation.

He added that building a railway between the two nations will protect the interests of both parties and that construction on the Shalamche-Basra railway can be completed in about 1.5 years. Regarding diplomatic ties with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, he stated that an Iranian delegation had been sent to Manama and that relations between the UAE and Iran are improving, especially following the return of Abu Dhabi's ambassador to Tehran.

Courtesy Tehran Times



All-out offensive against TTP: Implications for Pakistan

Military offensive to bear fruits in years; Nawaz Sharif too engaged with TTP in 2023; Afghan Taliban reaction to Pak decision critical

By Dr Raza Khan

As attacks from militant-terrorist outfit, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are increasing with each passing day resulting in heavy casualties among the law enforcement agencies (LEAs) in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, the government has decided to launch a new 'all-out comprehensive' military offensive against the group to put an end to the 'scourge of terrorism.' This was decided in the recent National Security Committee (NSC) meeting held on April 7 chaired by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif in which top civil and military leadership participated.

The most important outcome of the recent NSC meeting, is the decision to launch a full-scale military offensive against TTP. Though NSC statement reads: "the meeting agreed to launch an all-out comprehensive operation with renewed vigour, and determination with the backing of the nation and the government, which will rid the country of the menace of terrorism," it does not mention TTP by name but it is mainly aimed at the group.

As the statement said the operation will be launched in the entire country, it is expected it would also be launched against other militant-terrorist groups including the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) or its Wilayat-e-Pakistan chapter as well as various Baloch militant organizations. The importance of the NSC statement is that it refers to 'comprehensive operation' to eliminate the scourge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations from Pakistan. This means it will also include endeavours at political, diplomatic, security, economic, and social levels.

Certainly, the strategy against menace of terrorism must be comprehensive and have aspects i.e. political, economic, social, and psychological as mere military operations are not a solution. The reason is that terrorism itself is a societal phenomenon and is



manifestation of multiple maladies in the society like ignorance, poverty, unemployment and population explosion as well as injustice.

However, it remains to be seen whether the government would be able to plan and carry out the offensive in a comprehensive manner. Equally, the political, economic, security, diplomatic, and social components of the offensive could not be expected to be time-bound; rather it would take years not months to start bearing fruits.

But the 13-party ruling alliance has only three more months to complete its tenure, so, how come it could decide such a long-term offensive, is anybody's guess. So, this is a valid criticism vis-à-vis present government to take such a decision. It would have been rather advisable, had the offensive-decision been referred to the parliament. In the prevailing highly-polarized political situation in the country, an all parties conference (APC), including PTI would have been more rational approach.

Nevertheless, if the government has decided to launch a full-scale military operation against terrorists, the onus would now be on military leadership to take it to a logical end. Military leadership, however pleads that any offensive against terror outfits

must have societal ownership. This indeed is a pertinent argument. In this context, it is unclear whether the next political government would agree with the current strategy of launching military offensive against terrorist organizations, particularly the TTP.

A very important aspect of the NSC meeting is that it declared the 'strategy of starting negotiations' with TTP and freeing hundreds of its militants, as main reason behind regrouping of TTP and subsequent terror attacks. Although the meeting stop short of naming the previous government or any (retired) officials for having 'soft corner' for TTP, the target was quite obvious. Incumbent Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), via NSC wanted to chastise former premier Imran Khan and ex-DG ISI Lt Gen Faiz Hameed for starting the negotiations process.

However, it must be kept in mind that negotiations with the TTP had the ownership of the previous military leadership headed by the then army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa. This could be ascertained from the fact that former PM Imran Khan was voted out through a no-confidence motion on April 9, 2022, but

negotiations with the TTP continued under Lt Gen Faiz till September, 2022 with full support of the then army chief.

In fact, Imran Khan's government along with Gen Bajwa decided to have talks with TTP in line with the Afghan Taliban regime's advice. The Afghan Taliban urged Islamabad to initiate talks with the TTP, which is largely based in Afghanistan, for fears that militants belonging to the group may join IS-K and could become a far larger threat to both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As there was considerable substance in the Afghan Taliban argument, it was realized by Pakistan. But the process of negotiations was not properly managed by the interlocutors and the TTP also took undue advantage of it. Negotiations with any militant group including TTP is not a bad strategy but it depends how it is implemented. Notably in 2013, the PML-N government under Nawaz Sharif itself negotiated with Hakimullah Mehsud-led TTP. So at the moment what needs to be done is not to indulge in blame-game but to carry out offensive in a perfect fashion.

Prospects of offensive

It remains to be seen whether a military offensive against the TTP could be successful this time. One has full faith in the country's security apparatus to defeat a few thousand militants and terrorists, whatsoever hardened and trained they might be.

Another potent reason to argue that an offensive against the TTP would be a success because TTP does not have any local or community support in entire Pakistan, including Pashtun tribal regions, specifically North and South Waziristan, the traditional heartland of the group, straddling Pak-Afghan border.

International research on terrorism too has a general conclusion that only those terrorist groups could survive for long and prevail if they have sizable support for their narrative and modus-operandi from the local populations.

The TTP never has had significant support even in Pashtun tribal lands. How it survived over the years could be largely attributed to faulty strategies of the successive Pakistani governments. Since the

emergence of the group around September 2007, different strategies ranging from appeasement to negotiations to military offensives were employed to deal with it but none has worked in entirety, resulting in resurgence of the militants.

Reaction from Afghan Taliban

The Afghan Taliban reaction to the decision by the Pakistan leadership to launch an all-out military offensive against TTP would be critically important. The reason is that Afghan Taliban cannot be expected to 'ditch' Afghanistan-based TTP for multiple reasons.



TTP has been an instrumental in Afghan Taliban turning the tables on the Afghan state forces, capturing Kabul in August 2021 and forcing president Ashraf Ghani to flee. Secondly, if Afghan Taliban would support Pakistan's all-out offensive against the TTP, there are fears the latter could join forces with Afghanistan-based IS-K. In such an event it would pose severe threat to the Afghan Taliban.

Thirdly, there are strong anti-Pakistan factions within the Afghan Taliban and therefore, they would like to see problems multiplied for Islamabad. Though Afghan Taliban have vowed not to allow TTP use Afghan soil against Pakistan, they would either not ask the group's militants to leave Afghanistan. And as long as Afghan sanctuaries are available to the TTP, it would be very difficult for Pakistani forces to trounce the terror outfit.

Reportedly, in the wake of January 30

Peshawar Police Lines attack, Pakistan conveyed to the Afghan Taliban that TTP attacks would no more be tolerated. To this Afghan Taliban response was to do 'sour-searching.' Between the lines it was a very substantial advise. In this situation Pakistan's relations with Afghan Taliban would be affected, consequently Kabul's support to the TTP would increase.

Best choice for Pakistan

In such a situation, best option for Pakistan besides an all-out comprehensive offensive against terrorists, TTP in particular, is to give ownership of the offensive to the local population in the Pashtun tribal regions and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Because a very strong pro-peace youth movement has emerged in the last one year in different parts of KP including terrorism affected North and South Waziristan and Swat-Malakand regions. Until the youth movement of the local populations is not taken on board, any offensive against the TTP would not be successful.

Above all, complete success of any anti-terrorist operation in Pakistan is linked to political and economic stability in country. Unfortunately, the country is facing worst political and economic instability of its history. Therefore, the power that be, has to play its role and put all its weight behind political and economic stability bids. The establishment has to dispel the impression that the NSC meeting was timed and the decision of anti-terrorism comprehensive offensive was taken to delay the scheduled elections in the Punjab and the KP.

A Scot from Mian Channu

I've lived through one Ramazan in the winter, obviously a long time ago, so I can wrap my head around fasting and wearing a sweater. But that I would be doing so in April fasts was beyond me. The earlier part of Ramazan at least has passed in unseasonal balmy weather, and it is almost as if it's raining every day.

I wonder whether this has raised the bar for the next Ramazan. That's a year away, though, and it's of more interest whether we will celebrate one Eid. Well, we're in lockstep with the Arab world, but it was because the Arabs failed to see the moon, and then we did. Let's hope we all see the moon on the same day.

I suppose there will be some who will think Hamza Yousaf becoming Leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party, and then First Minister of Scotland in quick order, something of a Ramazan miracle. Well, his connection is to Mian Channu, from where his grandfathers both migrated.

It's funny about migrations. The late Ghulam Haider Wyne migrated to Mian Channu, from Amritsar, and rose to become the first Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly (when Mustafa Jatoi entered the National Assembly, he stepped back to become Leader of the IJI parliamentary party), and then Punjab Chief Minister. He was ousted through a no-confidence motion (which would never pass these days, not with the Supreme Court's judgment on Article 63A still in the field). It got worse because he was gunned down in the election campaign that year (1993).

Hopefully, Hamza Yousaf won't have his First Ministry ended so abruptly (though he should watch the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Assembly, Alison Johnstone, very carefully, lest she pulls Manzoor Wattoo on him), nor his life. However, provincial chief executives named Hamza (admittedly a somewhat small set, with one other member, Hamza Shehbaz) don't have a great record. So Hamza Yousaf should try to keep in good with the judiciary. He does want to end up like Hamza. I mean, perhaps the only thing worse than being a court-ordered CM is being ousted as CM as the result of a court order.



For a change, let's look at a politician about to be indicted. With woman trouble. No, we're not talking about the Cuptaan, the Toshakhana, or Tyrian White. We're talking about Donald Trump and Stormy Daniels. She was a porn star who had an affair with Trump in 2018. However, she took \$130,000 from Trump's lawyer in 2020 to sign a Nondisclosure Agreement about the affair. Trump is accused of campaign finance violations.

Similarly, Imran is not being accused of adultery, though a charge would lie, of not declaring a child on his nomination papers. Under Muslim personal law, Imran would be unrelated to the girl, as he never married his mother, and does not have to mention her on the nomination form. However, no one has taken that plea. I wonder why?

There are all sorts of funny things happening in politics, and Dr. Amber Shahzada, that gadfly of politics, passed away. A sign that the Punjab polls will not take place? Admittedly, I don't think Dr. Amber ever

fought a provincial seat, going down, or rather crashing, to defeat in the National Assembly polls in Nawaz Sharif's constituency.

He perhaps showed the dangers of doing a master's in philosophy. And the party he founded, the Aap Janab Sarkar Federation, is said to be named after three (female) students of the Philosophy Department at GC. Proof that the female is deadlier than the male came in Nashville, Tennessee, where a female indulged in the grand old American sport of school shooting, killing six. Or was it some feminist thing, showing that women can kill randomly too? It wasn't a first, only rare.

According to the Violence Project, in 172 mass shootings (with four or more killed) since 1966 in the USA, only four have been by women. Well, let's hope this doesn't give the terrorists any ideas. Males accounted for the four policemen, a DSP, and his guards, killed in Lakki Marwat.

By M A Niazi

Lahore's sick lungs

By Zofeen T. Ebrahim

When environmental lawyer, Ahmad Rafay Alam started the cycling group Critical Mass Lahore 14 years ago in the city, his plan was to promote “sustainable urban transport” as well as the idea that “women have a right to be in public spaces”. Both ideas caught on and have found resonance in Karachi, and Islamabad, but Alam himself gave up cycling because of the traffic, which had become too dangerous to navigate.

HRCP director Farah Zia says cycling brings not only “immense pleasure” to her, but also a sense of “freedom”. Sadly, like Alam, the sea of vehicles keeps her from pedalling to work every day, so she restricts herself to cycling around her neighbourhood.

Alam resumed cycling during the 2021 Covid-19 lockdown. He recalled that “once in a lifetime” event when the “air was cleaner, the sky bluer” and the roads rid of motorbikes, and cars. But life was back full throttle in 2022, and has picked up even more speed since then.

No lessons were learnt from the lockdown, it seems, and the 2022 World Air Quality Report, published earlier this month, is evidence of this. IQAir, a Swiss air quality technology company which published the report, ranked Lahore as the most polluted city in the world. It had ranked 15th in 2021. Peshawar, at fifth position, did not fare any better, and came fourth in the Central and South Asia region.

Two recent reports underscore the urgency of collective action to curb emissions.

What is making Lahore's air sick?

To understand this, we need to first acquaint ourselves with the very tiny but extremely hazardous particulate matter (PM), found in the air in solid or droplet form. These can be 10 micrometres, 2.5 micrometers or even less in diameter. By way of comparison, PM2.5 is one-thirtieth the width of a human hair, which is between 70 to 90 micrometres.



The smaller particles are so tiny that several thousand can fit in the full stop at the end of this sentence. These miscreants (including sulphates, nitrates, black carbon and ammonium) travel deep into our lungs and enter our bloodstream, causing serious lung and heart diseases. In fact, scientists say, air pollution has reduced the average life expectancy across Pakistan by up to 2.7 years.

The WHO global air quality guidelines to help governments and civil society reduce human exposure to air pollution and its adverse effects have recommended an annual PM2.5 guideline level of $5 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ and a daily PM2.5 guideline level of $15 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

The report by IQAir has listed the top five polluted (ie air pollution) countries in 2022 based on the WHO guidelines. Pollution in Chad at $89.7 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ was over 17 times higher than the WHO guideline, followed by Iraq with $80.1 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ (16 times higher). Pakistan came third with pollution levels of $70.9 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, 14 times higher than the guideline. Bahrain and Bangladesh came fourth and fifth with $66.6 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ and $65.8 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ respectively (more than 13 times higher).

PM2.5 concentrations in Lahore dropped from a high of $133.2 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2017 to a low of $79.2 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2020. Since then, however, concentrations have continued to climb, reaching $97.4 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2022.

The data collected from 7,323 cities across 131 countries, regions, and territories was based on over 30,000 regulatory air quality monitoring stations and low-cost air quality sensors operated variously by governmental bodies, research institutions, non-profit NGOs, universities and educational facilities, private companies and citizen scientists across the globe.

Interestingly, more than half of the world's air quality data was generated by grassroots community efforts. “Air quality monitoring by communities creates transparency and urgency; it leads to collaborative actions that improves air quality,” stated Frank Hammes, Global CEO, IQAir

Another study released this month in Lancet found that 99 per cent of the global population was exposed to PM2.5. Assessing the daily and annual PM2.5 concentrations across the globe from 2000 to 2019 using a computer model and incorporating traditional air quality observations from ground stations as well as meteorological data, the study finds the hotspots to be in eastern Asia, southern Asia and northern Africa.

The results are grim and underscore the urgency with which policymakers, public health officials and academia must come together to find ways to curb emissions from the usual culprits — power plants, factories, the farming sector, transport and waste burning.

Following close on the heels of the two damning global air quality reports, the Ministry of Climate Change got its National Clean Air Policy, 2023, approved by the federal cabinet earlier this month. The timing could not have been more perfect. Although in 2021, Pakistan had announced a Pakistan Clean Air Plan to perform national and local air pollution assessments, and its implementation continued in 2022, having a policy in place shows the government is committed to curbing air pollution.

The policy has identified one priority intervention each in five sectors: implementation of Euro-5 and Euro-6 fuel quality standards in the transport sector; enforcement of emission standards in industry; a ban on burning crop residue in agriculture; preventing the burning of municipal waste; and promoting the use of low-emission cooking technologies in households.

If fully implemented, these interventions can reduce PM2.5 emissions by 38pc by 2030. And that is the key for which provinces must be on board. “Vigilant adherence and tangible reductions to concentrations of air pollutants will be the metric that gauges its success and impact on the lives of the inhabitants,” said IQAir CEO Glory Dolphin Hammes about achieving success.

There is much that can be done to give cities their lungs back. Having an Ultra



Low Emission Zone, like there is in central London, where polluting vehicles must pay a daily charge to drive, is an idea; as are the ‘15-minute cities’, where all basic services and amenities that people need for daily life are within a 15-minute walk or bike ride

from their homes. As Alam said: “If more of us cycled in Lahore, we might not have such bad air, after all!” For those who cannot do without a motorised vehicle, electric bikes could be an alternative.

Courtesy Dawn



Copa del Rey: Real Madrid moves on to final

Karim Benzema scores hat-trick in La Liga in less than seven minutes

By Ali Abdullah

Real Madrid won the second leg of their Copa del Rey semi-final against Barcelona 4-0 at the Camp Nou, moving on to the final with an overall score of 4-1 and a matchup against Osasuna.

The Carlo Ancelotti team struggled for the first 45 minutes, but a fantastic counterattack culminated in a goal by Vinicius Junior allowed them to tie the game in the last seconds of the half.

In the second half, Karim Benzema seized charge and secured Real's spot in the final on May 6 by scoring the first hat-trick for a Real Madrid player at the Camp Nou since 1963.

Karim Benzema has experienced a season of opposites. He has been hindered by injuries and bad play far too frequently, but it is unlikely that he will replicate his goal-scoring prowess from the previous campaign, when he scored an incredible 44 goals in 46 appearances for Real Madrid.

On Sunday, against Real Valladolid, the Frenchman scored a hat-trick in La Liga in less than seven minutes, but some may have argued that was against weak competition. (Valladolid are 16th in the 20-team table). Not so against league leaders Barcelona, as Benzema once again displayed his lack of composure in front of goal with a second hat-trick. Nevertheless, he took four times as long on this one.

He appeared to be losing the game in the first half, but he was crucial to Vinicius Junior's first goal of the night right before halftime. Then, in the 50th minute, he stunned Barcelona with a stroked finish off a feed from Luka Modric to put Madrid ahead on aggregate. Eight minutes later, he converted from the penalty spot after Franck Kessie's careless challenge on Vinicius Jr. After a fantastic assist from Vinicius Jr., he skillfully lifted his third and final goal over Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Only Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Alfredo Di Stefano have more goals than Benzema's 16 in Clasico history. His hat-trick was the first by a Real Madrid player against Barcelona at the Camp Nou since Ferenc Puskas in 1963. The fact that the Frenchman is soaring when Madrid needs him most will make them happy.

At the Spotify Camo Nou, something else unexpected yet believable happened. There was a lot of commotion both on and off the pitch during the final Clasico played in the old Camp Nou before it is substantially dismantled this summer as part of the club's €1.5 billion Espai Barca reconstruction.

Early in the match, the almost full stadium was rocking, thanks to Barcelona's intensity and heavy pressing, which gave them the upper hand. They committed the first seven fouls of the game, and coach Xavi received a booking as a result of his criticism of referee Jose Luis Martinez Munuera's judgement.



The coordinated chanting of "Messi! Messi!" began in the crowd during minute 10, which corresponded to the number on his Barcelona shirt. When questioned about Lionel Messi's potential return this summer after two years with Paris Saint-Germain before the game, Barcelona sporting director Mateu Alemany was evasive, but tens of thousands of supporters were unambiguous in their responses.

Chants of "Gavi! Gavi!" were then heard in the 30th minute, shortly after the midfielder had received a booking for a fight with Vinicius Junior. The teenager wears number 30, much like Messi did earlier in the game. He originally wore number 6, but had to switch because of a dispute with La Liga over financial restrictions, one of many off-field conflicts Barcelona is presently facing.

Barcelona's strategy was significantly different from that first leg at the Bernabeu, where they only had 35% of the ball, which was their lowest possession percentage of the season across all competitions.

Despite the final result at the Camp Nou, Xavi's team controlled the first half with 59% of the ball, frequently shifting play to move Real Madrid from side to side. However, it was their left flank in particular that stood out.

The vivacious Gavi initially started from that wing, but he frequently drifted inside in his usual style, scooping up spaces and slipping into pockets, forcing right-back Dani Carvajal to stay close to his centre-back Eder Militao to cover any gaps.

Alejandro Balde, a 19-year-old Barcelona out-ball, was able to advance quickly from left back as a result. Balde was able to get off to a strong start in the assault because of his scorching pace.

Just before halftime, Barcelona had one of their best chances of the game thanks to a cross from Balde, but Madrid scored the game's first goal on the counterattack after a superb stop from Thibaut Courtois on Robert Lewandowski.

There was a clear intention from Barcelona to isolate Balde on the left side of their attack, but unfortunately for them, they simply couldn't sustain it in the second half.

Competing against Pakistan in white ball formats enticing: Gary Stead

Chance for men in green to top ODI ranking; NZ defeat to be Pakistan's fourth straight series victory in one-day internationals

Saqlain Mushtaq was hired as an assistant coach by New Zealand earlier this month for Pakistan series. The team was also named for the forthcoming five-match ODI series against Pakistan. Later this month, when the Black Caps visit Pakistan, the two teams will also compete in a T20I series.

Tom Latham will captain the team, in the absence of Kane Williamson and Ben Lister and Cole McConchie will make their professional debuts while on tour. The regular Canterbury captain was chosen for the T20 squad to tour Pakistan as a result of a successful domestic cricket season in all formats. McConchie's 1,140 runs across formats are the second most of any player this season while he's also picked up eight wickets.

Lister featured in the ODI Squad to face Sri Lanka during the recently completed ANZ ODI Series but didn't take the field and has the chance to add to his international T20 debut against India earlier this year.

The 15-man squad also features further opportunities for recent ODI debutants Chad Bowes, Rachin Ravindra and Henry Shipley. Those new faces are balanced by an experienced core including six members of the squad that made it to the final of the ICC Cricket World Cup 2019.

Nine members of the team have recently travelled to Pakistan as they participated in either the Test or ODI squads that visited Karachi earlier this year. With Saqlain Mushtaq joining the group as an assistant coach, the travelling squads will also gain further expertise in Pakistani conditions.

The possibility of competing against Pakistan in both white ball formats, according to NZ coach Gary Stead, is enticing. In the previous season, he says, we had a number of thrilling games versus Pakistan in both white ball formats, both at home and away; no matter where you take them on, they are a formidable bunch.



"The successful ODI series earlier this year in Pakistan provided big learning opportunities for the players and having more ODI match experience is fantastic in a World Cup year. Having someone with Saqlain's experience is a big boost for the group and we are looking forward to the insights he can offer us to aid our preparations for local conditions, and in particular the assistance he can provide to our spin bowling group," Stead said.

McConchie's consistency this season had been impressive, Stead said that Lister, who plays for the Aces, has impressed the coaching group with his desire to learn since joining the Black Caps environment. "Making your debut in India is a big challenge and it's been great to see Ben really try and soak up every opportunity since then."

This series is not only important as ODI World Cup will take place later this year, but the men in green have a chance to top the ODI ranking. Pakistan would go up to the top of the standings with 114 rating points if they defeat New Zealand 5-0 during the five-match series. Currently New Zealand are number one with 116 points whereas, Pakistan is number 5.

It will be Pakistan's fourth straight series victory if they defeat New Zealand in the one-day internationals. Pakistan has won their last three ODI series against the Netherlands, West Indies and Australia.

New Zealand played two tests when they visited last. As the light began to go, Pakistan's final pair, Naseem Shah and Abrar Ahmed survived 21 balls while Sarfaraz Ahmed scored a valiant century to deny New Zealand victory and force a thrilling draw in the second Test.

With 39 balls left in the game, Sarfaraz was out for a career-high 118, and New Zealand was in position to win the series. However, as night fell, Naseem scored 15 and Ahmed seven runs to lead Pakistan to 304-9 in pursuit of a 319-run total when umpires Alex Wharf and Aleem Dar ruled that there were just three overs left and the light could not be maintained.

The first Test, which was played in Karachi also resulted in a tie, ending the two-match series at 0-0 and denying New Zealand their first series victory in Pakistan in 53 years.

By Ali Abdullah

Pak Urdu movies to attract mega crowds on Eid

Action-packed Daur is most talked about Pakistani movie, film's music a hit even before release, item song shot on Soha Ali; Mahmood Aslam to play Sheikh Mujibur in Huay Tum Ajnabi

By Khalid Farshori

Whether its India or Pakistan, cinema has been a main source of entertainment in both Pakistan and India, specifically on occasions of religious festivals ie Eid-ul-Fitr. This tradition has been going on in these countries since pre-partition. In line with the coming Eid-ul-Fitr when Salman Khan's movie, Kisi Ka Bhai Kisi Ki Jaan, is eagerly awaited in Bollywood, also awaited by his Pakistani fans.

This Eid is going to be special in the country when movie lovers would be watching four Urdu, one Punjabi and two English movies. The only Punjabi film to be released on this Eid would be Lahore Qalandars. Featuring Saima, Iltmish Butt and Shafaq Cheema in the cast, the movie is poised to attract big crowds.



Urdu films include Money Back Guarantee, Huay Tum Ajnabi, Dadal and Daur. Among these four films, the action-packed Daur is the most talked about, promotion of which has created a buzz, especially on social media. Shafqat Cheema, Kamran Mujahid, Soha Ali, Rashid Mehmood, Shehbaz Chaudhry, Hafsa Rajput, Wasim Ali, Sardar Kamal, Azhar Rangeela and Aslam Hassan are included in main cast. Film's music has become a hit even before its release, especially its item song which is shot upon actress Soha Ali. Watching the trailer, one can guess this film has full potential to draw huge number of viewers on Eid. Being full of action, the movie contains romance with a flavor of comedy and six lyrics. Looking at production quality of Daur, whose filmmaker is a UK-based Pakistani, Aslam Hasan, it goes without saying that this is a mega-budget

production. The film is being screened under the banner of Metro Live Movies.

Cinemas across the country will also screen motion picture Dadal. Being an action-thriller this movie exposes faces behind Liari gang war, the Karachi underworld, along with some political characters. Based on the life of Haya Baloch, the lady boxer of Liari, Dadal is directed and written by Abu Aliha. Sonia Hussain, the heroine of Dadal while sharing first look of the film on social media, said that she is going to play Haya Baloch. The film is presented by Neha Lodge Banners. Mohsin Abbas Haider will appear along Sonia Hussain in Dadal whose title depicts a renowned Liari gangster.

Fawad Khan's film Money Back Guarantee is also airing on this Eid. The cast of the film includes big names like Mikal Zulfiqar, Karan Malik, John Rambo, Gohar Rashid, Shayan Khan, Hira Mani, late Ahmed Bilal, Adnan Jafar, Ayesha Umar, Shafaat Ali, Javed Sheikh, Hina Dalpazir, Ali Safina, besides former cricket star Waseem Akram and his wife Shanaira Akram.

Money Back Guarantee is purportedly the biggest and the most expensive film to be released on this Eid in terms of budget and cast. Fawad Khan's name alone suggests the film



could be the biggest hit of Eid. Producer's 100% money-back guarantee is reflected in the name of this film.

Faisal Qureshi, the director of Money Back Guarantee has extensive experience in making commercial films, as well as writing comedies. Based on this experience, it can be said Faisal will be able to show his worth in this movie, inspired by the English movie Money Heist. Money Back Guarantee is being released under the banner of Distribution Club.

Cricket legend Wasim Akram had earlier also acted in TV commercials produced by Faisal Qureshi; so when offered by Faisal, he didn't hesitate. Producer of this film, Shayan Khan, himself played the role of a Kashmiri youth living in Islamabad.

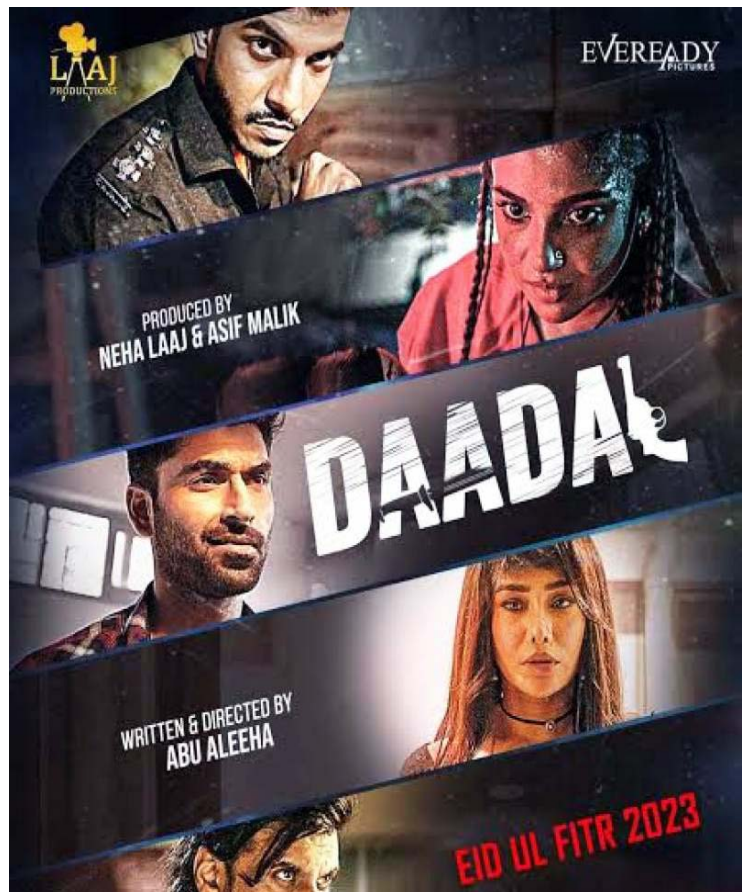
Another pertinent Eid-ul-Fitr film is Huay Tum Ajnabi. Directed by Kamran Shahid, it is a sensitive romantic story written in the background of the fall of Dhaka. Though movie is substantive effort, but audience will decide to what extent the director and writers have done justice to the subject. Watching the trailer and songs of the film, viewers are eager to watch this film. The cast of Huay Tum Ajnabi includes Mikal Zulfiqar, Sadia Khan, Mahmood Aslam, Shahid Hameed, Sohail Ahmed, Ayesha Umar, Shamoon Abbasi, and Samina Pirzada. This movie is being released under the banner of Mandviwala Entertainment.

Story of Huay Tum Ajnabi, entails love sequences against backdrop of the 1971 war. The film has 11 songs, says actor Mahmood Aslam who plays Bangladesh's political leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the film. "Acting is a tough job and especially portraying real characters from history is more different than ordinary characters."

Writer, director and senior anchor person Kamran Shahid who is also son of famous actor Shahid, says that film making is really a challenging job. As far as history is concerned, Huay Tum Ajnabi doesn't exhibit the entire 1971 war history, rather it contains only 25% of the history; the rest is a romantic comedy.

According to Kamran, he visited ISPR for logistic support. "They said we don't give anything on rent, but when I told them that I was making a film in the background of the 71 war, they changed their mind; and then they provided me tanks, guns and all related stuff at their end, even without seeing my script as they knew me," he maintained. He said all the stuff appearing in the film was not real; the graphics are also used but as far as cooperation or sponsorship is concerned, ISPR has nothing to do with that.

He said the film is not a propaganda, not even a response to any Indian film; nor its a continuation of any hatred. It's a typical entertaining but emotional movie, in which musical instruments played after the 70s, are being used. The movie comprises eleven songs and a romantic tale of Sufi music. Legendary singer Abida Parveen, Baqir Abbas, Sahir Ali Baga, Najat and Naveed Nashad will enthrall viewers through their lyrics.



Eid ul Fitr: A Joyous Celebration for Muslims Worldwide

By Pavan Manzoor



Eid ul Fitr, also known as the "Festival of Breaking the Fast," is an important religious holiday celebrated by Muslims all over the world. It marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan and is a time for rejoicing, feasting, and spending time with family and loved ones. In this article, we will explore the significance of Eid ul Fitr for Muslims, how it is celebrated, and how children enjoy this festive occasion.

Importance of Eid ul Fitr

Eid ul Fitr is a significant event for Muslims as it marks the end of a month-long period of fasting, prayer, and self-reflection. It is a time for spiritual renewal and rejuvenation, a chance to reconnect with one's faith and strengthen the bonds of community. This day is also an opportunity to express gratitude for the blessings bestowed upon us by Allah. During Ramadan, Muslims fast from dawn to dusk and engage in acts of charity, kindness, and spiritual reflection.

Secondly, Eid-ul-Fitr is a time of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is an opportunity for Muslims to forgive each other and to seek forgiveness from Allah. This is an important aspect of the festival as it promotes harmony, unity, and goodwill among Muslims.

Finally, Eid-ul-Fitr is a time of celebration and feasting. Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan by gathering with family and friends, exchanging gifts, and enjoying delicious food.

Celebration of Eid ul Fitr

Eid-ul-Fitr is a joyous occasion and is celebrated with great enthusiasm and zeal in Muslim communities around the world. On the day of Eid, Muslims gather at mosques or open spaces for special prayers called Eid prayers. These prayers are usually held in the morning and are followed by a sermon delivered by the Imam.

After the prayers, Muslims greet each other by saying "Eid Mubarak," which means "Blessed Eid." They then return home or gather with family and friends for a day of celebration and feasting. Special Eid dishes are prepared, and gifts are exchanged.

Children's enjoyment of Eid ul Fitr

Children are an integral part of the Eid ul Fitr celebrations, and they look forward to this day with great anticipation. They are often given new clothes to wear on the day of Eid, which adds to their excitement. Many children enjoy playing with sparklers and fireworks, and some participate in traditional games such as "piñata" or "egg tapping." Sweets and candies are also an important part of the celebrations, and children enjoy indulging in their favorite treats.



Eid-ul-Fitr is a significant festival in the Islamic calendar, marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan. It is a time of celebration, forgiveness, and reflection. Muslims around the world celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr with great enthusiasm and zeal, gathering with family and friends to enjoy delicious food, exchange gifts, and renew their faith.

Whether you are Muslim or not, Eid-ul-Fitr is a time to celebrate the diversity and richness of our world's cultures and traditions. As we celebrate this festival, let us remember to promote harmony, unity, and goodwill among all people, regardless of their race, religion, or nationality.

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