

Fortnightly

# The Truth International

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ABC Certified

Political Uncertainty Damaging Economy

CCI's Decision to approve Population Census result provided ground to delay General Elections

Pakistan Economy and FDI

To attract USD 100 Billion investment is a huge task. Will it be possible?

Highest Inflation

Hike in electricity rates and petrol prices will take inflation to new heights

## Delay in General Elections Schedule Creating more Confusion



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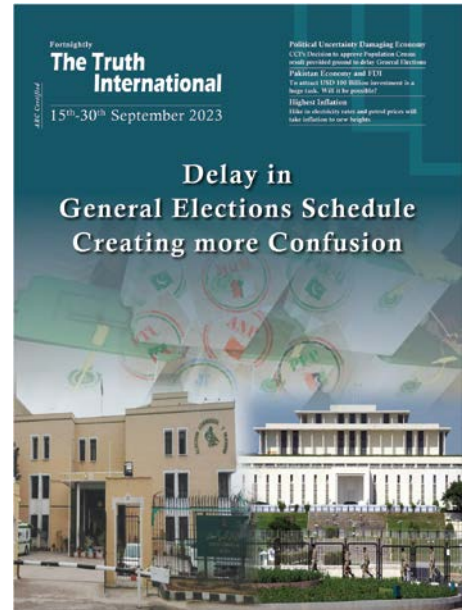
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# Pakistan's leadership "deficit"

By Dr Syed Riffat Hussain



It is often said that Pakistan as a country has become ungovernable. We have tried different forms of authoritarian rule since independence – the three martial laws \_ under General Ayub, Zia-ul-Haq, and General Pervez Musharraf each lasting for more than a decade exemplify this authoritarian trend. In the interregnum, we have had Z.A. Bhutto's civilian rule and different forms of 'hybrid regimes" but the structural problems continued to mount with the result that today Pakistan's economy is in free fall with an unsustainable external debt, its youth turning into a demographic disaster because of joblessness and outbreak of mass protests over energy crisis have aggravated the existential crisis.

Given this dismal socio-economic picture, a perception has gained traction that unless the country can find a set of "transformational" leaders, there is little hope of salvaging our future. This begs the

question of why there is a deficit of genuine transformational leadership in Pakistan.

We have had charismatic leadership in Pakistan - M.A. Jinnah and Z.A. Bhutto being the primary example – but beyond these two leading examples, there has been a dearth of leadership committed to serving the cause of the people and believing in a progressive, democratic Pakistan.

Historically, the area that came to constitute Pakistan was underdeveloped where the forces of feudalism and landed gentry remained entrenched and were the determining factors in defining the power structure of Pakistan.

One consequence of this structural predominance of feudalism was the relative weakness of the middle class, which is considered to be a crucial factor in the evolution of democratic culture. Modern democracy, based on values of dialogue and non-violent resolution

of conflict, flourishes in a culture marked by democratic temper. This culture encouraged the emergence of a leadership that was rational and committed to implementing policies that were truly in the public interest. One reason why public interest issues such as public health, education, employment, and safeguarding basic human rights have never become part of the public interest discourse is that the ruling elite gets away by paying lip service to these basic rights when they need peoples' votes. No political party- PPP is the only outstanding exception to this rule because under Z.A. Bhutto raised the slogan "Roti (Bread), Kapra (Clothing), Makaan (Shelter)" to win the 1970 elections - and entered the electoral arena based on matters that were critical to public interest. Yet it is ironic that articles 1 to 20 of Pakistan's Constitution guarantee the protection of these fundamental human rights that have been totally sidelined in public discourse.



Another factor is Pakistan's external linkages forged with Western nations led by the United States during the Cold War period. These linkages have made Pakistan more sensitive to Islamabad's security compulsions and led it to ignore people's interests and demands. Instead of following a growth model of development based on the indigenous needs of its own people, Islamabad has pursued a strategy of economic growth that responds more to its external needs and less to the needs of its own people. With the end of the Cold War and a shift in American focus toward the Indo-Pacific region to contain China, Pakistan has lost its strategic salience and its security conundrum has been aggravated.

One reason why the IMF has taken its time to offer Pakistan an economic bailout is its assessment that Islamabad has no option but to rely on IMF-funded help to

attract more foreign investment from its friends like China and other rich Arab countries of the Gulf like KSA, UAE, and Kuwait. The PDM government had set up a Special Investment Fund Council that has been given constitutional protection to meet these requirements. The SIFC so far has held five meetings, which involve top brass, all four Chief Ministers, and important members of the Caretaker government headed by Mr. Anwar ul Haq Kakar.

The key focus of these SIFC meetings has been to consider proposals on how to turn around the economy by attracting foreign investment. Addressing the last meeting, Army Chief General Asim Munir, announced to the attendees that he would be able to bring foreign investment to the tune of over 75 billion dollars.

After these tall claims, many

financial and business experts have clearly stated that in the absence of a political consensus in Pakistan, there is little hope of a fast turnaround of the economy. That raises the crucial issue of holding the next elections. Skeptics have stated that the earliest elections would take place in February 2024, not before. The Election Commission has yet to give a definite date by which elections would take place.

Another issue that is closely tied up with the date of general elections is the longevity of the interim setup. There is a general feeling that given the expanded mandate of the interim setup and the launching of anti-corruption initiatives against mafias, smugglers, and hoarders all across, it is doubtful that the caretaker setup would give up the government within ninety days. Only time will tell whether these apprehensions are valid or not.



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# Electricity bills and Delimitations

*Delimitations should be more than just polls' postponement excuse*



By M A Niazi

Prime Minister Anwarul Haq Kakar might think that the protests against the electricity bills were blown out of proportion, but they were quite serious. True, a revolution was not sparked off, but that was not because there was any lack of desperate anger among people.

Lack of leadership did pose a problem. The protests could be contained because of this lack of leadership, and it also meant that there was no impetus for the protests to continue so as to bring about a change. At the moment, it seems, no one is offering the kind of solution that would justify getting support. Only the Jamaat Islami, among the traditional political forces, is trying to put itself at the head of the movement, but its relative lack of success reflects how it does not have a solution that seems viable, and the low level of public trust in the party.

The ECP might be aware that the path it is following suits a political convenience. That might explain why it is getting tangled with the law and constitution while trying to use them to justify its deviation from them.

The caretaker governments had their

moment, and Kakar may well have lost it for them. His statement, which was confirmed that made by the caretaker Finance Minister, was that the government would be giving no subsidies. In short, the IMF's conditions were going to be fulfilled. That included a hike in petrol prices, caused by the recovery of oil prices on the international market. This increase is going to be made worse by the decline of the rupee. This means that the price of furnace oil in rupee terms is going to go up. That means the fuel adjustment surcharge is going to go up. It means that power bills are going to go up further.

Normally, a caretaker government would not really have to deal with such a crisis. In office for three months, a caretaker government would do its best to kick the can down the road and leave the crisis to come crashing down on the head of the newly elected government, which would have to handle it as soon as it came into office.

It might seem unfair to any new government, particularly one that might depend on support from smaller parties (as has been the case with all governments in the past, except for the

rare occasions where one party achieved an absolute majority on its own). However, no one has come into politics because it is easy. At the same time, while all of the parties are willing to accept the task, none has shown any sign that it has any solution.

It should not be forgotten that this was one of the planks of Imran's campaign: he too burned power bills during his 2013 dharna, and blamed government corruption for the high bills. The corruption argument seems to have collapsed, but no one else has a new narrative.

At this point, all parties have got a track record, and none have shown the ability to escape the IMF. Its SBA expires in March next, and will probably be followed by an ESAF. There is a broad consensus that recourse to the IMF is a necessary evil, and its conditions must be obeyed. It is almost as if the next election will determine which party will have the privilege of selling IMF conditionalities to the electorate.

However, the caretakers are also performing that task at present. The problematic thing about that is that this task is open-ended. It is not as if the



caretakers are handling the task better than any government that might be elected. The caretakers may be hapless, but they are hardly worse than any other government that might be elected. However, while there is some chance that an elected government might find a way out of the mess, there is the virtual certainty that the caretakers do not have a solution. The big difference is that elected governments have some hope of re-election, and govern accordingly; caretakers face no elections and, thus are held accountable by much murkier organizations than the electorate.

It does not seem that the 'hybrid experiment in the good old days when Imran Khan and the PTI were on the same page has had that much effect. That should have taught the lesson that there should be no further interference in politics, but that interference seems to be continuing. Apart from the ouster of Imran Khan, and the withdrawal of those assets which had been given to the PTI for the 1998 elections, in the shape of highly publicized press conferences and the formation of the Istehkam Pakistan Party, there has also been a combination of hounding of the PTI after May 9, and of the putting off of elections.

That put off by the Election Commission of Pakistan has allowed it to carry out delimitations in accordance with the census earlier this year. The only reason the ECP is

able to carry out the delimitations is that the census does not require a constitutional amendment. The provincial allocation of seats is laid down in the Constitution, and after various censuses, has been adjusted to reflect the new demographic reality. That adjustment is made by a constitutional amendment, which only Parliament can carry out.

Probably because this year's census was carried out earlier than needed, there was no change in provincial allocations. If there had been, would it have meant that elections were never to be conducted, or would the ECP have put off the delimitations until after the election?

That the delimitations have to be conducted is a clear constitutional requirement, but there is no time limit given in the Constitution, as there is for holding elections. The ECP has also brought forward the date for the elections about two weeks, by changing the date for completing delimitations from December 15 to November 30. After delimitations, the ECP will need about 45 days for holding elections, because that period is provided in the Election Law. The 90-day limit expires on November 9. The ECP would have to complete delimitations by September 25 to meet the constitutional deadline. That might well lead to rushed delimitations and loud squawks of protest from intending legislators. That could be

avoided by carrying out the delimitation procedure after the elections.

That might lead to the objection that the members sit according to old delimitations, while new ones have come into existence, but so long as by-elections are conducted according to old delimitations, there would be no problem.

The problem is not so much the timeline as the ECP's willingness to fall in with others' plans. Unless those others learn to accept the verdict of the people, and that it may be different from what they want, it will not be possible to have a genuinely democratic system.

It should be remembered that the desire to put off elections is essentially not just political but partisan, because it benefits one party or another. It does not really affect candidates (except those who might need time to live down a personal scandal), because though they hate elections, their personal support is if not timeless, at least multigenerational. However, the party vote, which often provides the victory margin, fluctuates with time.

The ECP might be aware that the path it is following suits a political convenience. That might explain why it is getting tangled with the law and constitution while trying to use them to justify its deviation from them.



# Prevailing uncertainties and the all-important September



By Sarfraz Raja

All eyes were on this month, September, and that too on two important dates: the 9th and 16th. First was the date of completion of the term by President Dr Arif Alvi and the other date was the retirement of the Chief Justice Pakistan Justice Umar Ata Bandial. On the other hand, it is more than a month now after the dissolution of the assemblies while the caretakers had taken over but still, there is no clue about elections and political parties are raising concerns about the timing of general elections constitutionally due within 90 days of the dissolution of assemblies. How could the post-September scenario impact the political scene? Uncertainty would remain as it is, or could the picture become clearer in the coming days? Lots to know and analyze.

## Post-September presidency and the top court.

The president of Pakistan Dr Arif Alvi completed his five-year term on the 9th of this month and in a normal situation he would have been no more in the office of the head of the country but these were not the normal circumstances as the electoral college for presidential elections which comprises of

members of national and provincial assemblies was not available, as the assemblies were dissolved a month earlier than the completion of presidential term. The Constitution allows the outgoing president to continue till the elections and oath-taking of the new president-elect. President Dr Arif Alvi was not having a comfortable time in the office after the Shehbaz Sharif-led allied government had taken over the charge removing Imran Khan from power through a vote of no confidence. President Alvi had sent back some of the government bills passed by the parliament and also stuck horns on the issue of elections in Punjab after the dissolution of the provincial assembly by his party. Even weeks before the end of his tenure two tweets by him regarding the official secret act and army act passed by the parliament and sent to his office for final approval.

After notification issued by the law ministry, his tweets denying the approval from him were still a controversy. It was reported in some media that President Alvi didn't want to stay in office after the completion of his term but after a media-reported meeting of the President with the Army chief and DG ISI which got no rebuttal the president decided to stay in office till the election of next president

and it is also reported through sources by some journalists that President would not get involved in any confrontation on issues like elections date. Which indicates smooth functioning from the presidency onwards. Some hundred meters away from the presidency in the highest court of the country a top and the most important change was due that was of the charge of Justice Qazi Faiz Essa replacing Justice Umar Ata Bandial as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Two judges with 360-degree opposite opinions in many matters. In fact, Justice Bandial earned a reputation as pro Imran Khan judge and he is criticized for giving favors to the PTI chief in many of his cases by constituting a bench of specific judges repeatedly. On the other hand, Justice Faiz Essa is the judge who faced a reference against him in Imran Khan's tenure. Justice Essa openly differed with CJP on many issues including the act passed by the parliament giving authority over the constitution of benches and the right of suo moto to a three-member committee of three senior judges. It is assumed that under Justice Essa as Chief Justice, the working of the top court would be changed but the hope of PTI to get some relief from the courts would also diminish.

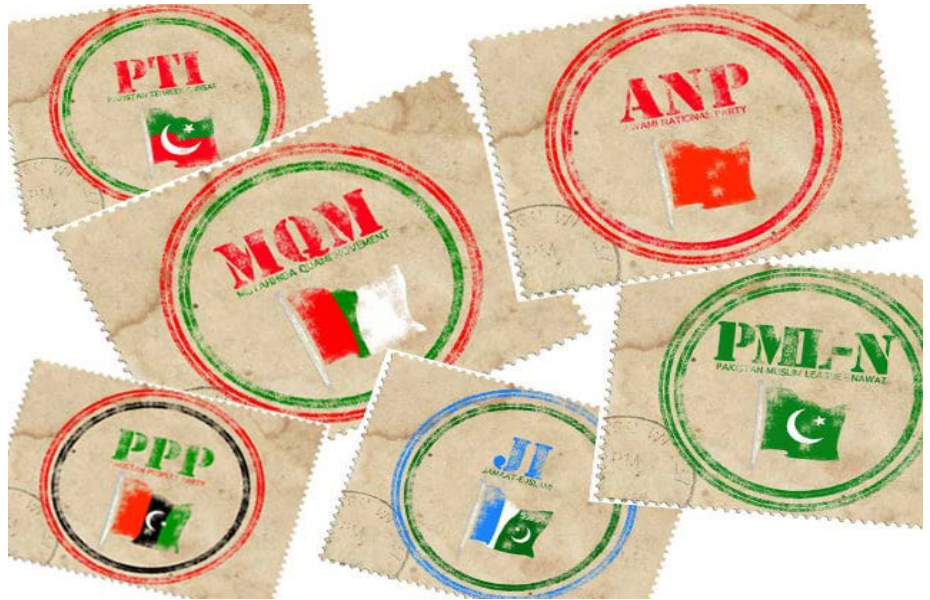




## Prevailing uncertainties in the political arena

If we go by the book the country should have been in elections mod, which was due before 10 November as per the constitution of the country elections have to be held within ninety days after the dissolution of the assemblies by the president but something happened some days before the dissolution which comes in way of this strait line when the council of common interest approved the new census and now its election commission's decision that after the new census, it is obligatory that new delimitation must take place and the electoral body also issued a schedule for this delimitation process which has to be completed in the end of November and then the election schedule would be issued for next 60 to 90 days. This means elections could be held in January or February next year. There is no specific date announced yet which creates doubts, concerns, and uncertainties. Initially, it was debated that the President has the authority to announce the election date and he called the ECP officials for a meeting to discuss the matter but the ECP refused to join any such meeting calling it their authority to announce the date of elections and later the law ministry justified this take. What do Political parties think? All the major parties are passing through a phase of uncertainties within themselves too.

PTI is uncertain whether they could be allowed to take part in elections. It's to leadership is behind the bar or out of the scene to avoid arrests. Its chairman after



getting a sentence from the district court in the Toshakhana case was disqualified by the ECP which still continues. Khan is under interrogation in some other serious cases like Cypher and the 190 million pounds deal case besides the cases of the 9th May incidents. So It is uncertain whether either PTI leadership or even the party could take part in the elections or not.

PMLN has some other kinds of uncertainties: its top leadership was not in the country last month Shehbaz Sharif announced the date of the party Quaid Nawaz Sharif's return in mid of October but it's still unclear whether he will come or not on the date announced. Some sources in PMLN revealed that Nawaz wants to get some assurances. Keeping in view the legal ground he has to surrender himself before the court as his sentence was suspended to

allow him to go abroad on medical grounds and for bail, suspension of his sentence, or acquittal, but Nawaz wants he didn't have to go to jail and secondly, he wants to come back when there will be some clear indications of election date will be announced. So sources say that Nawaz's return depends upon such conditions. But the PMLN candidates want their leadership to be back as early as possible to get into the election campaign.

PPP was the major ally of our government and in fact, its members were part of the CCI meeting which approved the new census but recently party leadership demanded an election within ninety days. Bilawal the PPP chairman was also among those who demanded elections before November. Recently the head of PP parliamentarians Asif Ali Zardari in a statement showed his confidence in the ECP in conducting elections according to the constitution. His statement was actually a denial of his party stance. Interestingly when Bilawal asked to respond in a media interaction he disowned his father's statement and said that what he was saying was his party's CEC view media could approach the former president to clarify his statement. These remarks expressed by Bilawal hinted at a rift among the party's top leadership on the issue of election timings. It's for sure that Uncertainty about elections could continue till the date is announced but the month of September would also impact the political scenario, especially after the change of leadership in the apex court of the country.





# Despair and hope as Chief Justice Bandial retires

By Tahir Niaz

The nation has seen much political turbulence during the past one and a half years. From Imran's ouster to his landing in jail to saving the country from default and having a vibrant caretaker government, the situation took to a new height in terms of controversy and subsequent instability.

However, a lot more is being anticipated after the 'big' retirement. Chief Justice of Pakistan Justice Umar Ata Bandial retired on September 16, 2023, after attaining the age of 65 years. Following his retirement, Justice Qazi Faez Isa will take over as Chief Justice of Pakistan on September 17, 2023.

On the other hand, President Dr Arif Alvi's five-year tenure also ended on September 8, 2023; however, he is likely to stay in office even after the expiration of his stipulated Constitutional term. Article 44 of the Constitution describes the term of office of President. (1) Subject to the Constitution, the President shall hold office for a term of five years from the day he enters upon his office: Provided that the President shall, notwithstanding the expiration of his term, continue to hold office until his successor enters upon his office.

Nonetheless, the question is if the big retirement would mark the beginning of a new era in the political history of the country. Whether the country's politics would take some unusual turn after the new chief justice assumes office.

There is quite a margin to anticipate something between 'despair and hope' from both sides of the political divide. People who stood back of the now-retired chief Justice fear that things could take an adverse turn soon after he goes home. Some believe that some important decisions announced by the judiciary under CJ Bandial might be reversed and those who tried to put resistance in this regard will be just a matter of a notification.

If ex-CJP Bandial became controversial while in office, the new chief justice has it even before assuming charge as the top judge given the announcements like Nawaz



will return to Pakistan once the new chief justice takes over.

According to Khawaja Asif, a Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) stalwart, Nawaz Sharif will return to Pakistan after CJP Bandial's retirement. Talking to a private TV channel on July 19, 2023, he said the PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif is expected to return to Pakistan after the retirement of Chief Justice of Pakistan Umar Ata Bandial adding that they have a threat from the behavior of "good to see you" — referring to the then top judge.

The ex-defense minister also expressed his severe concerns over the behavior of the apex court, especially during the past few months, saying: "One should not take the risk of Nawaz Sharif's return" in this situation". It is pertinent to mention here that CJP Bandial-led three-member bench on May 11 directed the anti-graft agency, National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to present PTI Chairman Imran Khan two days after his arrest in a graft case. Adhering to the court orders, Khan was presented before the bench under a tight security cordon. At the outset when the ex-PM

came to the rostrum, he was greeted by the ex-chief justice who welcomed him by saying: "Good to see you."

Nawaz Sharif — who has been in self-imposed exile in London since November 2019 — was thrown out as the PM on July 28, 2017, after being disqualified from holding public office by the Supreme Court in a verdict.

The five-member Supreme Court bench had unanimously disqualified Nawaz for failing to disclose his un-withdrawn receivables constituting assets from UAE-based Capital FZE in his nomination papers for the 2013 General Election, stating that this meant he was not "honest" and "truthful", as per Constitution of Pakistan.

The Shehbaz-led ruling coalition passed several laws apparently to 'salvage' their leadership. Several NAB amendments were introduced which benefited the leadership of PML-N and the PPP, as per the court observations. However, these amendments were termed null and void, meaning thereby all the cases against the top leadership of the two parties are open, again.





Many more important petitions are in the pipeline to test the patience and judgment of the new chief justice of Pakistan, Justice Qazi Faez Isa.

The ball is now in Justice Isa's court. Maryam demands 'overturning' Nawaz's conviction. In February this year, PML-N Senior Vice-President and Chief Organiser Maryam Nawaz demanded redressal of "injustice" against her father Nawaz Sharif before the next elections take place in the country.

Maryam, while addressing the PML-N workers' convention in Sahiwal, said: "Elections will be held after the conviction of innocent Nawaz Sharif is overturned." The PML-N leader also said: "Justice first, then elections will be held." She added that polls would be conducted in the country when the vote is given respect.

At a time when the Supreme Court seemingly became a victim of political acrimony, reports from other fronts are also not very encouraging. Pakistan is in uproar as protests over soaring energy and fuel prices continue. Protests against rising electricity and petrol prices have rocked Pakistan over the past week with thousands taking to streets and setting their electricity bills alight across the country.

The cost of electricity has doubled in the last three months to about 50 rupees a kilowatt. Petrol prices have shot up from Rs 262 per liter in June to Rs 305 in September.

Pakistan is in the midst of political and economic turmoil. Inflation is hitting a record rate of 36.4%. Protests turned violent in Karachi some days back when a worker from K-Electric, which generates and distributes power to the city, was attacked by an enraged mob.

In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, the energy department requested police protection for its staff and installations after threats of attacks by protesters.

The protests came to an end at the weekend when shops and markets across Pakistan closed in response to a call by the trader unions. The two-day strike is estimated to have cost the country an estimated 10bn rupees.

According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the price of wheat flour has more than

doubled since August 2022. Sugar is also more expensive.

Amidst economic turmoil, there have been calls for traders to shut markets by 10 pm. The move has been resisted by traders in the past.

The country's economy is on the brink of disaster, society is politically polarised, terror attacks are increasing and, inflation soaring ever higher, many in Pakistan find themselves struggling to feed themselves and their children. As the economy is struggling, foreign reserves have plummeted to one of the lowest levels in decades.



Meanwhile, militants continue to launch attacks, often targeting security forces. Pakistan's armed forces recently said there had been 436 terror attacks so far in 2023.

As the crisis on the economic and security front is spiraling, the former prime minister Imran Khan's personality lies at the heart of the political crisis. Political uncertainty is making things even more difficult for the manager to deal with.

The Analysts believe that the current situation was sparked when Imran Khan was ousted from office in April 2022 in a vote of no-confidence. Khan responded

with a series of rallies and a long march to the capital, Islamabad, ending the protest with a bullet injury.

According to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, there are over 180 cases against Khan and charges include terrorism, corruption, and contempt of court. But the party has been terming this all an outcome of the "law of the jungle". While the other side, in turn, has accused Mr Khan of acting out of ego and narcissism and against the interests of the country.

The battle that marred the upper judiciary's work during the past 16 months has

weakened the institution. The previous PDM government accused some judges of bias in Imran Khan's favor, and the division and disagreement led to a kind of constitutional crisis.

General elections are due to take place by the end of this year or at the start of 2024 but the fear is that it could be delayed using the same reasons used to delay the Punjab and KP assembly polls. Even if elections happen soon, they will lack acceptability unless and until the political parties decide what they want to do with the nation. It is up to the politicians to come to an agreement irrespective of who assumes the office of the top judge.



# The challenges for Chief Justice amidst a campaign for civilian supremacy



By Asadullah

Justice Qazi Faez Isa is going to assume office as the Chief Justice of Pakistan on September 17, at a time when the Supreme Court Bar Association started the 'movement' for the release of political prisoners, and against the civilians' trials under the Army Act. The lawyers also demanded the army to stick to its constitutional role; seek a treason case against the Election Commission of Pakistan officials and insist on abolishing the perks of state officials on public expense.

The resolution passed at the All Pakistan Lawyers Convention organized by the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) reads like a charge sheet against the state: it demands the release of all political prisoners, an end to the security establishment's meddling in political matters, upholding the Constitution and rule of law, and the primacy of civilian supremacy. It also opposes the trial of any civilian in military courts, calling it a negation of fair trial, due process, and other fundamental rights, demands general elections within the 90-day period defined in the Constitution; warns the government to stop interfering in

the judiciary's working; and seeks punishment for those who continue to defy the court's orders.

These demands can hardly be described as radical or revolutionary. Indeed, they seem rather straightforward in that they simply reiterate that the respective roles each stakeholder has been assigned by the state must be adhered to. The legal observers however termed the strikes as a campaign for the upcoming election of the SCBA scheduled to be held next month. Since the SCBA opposed the civilians' court-martial, this would be the first and foremost challenge to the upcoming CJP Isa as he always speaks for the rule of law and supremacy of the constitution.

The outgoing Chief Justice Bandial took up the petitions against the military courts earlier this year, however, kept the matter inconclusive and left it for his successor Justice Isa. Justice Bandial in fact, included Justice Isa in the bench, however, the CJP designate recused himself owing to his stance on the suo motu powers of the Chief Justice. In the last hearing on the military court, Justice Bandial observed that the

Supreme Court would not allow the army to carry out any unconstitutional act, stressing that the military was meant to serve the country.

Leading a six-member bench for hearing a set of petitions against the civilians' trials in military courts, the chief justice emphasized that those who built their case on the Constitution and the law would be successful.

The army leadership decided court martial of those who attacked the military installation following the arrest of Chairman Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) chairman Imran Khan on May 9.

Following the unprecedented violence and riots of the arrest, violence erupted after the arrest the authorities decided to try those involved in attacks under the Army Act and the Official Secrets Act. The move was, however, challenged in the apex court. Justice Bandial remarked that the incidents of May 9 were of a serious nature, adding that it pained him to hear remarks about the Pakistan Army being equipped to open fire on protestors on May 9.





However, throughout the hearing of the petitions against military courts, the bench did not reach to a logical conclusion and left this matter to be decided by the next CJP. The observers are of the view that the like-minded judges dragged Justice Isa into the controversy by adding him in the bench but following his recusal, the matter lingered on. Subsequently, being the Chief Justice, Justice Faez Isa has to deal with this crucial issue. Justice Isa was the senior puisne judge of the Supreme Court, however, Justice Bandial did not include him in the bench for hearing any important case. When Justice Isa was notified as the next CJP in June this year, he complained that despite his predecessor, incumbent CJP Umar Ata Bandial did not consult with him in the composition of benches as well as other crucial affairs of the apex court.

Justice Isa's note is public and was read by him during the start of the hearing of constitutional petitions against the trial of civilians before military courts under the Army Act. However, three paras were not read out by him during the hearing wherein he complained that CJP Bandial never consulted with him as well as the other senior judge, Justice Sardar Tariq Masood, in the composition of benches and other important affairs. The clash between the CJP designate and the incumbent one has continued throughout the tenure of the latter. Harsh words were exchanged



between them a couple of times, especially during the Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP) meeting on the appointment of SC judges last year. Justice Isa in his note says that there is a precedent in the apex court that the consultation is always made with senior judges regarding the composition of benches as well as other crucial affairs. Justice Bandial led bench has suspended the legislation to streamline the suo motu powers, while the apex court has set aside the identical legislation that expanded the scope of review proceedings.

In a recent hearing, the CJP termed the Supreme Court Practice and Procedure Bill as an attempt to interfere in the domain of the judiciary. It is expected that the upcoming CJP would rationalize powers of taking suo motu notice. In an interaction with the students on April 19, Justice Isa said: "I could be wrong but in Article 184(3) the word suo motu does not even exist", explaining that it only included matters of "public interest" and the provision of fundamental rights. "The way I understand, this space was left for the oppressed, for the brickkiln workers, for bonded laborers, for women denied education, and children forced into labor" because ordinary legal provisions could not tend to their plight," he continued. Article 184(3) sets out the apex court's original jurisdiction and empowers it to take notice of matters involving the question of "public importance" with reference to the "enforcement of any of the fundamental rights" of the people. "Sometimes this provision has been used for very good purposes but sometimes for really bad ones," said Justice Isa, stressing that the suo motu notices should be dealt with "great care" because there was no constitutional space for appeal against it. Justice Isa acknowledged that some of his colleagues believed that "only the chief justice had the power" to take suo motu notices, adding however, that "the Constitution does not state this".





# Ignoring the President of Pakistan means ignoring the State

*This is a great insult not to President Dr Arif Alvi but to President's office, and certainly a wrong message all over the world that Pakistan as a nation has still not grown*

By Col. (Retd) Mukhtar Ahmed Butt

There cannot be a bigger tragedy for the country when the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of Pakistan with a cap of nuclear state writes a letter to Chief Election Commissioner of Pakistan to come for the mutual discussion to decide election date, he not only refuses to go to him and writes back that President cannot suggest election date and words to that effect. This is a great insult not to President Dr Arif Alvi but to President's office, and certainly a wrong message all over the world that Pakistan as a nation has still not grown. Chief Election Commissioner ECP had all the right to disagree with the President but should not have refused to go to him and in response replied back his communication. If the institutional heads start indulging in disrespect of the President's office and disregard his orders it causes no harm to the President but damage to the highest state institution of the country.

Unfortunately, everyone is busy interfering in others' domains, and not doing their own work has complicated the issues. Each lawyer has his own interpretation of law and considers himself the only expert whereas this sort of attitude has weakened all the institutions of the state. There used to be an institution of the higher judiciary that had the sole prerogative to interpret the constitutional provisions that are now past because the previous government including the PM, Law minister, and others openly said that the decision of SC shall not be implemented.

This type of attitude is certainly not acceptable in any democratic setup. In the recent past, we have witnessed a great confrontation between various state organs that has virtually shaken the foundation of the state. There is no one to correct the situation and things are certainly getting out of control. It was the sacred duty of the media to create checks and balances and plead the case of the people but their leaning towards certain political groups has created more uncertainties between rulers and the public at large. No amount of criticism and different stories floated against each other has done any harm to individuals except in giving headlines news and fodder for talk shows and only damaging the reputation of the individuals and parties.

We have seen how the burning and basic issue of holding elections in 90 days is being sidelined under different interpretations. If we glance through articles of the constitution from 8 to 28 it guarantees basic fundamental rights to ordinary citizens but are being flouted openly, Under Article 10 if some citizen is arrested by LEA must be produced in the court within 24 hours but practically it is not being done therefore it has resulted in forced disappearances of the citizens. Likewise, there are many clauses pertaining to the fundamental rights of citizens but not being followed. These days the burning issue is the holding of general elections in the country. Under Article 224 after the dissolution of assemblies' elections must take place in 90 days according to the constitution, but ECP wants to delay under the cover of new delimitation simply means to



render the constitution ineffective. We have seen that after the dissolution of Punjab and KPK assemblies' elections were not held within 90 days.

God forbid if general elections are not held in 90 days under any pretext that would simply mean that the 1973 constitution is no longer workable therefore this needs to be changed as it has failed to provide a solution due to a political crisis. History is full of examples where such grave violations have resulted in the breakup of countries. We did not accept the results of the winning party of Mujeeb Rahman and lost half of the country. Political rivals are to be defeated or eliminated only through political process, any other method used shall prove counterproductive. The nation is protesting against inflated power bills with so many additional taxes imposed for which there is no justification at all. Before imposing taxes these must be discussed in the assembly and approved by the house. The 1973 constitution also gives guarantees of education health shelter and food security so protest on only power shall not make any difference. It looks that sooner or later 1973 Constitution shall be declared non-workable so that a new constitution is brought in place to suit their own conveniences.

This political instability and the mess created by PDM for sixteen months has proved to be a disaster for the economic meltdown of the economy. This can only be controlled by holding free fair and transparent elections with transparent ballot boxes in 90 days. Any political engineering at this stage, when polarization is at its peak, shall plunge the country into further chaos and confusion. Pakistan in general and Pakistanis in particular can ill afford the continued political confrontation in the country. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the interim government to concentrate on holding free and fair elections in 90 days. If the present CEC cannot hold elections within 90 days which is his primary responsibility, he must be shown the door. The writer is an ex-serviceman and a Karachi-based renowned analyst.



# The SIFC's 100 billion dollars' investment target and prevailing challenges

*Everyone in the country and abroad knows that fetching foreign investment without political and economic stability is a herculean task*



By Javed Mahmood

Army Chief General Asim Munir created a new controversy during his recent meeting with leading businesspersons in Lahore. General Asim Munir, who is a member of the newly-created Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), told businessmen that he would line up \$100 billion in foreign investment through the SIFC.

He also told the businessmen about the SIFC strategies to attract huge foreign investment from Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and other Gulf countries. Army Chief also reminded the leading businessmen that not a single political party was sincere with Pakistan. General Asim also mentioned the names of a few politicians who started their professional life on motorcycles and now they were living abroad. Karachi's famous businessperson Zubair Motiwala disclosed this in a TV talk show.

Interestingly, the army chief held politicians responsible for corruption, but he did not mention any former

army chiefs and generals who have done more corruption and more harm to Pakistan than politicians. Hence, the mindset is just to defame politicians and overlook mega corruption and malpractices of generals whether serving or ex-servicemen.

## Pros and Cons of the SIFC

Now we discuss here the benefits of establishing the Special Investment Council and the challenges that it could face in generating foreign investment while keeping in mind the over-ambitious target of \$100 billion. Everyone in the country and abroad knows that fetching foreign investment without political and economic stability is a herculean task. As the country has been going through political turbulence since the ouster of Imran Khan's government and a consistent economic downturn, it seems a challenging task to attract billions of dollars in investment.

Additionally, at present, Pakistan has

been going through a political transition phase as the caretaker government is supposed to hold elections in three to four months. In this situation, it will be difficult for foreign investors to put at stake their billions of dollars amid political and economic uncertainty in the country.

Moreover, Pakistan is in the IMF program under the 9-month stand-by arrangement, valid to March 24, 2024. During this period, Pakistan will experience more economic troubles in the form of frequent hikes in the cost of utilities and petroleum prices. It is also another drawback for lining up foreign investment. In this scenario, why would investors make billions of dollars in investment in Pakistan when they are foreseeing a crisis in the country? For the past many days, all the people – whether traders, industrialists, businessmen, or the common people have been protesting against an unprecedented hike in electricity bills, and the government was not in a position to provide any relief to the masses just

because of the IMF's program. Why would foreign investors come to Pakistan, why they are seeing Pakistani businessmen in serious trouble after a manifold increase in the cost of utilities?

Meanwhile, a few days ago, law enforcement agencies launched a crackdown against the smuggling and hoarding of US dollars, sugar, and other commodities. This strategy has given a blow to the smuggling and hoarding tendency, but the masses are still to see relief from the nationwide crackdowns.

These days, the cost of utilities (especially electricity) in Pakistan has gone up even beyond the rates prevailing in the United States, Europe, Canada, and Gulf countries and this is also a big disadvantage for foreign investors. It is because the growing cost of utilities erodes the profitability of investors and businessmen.



Additionally, after the expiry of the IMF program in March 2024, Pakistan will once again be facing a default-like situation and the government will have to run after the IMF and others to get more loans. And this is not a good situation for foreign investors at all.

## Benefits of the SIFC

Nonetheless, there are some benefits of the high-powered SIFC. As the PM and army chief are the members of the council, it can discourage red tape culture in the country, expedite foreign investment cases, and offer incentives.

For example, the SIFC has unveiled a new visa policy, targeting increased investments from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations and other countries. The decision follows two days of thorough discussions by the council, which counts the army chief

among its members. The SIFC was established earlier this year to attract foreign investments from the Gulf nations and other friendly countries.

However, Federal Law Minister Ahmad Irfan Aslam said that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) garnered significant funds from China, but the Western countries haven't made commitments to the SIFC yet. He said that the SIFC and CPEC had different scopes and sectors for Chinese investment. While CPEC focuses on roads, infrastructure, and energy projects, the SIFC allows investment in minerals and other areas that are not part of the corridor project.

Federal Law Minister claimed that agreements had reached an advanced level with GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

He said, "We will first sign the agreement with Saudi Arabia by the year's end."

In a video message released after chairing the SIFC's apex committee meeting, Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar said that important decisions regarding the new visa regime had been taken. He said Pakistani embassies would grant visas to business people who have a letter from either the host countries or any global business organization. Moreover, invitations from Pakistani chambers and entrepreneurs to foreign business people would also suffice for visa issuance.

The prime minister's secretariat said in a statement that the SIFC's second session was arranged to seek input from the ministries of foreign affairs, interior, information technology, national food security, and water resources to improve business and

investment climate in the country. Ministries presented comprehensive plans covering milestones, timelines, and solutions to overcome major challenges.

Moreover, addressing a press conference, Caretaker Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani said that Pakistan was pursuing proactive diplomacy and its relations with other countries are improving. He said the SIFC was briefed on Pakistan's relations with China, the United States, and other Middle East countries. He said GCC countries had shown interest in the investment council. Besides, Pakistan's relations with African countries would improve following the full implementation of the 'Look Africa' policy, he said, adding that steps were being taken to solve international investors' issues.

## \$100 billion investment

Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim highlighted the pivotal role of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), emphasizing its potential to attract substantial investments of up to \$100 billion from countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and others, during a meeting with LCCI President Kashif Anwar alongside prominent business figures in Lahore. Army Chief General Asim Munir assured business leaders that the currency exchange would be brought under the tax net, promoting transparency in dollar exchange rates and interbank rates. This will facilitate investment and unlock the potential for economic growth in Pakistan. To strengthen economic decision-making, the Chief Army revealed plans to establish task forces focused on economic affairs and various sectors. To sum up, the chief of army staff must sit with the SIFC and leading economists in Pakistan to evaluate the prevailing political and economic challenges and then firm up proposals to fetch foreign investment. Merely issuing statements ignoring ground realities is not enough to overcome the economic challenges.

In my opinion, the SIFC must find a way to get rid of the IMF that is the only way to bolster foreign investment and give relief to the masses in the country, including the business community. When the country's environment is conducive for our own people, foreigners will definitely like to make investments here in a big way.



# Analysis: COAS' consultations reveal 'blueprint for revival'

*Experts argue that for sustainable economic recovery, SIFC should also focus on structural reforms, not just foreign investment*



By Khalid Hasnain

Recent meetings between the army chief and representatives of the country's business community, in Karachi and Lahore, have revealed the outlines of a plan to revive the country's economy by mobilising all resources through the prime minister-led Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC).

The chief of army staff, who is a member of the SIFC's apex committee, reportedly assured the business community of making all-out efforts to ensure transparency in dollar rates in open and interbank markets, besides bringing money exchanges under the purview of taxation, eliminating smuggling at the borders with Iran and Afghanistan and improving tax collection.

The COAS also explained the SIFC's role in attracting investments of up to \$100 billion from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and other countries. However, Gen Asim Munir's meetings with traders are not

a new thing on part of the military leadership, not is he the first one to do so. Former COAS, Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa also held similar meetings with the business community, reportedly in October 2019 and June 2021, to allay their concerns over the deteriorating economic situation in the country.

During recent meetings with businesspersons, the COAS said that he believes \$100bn investments in various sectors would massively help strengthen the country's economy.

"I think these investments would leave a positive impact on our economy. It will bring dollars, strengthen the rupee and resolve our forex-related issues," said Zubair Moti-wala, the chief executive of the Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, in a recent TV appearance.

He said the COAS was of the view that the Rs1.3 trillion being spent on the

state-owned enterprises should be stopped and they should be privatised.

The business community leaders, during meetings with the army chief, highlighted various issues, including smuggling at the western and northwestern borders.

"When we raised this issue in meeting, the COAS said a task force has been constituted which will control smuggling very forcefully," said Irfan Iqbal Sheikh of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

According to Mian Anjum Nisar, the FPCCI's Businessmen Panel chairman, the meeting focused on several issues the country's economy has been passing through. "We found him [army chief] committed to doing something in a bid to end crises by all means to benefit the public," Mr Nisar, who attended the meeting in Lahore, said.

## Structural reforms

While Gen Munir's huddles with the business community are generally being termed as a positive development, economic experts view them from a different angle. They say that efforts to revamp the economy must be carried out by ending political uncertainty and holding the general elections on time.

They term the army chief's role very effective in giving a push for quick decision-making on the part of bureaucracy to ensure ease of doing business in the country.

They are of the opinion that the role of SIFC shouldn't be limited to bringing only foreign direct investment (FDI) to the country, but it should also focus on introducing structural reforms to strengthen the economy.

"During the period between 2015 and 2020, the country received FDI worth \$62 billion, either in the form of loans or other kinds of inflows. But despite having such a huge investment, we are still standing at the door of IMF for loan," says Dr Sajid Amin, senior economist at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI).

"Such investment can only resolve our liquidity-related issues (flow of dollar, exchange rate, foreign reserves, etc)," he says, adding that the government should take a firm decision to introduce some structural reforms to widen the tax base, improve tax collection, debt repayments, privatise state-owned enterprises and introduce a tax-facilitation system.

Mr Amin feels that holding of elections on time strengthens the democratic system. "After elections, the SIFC and the new government should work together to steer the country out of the economic crisis." He believes that Pakistan would have to go for another IMF programme if it opts for such structural reforms.

The federal government issued a notification on June 17, constituting two committees of the SIFC, aimed at attracting investment from the Gulf states in the fields of defence, agriculture, minerals, information technology and energy.

Through the notification, the Shehbaz

Sharif-led government constituted an apex committee of the SIFC under the command of the prime minister. Its members include nine federal ministers, the army chief (by special invitation), all chief ministers, a national coordinator (from the Pakistan Army) and the PM's special assistant, who works as the committee's secretary.

Later, the composition and scope of the SIFC were also made part of the law through an amendment to the Board of Investment (BoI) Ordinance, 2001.



"SIFC is a powerful body that was constituted to end red tape, giving a push to resolve various issues related to NOCs, refunds, approval, etc, quickly," explains eminent economist Haroon Sharif.

But the main issue, the former state minister and BoI chairman says, is how to restore the private sector's confidence by introducing reforms in the industry, dispute resolutions and economic zones. These, he argues, cannot be done by the SIFC alone. "Even if we find some money, we cannot do it with this."

There should be no role of bureaucracy in the board's affairs; it should be given to professionals from the private sector if "we want to bring investments", he maintains.

Mr Sharif also calls for ending the role of bureaucrats in the process of privatising state-owned enterprises, as only the private

sector's professionals can better assess and make the pricing of assets.

While the economists seek structural reforms side by side bringing FDI by the SIFC, journalist Kamran Khan — who claimed to be privy to developments in power corridors — said that the premier intelligence agency, in collaboration with the relevant civilian agencies, will play a central role in eliminating smuggling along the Iranian and Afghan borders, confronting de-dollarisation of economy.

"The developments in last 24 hours confirmed that the COAS Gen Asim Munir will now lead Pakistan's battle for economic survival from the front. In [recent] meetings... [he] resolved to implement an ambitious plan to reform the economy," Mr Khan said in his post on X, formerly Twitter. But there are still some who view the latest development with some degree of trepidation. Sharing a report from March 2000, analyst and think tanker Mosharraf Zaidi recently pointed out how similar the stated purpose of the SIFC and the Musharraf-era Corporate & Industrial Restructuring Corporation (CIRC) seems to be. "CIRC's purpose? To revitalise the economy by reviving non-functioning public sector entities. Sound familiar?" he asked, rhetorically, in a post on X.

Courtesy Dawn



# Despite the crisis, Hubco's profit doubled in FY23, amounting to Rs 62 billion: PIA in trouble

*According to the results, the company's top line saw a YoY increase of 17.60% in FY23, reaching Rs114.26 billion compared to Rs97.16 billion*



By J. Choudhry

The HUBCO's profit doubled in the financial year 2022-23. It increased to Rs 62 billion, from Rs 29.6 billion in the preceding fiscal year. The Hub Power Company (HUBCO) disclosed its financial results on Sept 12, for the year ended 30 June 2023. Its earnings per share increased to Rs44 per share compared to Rs 22 in the preceding year.

Along with the FY23 financial results, the board of directors of HUBCO has also announced a final cash dividend for the period ended June 30, 2023, at Rs6 per share i.e. 60%. In addition to the already paid interim dividends of Rs24 per share, totaling 240% during the financial year.

According to the results, the company's top line saw a YoY increase of 17.60% in FY23, reaching Rs114.26 billion compared to Rs97.16 billion in SPLY. The company managed to reduce its operating costs by 4.01% YoY in FY23, amounting to Rs61.48 billion, compared to Rs64.06 billion in FY22, thanks to improved expense management. The growth in sales and the reduction in operating costs resulted in a significant improvement of 59.55% in gross profit, which reached Rs52.78 billion compared to Rs33.10 billion in FY22.

Similarly, during the review period, other income increased by 68.78% YoY, reach-

ing Rs3.59 billion in FY23 compared to Rs2.12 billion in SPLY. On the expense side, the company witnessed a 33.03% YoY increase in general and administrative expenses, totaling Rs1.37 billion during the review period. Conversely, HUBCO's other expenses decreased significantly by 80% to Rs79.42 million compared to the Rs398.05 million recorded last year.

Profitability received a significant boost from a substantial 3.71x increase in the share of profit from associates and joint ventures, totaling Rs34.32 billion in FY23 compared to Rs9.32 billion in FY22. The company's finance costs rose by 2.44x YoY, standing at Rs19.32 billion, compared to Rs7.93 billion in FY23, primarily due to higher interest rates. On the tax front, the company paid higher taxes amounting to Rs8.41 billion, compared to the Rs5.53 billion paid in the corresponding period of the previous year, representing a YoY increase of 52.20%.

## PIA's financial crisis deepens

Pakistan International Airline (PIA) cancelled many flights amid deepening financial crisis. PIA cancelled several domestic flights to and from Karachi as the airline failed to settle its dues with Pakistan State Oil (PSO) for fuel supply. Among the

canceled flights are two Karachi-Muscat bound flights and two-way domestic journey from Karachi to Faisalabad, Islamabad, and Lahore.

Additionally, departures from Karachi to Turbat, Bahawalpur, and Sukkur were also removed from the schedule. The national airline urgently sought funds from the government to address this crisis. Furthermore, scores of the PIA employees had not received their salaries. A spokesperson from PIA stated that the officials are negotiating with the Ministry of Finance. He said the airline would soon release salaries of employees.

Meanwhile, last week media reports alerted about the financial crisis in PIA. It could lead to the grounding 15 aircraft. The airline had to clear dues worth Rs20 billion, including payments for fuel, federal excise duty (FED), and lease payments. Any delay in settling these dues could result in 15 planes being taken out of operation, potentially leading to the suspension of more than 30 domestic flights.

Meanwhile, in response to the critical situation, the Ministry of Aviation acknowledged that the overhaul of PIA was a complex process requiring a year's time. However, they emphasized the importance of keeping the airline operational during this period.

# Pakistan's ongoing Battle Against Smuggling, Hoarding, and Power Theft: A Battle for Economic Stability

By Romana Afsheen

Smuggling, hoarding, and power theft have posed persistent challenges to Pakistan's economy and governance since its inception in 1947. Governments, both civilian and military, have implemented various measures to combat these issues. However, the effectiveness of these actions has often been questioned, and the reluctance to publicly name the culprits has raised concerns about transparency and accountability.

## Smuggling

Smuggling has been a recurring challenge for Pakistan due to its porous border with Afghanistan and a long coastline, making the country vulnerable to the illicit trade of goods, including narcotics, weapons, and consumer products. The government has implemented anti-smuggling policies and established agencies like the Anti-Smuggling Organization (ASO) to combat this menace.

During Ayub Khan's rule in the 1960s, efforts were made to control smuggling, but the problem persisted due to a lack of resources and corruption among law enforcement officials. Similarly, in the early 2000s, under the leadership of General Pervez Musharraf, the government aimed to tackle smuggling more aggressively. However, the challenge remained, with deep-rooted issues and corruption playing a significant role.

## Hoarding

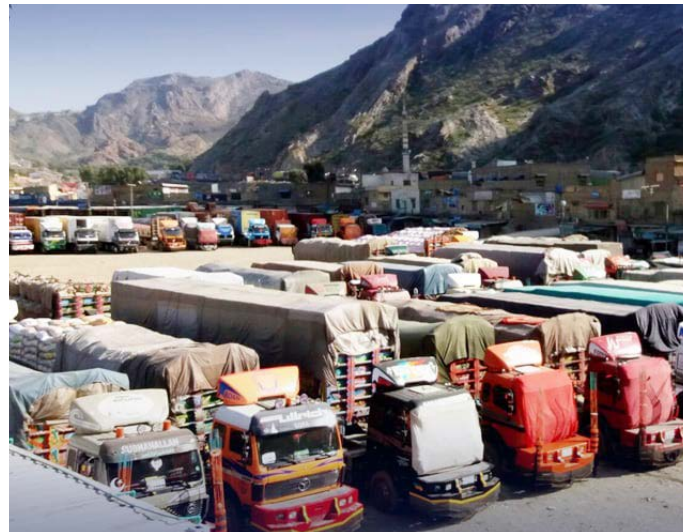
The sugar crisis has been a recurring nightmare for Pakistan's economy, characterized by hoarding, price manipulation, and a lack of transparency within the sugar industry. Investigations into these matters have often failed to yield substantial results, leading to public frustration.

In recent years, the government has initiated commissions of inquiry to probe the sugar crisis, but the names of influential figures allegedly involved in hoarding and price manipulation have not been publicly disclosed. This lack of transparency raises questions about the government's commitment to holding those responsible accountable.

## Power Theft

Electricity and power theft have been long-standing issues in Pakistan, contributing to massive financial losses for the government and frequent power outages. Various governments have launched campaigns to address these problems, including legal actions against power thieves and efforts to upgrade the power distribution infrastructure.

During Musharraf's tenure, the "Azadi Bijli" campaign aimed to combat power theft and improve power distribution. However, the results were mixed, and the problem persisted due to insufficient enforcement and accountability measures.



## Government Hesitancy to Name Culprits

The reluctance of governments to publicly disclose the names of hoarders, smugglers, and power thieves is a complex issue. It is essential to uphold the principles of due process, legal accountability, and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. Publicly naming individuals without concrete evidence can lead to legal complications and reputational damage.

Moreover, Pakistan's political landscape is often influenced by powerful individuals and vested interests. Naming and shaming those involved in illicit activities can result in political repercussions, leading to an environment where such actions are discouraged.

## Recent Crackdowns

The caretaker government, under the leadership of Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti, has taken significant steps to combat smuggling and illegal economic activities in Pakistan. These actions are aimed at promoting economic stability and addressing issues related to foreign currency, sugar hoarding, and petroleum product smuggling. Here is a rephrased and organized version of the provided information:

## Government's Grant of Powers to FIA

The caretaker government has decided to empower the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) extensively to combat various forms of smuggling, including US dollars, sugar, fertilizers, and petroleum products. This decision was made during a meeting chaired by Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti, and a notification has been issued to delegate additional authority to tackle smuggling.



## Expanded Focus of FIA

The FIA, which had already initiated crackdowns against US dollar smugglers, will now expand its efforts to combat the smuggling of sugar, fertilizers, petroleum products, US dollars, and other foreign currencies. The agency will have the authority to take necessary measures at all entry and exit points related to foreign currencies.

## Reporting and Focal Person

FIA's zonal directors have been instructed to provide daily reports to the agency's headquarters through relevant channels. Additionally, an inspector-level officer from FIA's anti-money laundering directorate has been appointed as the focal person for these activities.

## Crackdown on Dollar Smuggling

The government has initiated a sweeping crackdown on individuals and groups involved in dollar smuggling, hoarding, and organized crime cartels. This decisive action comes after government officials were identified as implicated in these illegal economic activities. The crackdown has led to a remarkable 3.5% appreciation of the Pakistani currency against the US dollar.

## Policy Reforms and Surveillance Upgrades

Official sources have revealed that major policy reforms are in progress, signaling a transformation in commodity and currency trading. The government also emphasizes the upgrading of surveillance systems at land, sea, and airports to combat illegal movements of goods and currency, with a clear stance that such activities will not be tolerated.

## Response to Crackdown

Reports indicate that currency smugglers have gone underground in response to the crackdown, allowing the Pakistani currency to regain over 5% in just two days. This crackdown is a significant step in the government's efforts to combat smuggling and promote economic stability.

## Crackdown on Sugar Hoarding

In addition to the crackdown on smuggling, the government has taken action against sugar hoarders. Sugar mill owners have offered



to supply sugar to the Punjab government at a reasonable rate of Rs140 per kg, following a crackdown that saw the arrest of dozens of hoarders and the seizure of hundreds of tonnes of sugar. This crackdown has led to a reduction in sugar prices in various cities and towns, providing relief to consumers.

## Crackdown on Gas and Electricity Theft

Similarly, a massive crackdown against gas theft has been launched, with 250 illegal meters and 47 illegal connections disconnected on the outskirts of Islamabad. In Rawalpindi, a divisional committee has been activated to check electricity theft, with a focus on commercial consumers and plans for action against domestic consumers in the second phase.



## Conclusion

To effectively combat these issues, Pakistan needs comprehensive and sustained efforts that prioritize transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

Ultimately, breaking free from the cycle of smuggling, hoarding, and power theft requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses the root causes, strengthens institutions, and promotes a culture of transparency and accountability.

The challenges of curbing smuggling, hoarding, and power theft in Pakistan have persisted for decades and transcended different political regimes. While various governments have attempted to address these issues, the results have often fallen short of expectations.

Public disclosure of names is a sensitive matter and must be handled with caution, ensuring that due process and legal accountability are upheld.

Crackdowns that primarily focus on apprehending lower-level individuals often fail to produce lasting results. Instead, prioritizing the capture of influential figures can be more effective. Influential individuals hold key positions within criminal networks, and their arrest can destabilize the entire operation, deter others, provide vital intelligence, and enhance public trust in law enforcement. This targeted approach not only yields immediate disruption but also has a more enduring impact on reducing criminal activities.

# The Economic Plight of Masses in Pakistan



By Muhammad Ghazanfar Sakrani

The world today is faced with uncertainties on various fronts. The solution to the Russia-Ukraine war remains out of sight, the future of oil prices which recently touched \$90/barrel and the revival of post-COVID economic recovery in China too remain in doubt.

Pakistanis are also facing the brunt of uncertainty, not just in its political landscape but also on the economic front.

Well, it is certain that the economic malaise is bound to worsen the already aggravated lifestyle of the common man. However, the extent of the pain yet to be faced by the masses remains uncertain.

Since the last year, the trouble for common Pakistanis in matching their expenses to income has increased manifold. The cost of living crisis was ignited by the inflated electricity bills for the last month which sparked country-wide protests. This leads the caretakers to join heads and discuss the possibility of relief provision for the masses.

Though the caretakers requested the fund to allow for the provision of relief which would affect recoveries by up to Rs6.5 billion, the fund paid no heed to this proposal. In fact, the fund expected the proposed plan may affect recoveries by more than Rs15 billion and asked the government to fill the financial gap of Rs15 billion.

Nepra authorized XWDiscos to levy a Rs1.46 per unit charge in consumers' electricity bills for September as part of fuel cost adjustment (FCA) charges which will further burden the masses rather than provide relief. The question arises, "Is there a light at the end of the tunnel or is the respite far-fetched?" The answer may be the latter!

The unprecedented hike in electricity rates followed by a surge in petrol prices by almost Rs40/litre since caretakers took charge has added fuel to the fire.

The official CPI figures for August 2023 clocked in at 27.4%, raising the eyebrows of experts. The figure also declined from 28.3% recorded in July, though enough to flare up the already burdened middle class. Amid hiking the margin of petrol and diesel by Rs3.5/litre, there exists a huge possibility of another round of surge in petrol prices by Rs.9.7/litre in the upcoming fortnightly review.

The effect of a hike in fuel prices isn't isolated, rather the trickledown effects are also felt in the prices of other commodities. The prices of essential items have almost doubled since last year. On the contrary, the earnings did not catch up with the rate of rising prices. The question again arises, "Is there still a light at the end of the tunnel or is the respite far-fetched?" The answer may be the latter!

Amid surging inflation, the policy rate which is already at the record high level of 22% is expected to go up by at least 150bps as depicted in the recent T-bill auction. The 3-month yield touched 24.499% while the yield on the 12-month paper crossed north of 25% in the recent auction.

The hike will adversely affect not just the private sector which is already shying away from the debt market but also the government who remained the largest borrower for commercial banks for the last 4 years.

This increased debt servicing may enhance the fiscal slippage leading to a shortfall in the fiscal position of the government, and the cycle of fiscal adjustment may go on and on.

The condition of common Pakistani remains dire, to say the least. People do not hesitate to sell their valuables just to pay off their utility bills. The electricity bills may be taking the lion's share of a common man's expense budget after the food, rent and other essential items. In such a case, cutting the coat according to the cloth remains impossible.

All eyes are on the caretakers, hopefully, they will be able to take care of the masses. The times ahead may be more tough!!!

Courtesy Mettis Global New



# Innovative changes introduced recently by the SECP in the procedure of election of companies' directors appears to be 'Ultra Vires' the companies act, 2017

By Abdul Rehman Qureshi

During the seventies, it was considered expedient by the relevant Government that the method of Keeping close control and running business of companies through their Managing Agents be abolished and a democratic system for electing directors by the members on the Board of companies through cumulative voting be introduced. In that context, "The Companies (Managing Agency and Election of Directors) Order, 1972 was issued. As a result, all existing Agreements or Contracts entered into by the companies with their Managing Agents were terminated forthwith. The Managing Agents and the directors nominated by them ceased to hold their respective offices. The main logic behind these reforms as stated was protection of the interests of minority shareholders of the Companies. The newly introduced method of electing directors by the members in the general meetings provided a very simple and transparent manner of election of directors and consequential appointment of Chief Executive Officer for a term of three years. These reforms were appreciated by the investors and also accepted willingly by the business community. This system worked so smoothly that while reviewing the age old Companies Act, 1913 (the Act) in eighties, the time tested procedure of appointment of directors, their removal, if warranted and the arrangement of filling the casual vacancies occurring due to any reason were provided and incorporated in the revised Company Law i.e. "The Companies Ordinance, 1984". The said Law remained in the field till 2017 when after a prolonged deliberation, it was also repealed and substituted by the new 'Companies Act' enforced on 30th May 2017.

Keeping in view the new developments during the period, the ground realities and practical difficulties faced by the corporate sector, appropriate provisions were inserted and enforced through the revised Company Law but the existing procedure of appoint



ment/election of directors including the Chief Executives and Chairperson was not disturbed and all the time tested related provisions were adopted/incorporated in the revised Company Law. However, in order to keep the level of our Corporate Governance in line with the International Standards, the Listed Companies (Code of Corporate Governance) Regulations, 2019 (the Regulations) were reviewed and few innovative changes related to the role of independent directors, providing also space for the females compulsory representation on the Board of "Public Interest Companies (PICs)" were inserted in the Act and Regulations notified thereunder. However, the provisions related to appointment of independent directors, sub-section (3) of section 166 of the Act specifically stated that "independent directors of a company shall be elected in the same manner as other directors are elected in terms of the provisions of section 159 of the Act.

Though section 154 of the Act specified the minimum number of directors which must have a company including compulsory representation of a female on the Boards of PICs, yet a uniform procedure of their

appointment through a system of cumulative voting has been provided under sections 159 and 166(3) of the Companies Act, 2017. Recently, the SECP, ignoring the spirit of statutory provisions has introduced a separate voting system for the election of three categories of directors of a company like females, independent and other directors. According to the newly inserted Regulation 7A in the Listed Companies (Code of Corporate Governance) Regulations, 2019, it shall now be mandatory that in future voting for election of directors of listed companies shall be held separately for the three categories i.e. female directors; independent directors; and other directors.

In my view the method of separate voting for the three categories will be defeating the spirit of time tested 'cumulative voting system' as the majority shareholders shall always be successful to elect the persons of their choice on the basis of their majority voting powers and they will be depriving the minority shareholders while electing a female and independent directors as separate classes.

So far the election of third category of “other directors” is concerned, they will also be elected by the majority shareholders having all the seats in their pocket. It may be kept in mind that when there is a competition amongst the less number of seats, a higher percentage of votes is needed to win which can easily be managed by the majority group.

Thus, in view of the position discussed above, it may be noted that the amendments introduced in the procedure of voting system through the SRO 906(1)/2023 dated July 7, 2023 being “ultra vires” the specific provisions contained in sections 159 and 166 of the Companies Act, 2017 are neither workable nor in the interest of minority shareholders. In fact, the newly introduced amendments have defeated the basic theme of the ‘cumulative voting system’ which was a very simple and time tested procedure in the field since 1972. The existing system provided under section 159 of the Act takes care of the interests of minority shareholders which as a result of division of votes during the election process, enable them to secure their representation by electing few members on the Board of respective companies.

So far as the appointment of independent and a female director is concerned, it may be considered in light of the prevailing corporate culture in our country and the ground realities. In this context, I had already highlighted through my comments on the draft of proposed amendments that when so called independent directors and a female member are elected with the support of voting powers possessed by the majority group of the company’s sponsors, the independent position of such directors is necessarily compromised from the day one of their appointment. Therefore, I had recommended that following the policy/practice of Singapore, the appointment of independent directors including a female director may be left to the elected Boards of listed companies. The Board of the respective company must have the privilege to select the persons of their choice from the ‘databank’ maintained by the Pakistan Institute of Governance (PICG) or some other institution nominated by the SECP. In support of my recommendations, I had quoted provisions of the Act related to appointment of Chief Executive of a

company which permits the elected Board of the company concerned to nominate/appoint a person from amongst the elected directors or any outsider fit and proper professional, of their choice may be selected from the market. The person so appointed by the elected directors need not even be shareholder of the respective company. Similarly the representation of a female should be on merit and the Board be allowed to elect a qualified person from the data maintained by the PICG. If the SECP carries out a survey and breaks down the female representation on the Boards of PICs, it will find out that a large majority of female Boards’ members are close relatives of the respective Boards members who irrespective of their qualification or fitness for the highly responsible position were

it is considered necessary to allocate a specific quota for representation of females. On the other side, it has been observed that on certain Boards, females possessing appropriate professional qualification have been appointed as directors, who are performing successfully as a part of the management and it is being appreciated at all levels.

In light of the position discussed above, I am of the view that Independent directors selected from the databank of ‘PICG’ and making them part of the Board need not even be members of the companies like a Chief Executive hired from the market. The sponsors’ directors whose financial stake is involved and at risk must have the right to select the team members from the panel of



elected/appointed just to fill up a seat reserved for females on their Board and not realizing if she is able to contribute towards improvement of the company’s performance. In my view, it has defeated the very purpose of imposing such specific quotas on Companies.

In fact, there is hardly any opposition in taking the female on the Boards of listed companies if they possess the requisite qualifications, experienced and justify for holding such position and the role to be played as director of a big corporation particularly to protect the interest of investors and creditors. It may, therefore, be noted that to run/manage a company is altogether different from the functions of a Union Council, an NGO or a Club, where

experts. Similarly, a sufficient number of qualified females in the field of accounting, legal, business administration and IT etc. are available who may seek registration with the PICG and the listed companies may be allowed to identify the suitable persons to be appointed as directors who are able to contribute towards improvement in performance of the company and to protect the interests of its shareholders, creditors and employees. At the end, it is also recommended that the number of independent directors including females on the Board of a company should be fixed upto three only without any discrimination of genders. It may, however be kept in mind that in order to proceed towards the right direction, suitable amendments would have to be made in the respective Laws.



# Pakistan's Choices Amid Global Isolation & Economic Fragmentation



By Amir Jahangir

Growing trade restrictions may reverse economic integration and undermine the cooperation needed to protect against new shocks and address global challenges

The global economic stage is undergoing a profound transformation, with a rising specter of geo-economic fragmentation threatening to cleave the world economy into rival blocs. This disintegration not only spells a precarious outlook for the global economies but also holds significant implications for Pakistan's economic landscape. As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) sounds the alarm bells on the perils of fragmentation, the urgent need for enhanced global collaboration comes into sharp focus.

Estimates of the potential costs of fragmentation are marked by their variability, painting a spectrum of possible outcomes. Should trade fragmentation gain momentum, the impact could range from a modest 0.2 percent reduction in global output in a limited fragmentation scenario to a staggering 7.0 percent decrease or about \$7.4 trillion in today's dollars in a severe scenario.

That's equivalent to the combined size of the French and German economies, and three times sub-Saharan Africa's annual output. However, the repercussions do not stop there. The advent of technological decoupling could exacerbate the economic toll. If technological decoupling is added to the mix, some countries could see losses of up to 12 percent of the GDP. The effects of fragmentation ripple through various channels, from the imposition of trade barriers to the constriction of technological diffusion, and from the curtailment of cross-border migration to the diminishing flow of capital, all while international cooperation faces a sharp decline.

The IMF has emerged as a steadfast advocate for heightened global cooperation as an antidote to the fragmentary forces that threaten economies worldwide. Emphasizing the need for unity, the IMF champions the role of multilateral institutions in recalibrating global collaboration and staunching the tide of fragmentation. Its arsenal of financial tools, coupled with its impartial approach and global oversight mechanisms, enables the IMF to serve as a

linchpin in guiding nations toward a more cooperative future.

Kristalina Georgieva, the Managing Director for the International Monetary Fund has advised the world leaders, including Pakistan, "Policymakers need to focus on the issues that matter most not only to the wealth of nations but also to the economic well-being of ordinary people." Georgieva wrote in the Foreign Affairs Magazine, "They must nurture the bonds of trust among countries wherever possible so they can quickly step-up cooperation when the next major shock comes."

The trajectory toward geo-economic fragmentation charts a profound challenge, one whose reverberations transcend international boundaries and cast a shadow over economic outlooks. Nevertheless, the power of collective action remains an indomitable force. Countries, including Pakistan, stand at a crossroads where mutual engagement can pave the way for concerted efforts to counteract fragmentation's onslaught. By forging alliances that rise above national confines

and coalescing around shared imperatives, nations can begin the arduous task of mitigating fragmentation's corrosive effects and fortifying the pillars of global cooperation.

In Pakistan's context, the urgency of the situation cannot be overstated. As a country that is intricately linked to the global economic fabric, Pakistan finds itself at the nexus of both challenges and opportunities. It's imperative for policymakers and stakeholders alike to heed the IMF's call and prioritize cooperation that transcends borders. A concerted push for comprehensive reforms that bolster economic resilience and galvanize cooperation is essential to steer Pakistan away from the precipice of fragmentation-induced vulnerability.

The world, once a tapestry of interconnected economies, is undergoing a seismic transformation. The ominous shadow of geo-economic fragmentation looms, threatening to carve the global economy into rival blocks. For Pakistan, a nation straddling the delicate balance between challenges and opportunities, charting a course through these turbulent waters demands a strategic and comprehensive approach.

As the IMF sounds the alarm on the far-reaching risks of fragmentation, Pakistan finds itself at a crossroads that demands visionary leadership, collaboration, and a steadfast commitment to resilience.

At the heart of this dilemma lies the undeniable truth, the world's economies are increasingly vulnerable to isolation. Trade barriers and protectionist policies, once distant whispers, now reverberate across nations, affecting even the farthest corners of the globe. Pakistan's response must be rooted in the diversification of its partners and offers. By forging new trade partnerships and broadening its economic horizons, Pakistan can shield itself from the potentially crippling impacts of isolation.

Yet, trade is only one facet of the challenge. Technological decoupling — the act of severing technological interdependence — casts its own shadow. Here, the key lies in investment in innovation, research, and development. A nation that adapts to the

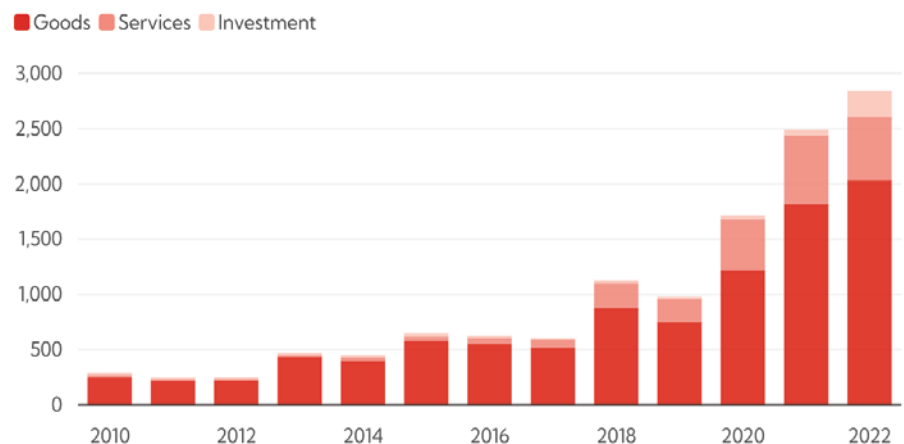
changing tides of innovation can remain afloat in a sea of uncertainty.

But the waters run deeper still. Migration, once a bridge for the exchange of skills and ideas, faces the risk of constriction. Pakistan must champion the facilitation of cross-border movement, acknowledging the immense potential in harnessing the talents of its diaspora while welcoming the expertise of foreign workers.

## Walled off

Restrictions on trade have greatly increased in recent years.

Number of trade restrictions imposed annually worldwide



Source: Global Trade Alert and IMF staff calculations.

IMF

In the midst of these challenges, the IMF gestures, waving the banner of cooperation. Its call is not just a plea for unity, but a lifeline for nations navigating these uncharted waters. Multilateral institutions, like the IMF, offer a platform for collective action, for the pooling of resources, and for a united stance against fragmentation. The IMF's tools and expertise, from financial instruments to global oversight mechanisms, can pave Pakistan's path to stability.

Yet, Pakistan's journey is not a lonely one. As a member of the global community, Pakistan's actions resonate far beyond its borders. Strengthening regional integration through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can shield the nation from the worst effects of fragmentation. By nurturing international partnerships and engaging in diplomatic dialogues, Pakistan can be an advocate for collective solutions on the global stage.

As the tapestry of the world economy

unravels, Pakistan must rewrite its role in this narrative. It requires visionary leadership that defies isolation, embraces innovation, and champions collaboration. It calls for policies that create an attractive investment climate, a resilient financial sector, and an educated workforce capable of thriving in a swiftly changing landscape.

In the end, the story of Pakistan's journey through geo-economic fragmentation is not

one of despair, but of determination. It's a tale of resilience in the face of uncertainty, of unity in the face of isolation, and of progress in the face of disruption. As the waves of change crash upon its shores, Pakistan has the opportunity to emerge not as a victim of fragmentation, but as a beacon of cooperation, a model for navigating the complexities of a fractured world.

In the broader spectrum, the vision of a cohesive global economy, standing firm against the onslaught of fragmentation, remains within reach. It requires the unwavering commitment of nations to look beyond immediate interests and work collaboratively to foster a landscape of stability and prosperity. In this shared pursuit, Pakistan stands as a testament to the power of unified action and serves as a beacon of hope in a world teetering on the edge of fragmentation.

Courtesy [www.narratives.com.pk](http://www.narratives.com.pk)



# Pharmaceutical Companies in Pakistan: Navigating the Political Landscape of Marketing Tactics

By Hussnain Ahmad

Pharmaceutical businesses are pivotal in healthcare management by offering important medications and therapies that enhance and preserve human life. Nevertheless, the pharmaceutical sector is not impervious to scrutiny, particularly about its marketing strategies. In Pakistan, similar to several other nations, there has been a growing apprehension over the marketing practices employed by pharmaceutical corporations for their innovative medications and the resultant implications on customers. This article delves into pharmaceutical marketing in Pakistan, elucidating companies' possible utilization of strategies that may entangle customers.

To comprehend the functioning of pharmaceutical businesses within the political landscape of Pakistan, it is necessary to commence the analysis by examining the regulatory framework. The oversight and regulation of the pharmaceutical business in Pakistan is carried out by the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (DRAP), which is responsible for ensuring adherence to regulatory standards. DRAP also ensures that healthcare products within Pakistan's market adhere to specified quality, safety, and effectiveness standards. DRAP regulatory roles encompass activities such as granting approval for marketing, monitoring product safety, conducting market assessments, overseeing clinical trials, and managing the release of biological products. DRAP also licenses establishments, conducts regulatory inspections, performs laboratory tests, and oversees pharmacovigilance to uphold these standards.

The effectiveness of the DRAP regulatory framework directly affects pharmaceutical companies' operations in Pakistan. If there are weaknesses or gaps in the regulations, it can create opportunities for pharmaceutical companies to use marketing tactics that may not be in the best interest of consumers. For example, companies might resort to misleading advertising claims, aggressive



promotional strategies, or excessive branding if regulations are not strict enough. These practices could lead consumers to make decisions that are not based on accurate information or what's best for their health.

In Pakistan, it's of utmost need to conduct a thorough and careful assessment of the concerns surrounding the pharmaceutical industry's regulatory framework. This scrutiny is essential because the pharmaceutical sector is central to the nation's healthcare system. The efficacy of this regulatory system directly influences how pharmaceutical companies operate within the country, particularly in terms of their marketing practices. Any insufficiencies or gaps in this regulatory structure can trigger significant and far-reaching consequences, impacting not only the industry itself but also the overall health and welfare of the general population.

A strong regulatory framework acts as a safety net, ensuring that pharmaceutical goods adhere to exacting safety and efficacy requirements. Customers are thus shielded from possibly harmful or inefficient treatments as a result. Additionally, it can promote healthy competition, which could give the public access to more reasonably priced and broadly distributed medications. Contrarily, a weak or ineffective regulatory

environment may allow pharmaceutical corporations to use marketing techniques that are not always in line with customers' interests. Such approaches could include dishonest marketing, pushy sales techniques, or setting unacceptably high pricing for necessary medications. Furthermore, regulatory shortcomings can make healthcare affordability and accessibility problems worse in a country like Pakistan, where these challenges are already prevalent. They may restrict the supply of affordable medications, making it more difficult for marginalized or underprivileged communities to access necessary medical care. Ultimately, these shortcomings impact health outcomes and lead to disparities in access to healthcare.

It is crucial to examine Pakistan's pharmaceutical regulation system carefully. It ensures that the system efficiently protects the public's health, encourages fair competition, and tackles issues with the cost and accessibility of medications. Beyond the pharmaceutical industry, the effects of regulatory shortcomings ripple through the larger healthcare system and significantly impact Pakistan's population health.

Moreover, the regulatory framework's effectiveness can also impact affordable and accessible medications in Pakistan. When pricing regulations are not enforced

adequately, pharmaceutical companies might set prices at levels many people cannot afford. This, in turn, can restrict access to essential medicines for a significant portion of the population.

Pharmaceutical companies employ a range of marketing tactics to promote their products. While branding, advertising, and sales efforts are essential components of their strategies, their impact on consumers in Pakistan is a subject of concern. These practices can significantly affect consumer choices and access to healthcare, sometimes to the detriment of the population.

Excessive branding and promotion are prevalent in the pharmaceutical industry. While effective branding can build trust and recognition, excessive marketing efforts, including visually striking commercials and memorable slogans, can lead to an undue perception of superiority among consumers. This perception may persist even when equally effective and more affordable alternatives are available. As a result, consumers might be inclined to choose higher-priced branded medications, potentially straining their financial resources.

Misleading claims in pharmaceutical advertising further compound the challenges consumers face. Many companies emphasize the benefits of their products, but in some cases, these claims lack robust scientific evidence. This raises questions about the extent to which regulatory bodies oversee and enforce truthful advertising practices. Misleading claims can lead consumers to choose based on false information, potentially affecting their health outcomes.

Moreover, aggressive sales tactics employed by pharmaceutical businesses can directly impact consumers' healthcare decisions. These tactics may involve incentivizing healthcare professionals to promote specific products, implementing discounted pricing schemes, or sponsoring medical conferences. Such strategies can influence prescription decisions, limiting consumer choices and compromising patients' best interests.

The pricing strategies employed by pharmaceutical companies are a global controversy, and Pakistan is no exception. Some

companies have faced allegations of setting excessively high prices for their medicines, making essential treatments financially inaccessible to a considerable population. This pricing strategy can trap consumers into purchasing medications at the expense of their economic stability, affecting their overall well-being.

Within politics, it is not uncommon for pharmaceutical corporations to engage in lobbying activities to influence policies that align with their interests. This may encompass the promotion of less stringent regulatory measures or patent safeguards that restrict market competition. These endeavours have the potential to impede the introduction of more cost-effective generic alternatives, perpetuating the cycle of high-cost pharmaceuticals and limiting customer options.



Pharmaceutical companies in Pakistan wield significant political influence due to their substantial financial resources and savvy lobbying efforts. With ample funds, these companies can actively engage in lobbying activities and provide substantial financial support to political candidates sympathetic to their interests. This financial clout creates an environment where policymakers may be more inclined to consider pharmaceutical companies' preferences when shaping healthcare policies. Moreover, these corporations often employ well-connected and influential lobbyists who excel at effectively conveying their positions and goals to lawmakers. Consequently, pharmaceutical companies in Pakistan can shape the political landscape in their favor, advocating for policies that could bolster their market dominance, such as less stringent regulations or patent

protections limiting competition. These efforts can have far-reaching consequences for the pharmaceutical industry and its consumers.

For consumers, the ramifications are multifaceted. First and foremost, limited competition often leads to elevated drug prices, making essential medications less accessible to the average citizen. This can translate into financial burdens for individuals and families, particularly those who rely on pharmaceutical interventions for chronic or life-threatening conditions. Moreover, when the pharmaceutical landscape becomes influenced by political interests, the focus on consumer welfare may diminish, affecting the availability of safer and more cost-effective treatment options. Certain pharmaceutical entities also exert the potential monopolistic control that can limit choices for healthcare providers, potentially influencing prescription decisions that may not align with optimal patient care.

In essence, the intersection of pharmaceutical lobbying and political influence in Pakistan's healthcare arena underscores the need for a delicate balance between incentivizing innovation and safeguarding the interests of consumers. A robust regulatory framework and transparent policymaking processes become paramount to ensure that pharmaceutical policies align with the broader goal of providing accessible and affordable healthcare to the Pakistani population rather than primarily serving the interests of a select few within the industry.

Like their counterparts in several other nations, pharmaceutical businesses in Pakistan utilize diverse marketing strategies to endorse their medicines. Although branding and advertising can be considered valid approaches to increasing awareness, ethical difficulties arise when these methods result in consumer exploitation or impede the availability of inexpensive pharmaceuticals. In the realm of politics, it is imperative for regulators, politicians, and civil society to diligently observe and rectify any unethical or deceptive activities prevalent in the pharmaceutical sector. Ensuring a harmonious coexistence of fostering innovation and safeguarding customers' welfare should be the primary focus of these endeavors.



# TTP and the Afghan Taliban

By Syed Fakhar KaKaKhel

On the border of Afghanistan's Nuristan province and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) chief Mufti Noor Wali was giving wireless instructions to his fighters who crossed the border from Afghanistan and attacked two security check posts in Chitral district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In another video, it can be seen how the Pakistani Taliban are entering Pakistan by cutting the fence on the Pak-Afghan border. Four security personnel have been martyred in the cross-border attack in Chitral. On the contrary, the spokesperson of the Afghan Taliban, Zabihullah Mujahid, stated that the territory of Afghanistan was not used for the attack on Chitral.



TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mahsud, in the same video available on social media and purportedly recorded during his visit to Pakistan's northern areas, had declared that his outfit came under the larger "umbrella" of the IEA.

"Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan is a branch of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, [and] is a part of that umbrella on this land," Mahsud, flanked by armed TTP fighters, can be seen saying in the video as he addressed a group of men.

Responding to these statements Afghan Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, in an interview with Arab News, rejected Mahsud's claim of affiliation with the IEA.

"They are not, as an organization, part of IEA and we don't share the same objectives," Mujahid is quoted as saying by the publication.

"We advise TTP to focus on peace and stability in their country. This is very important so they can prevent any chance for enemies to interfere in the region and in Pakistan. And we request Pakistan to look into their demands for the better of the region and Pakistan."

Mujahid said the TTP was Pakistan's internal matter, adding: "The IEA stance is that we do not interfere in other countries' affairs. We do not interfere in Pakistan's affairs."

Looking at the evidence provided by the militants themselves, there could be two reasons why the Afghan Taliban is hesitant to accept their responsibilities when it comes to the Pakistani Taliban. One is that the Afghan Taliban has no control over these areas of Afghanistan. The other reason may be that the Afghan Taliban's interim government does not have the power to stop the Pakistani Taliban. Looking at the facts on the ground, it can be said that both these reasons can be valid simultaneously.

Nuristan, Badakhshan and Kunar are the provinces of Afghanistan which historically have not been completely within the reach of Kabul and remained ungovernable by the central government of Afghanistan. The process of withdrawal of Russian and American allied forces also started from these areas. Even when there was a strong Afghan government in Kabul backed by Russia, anti-Kabul movements continued to thrive in Nuristan and Kunar region. Even in the war against Russia, Nuristan and Kunar were among the most dangerous areas. In the recent past, we have witnessed that the most intense resistance to the American coalition forces came in these same areas. In 2009, The Battle of Kamdesh chronicled how American coalition forces suffered heavy casualties in the area.

Even now that the Afghan Taliban have come to power, their opposition forces are quite effective in these areas. The Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Northern Resistance Front (NRF) elements are present in these areas. Soon after the Chitral intrusion by TTP elements Afghan Taliban claimed to have arrested a group of ISKP fighters in neighboring Badakhshan province. It is also a fact that Nuristan is sparsely populated overall but its strategic importance is very high. On the one hand, it is on the border with the Afghan province of Badakhshan, which borders Tajikistan and China, on the other hand, it borders Chitral, which borders with the Pakistani province of Gilgit-Baltistan, which further shares its border with Indian Occupied Kashmir and China.

It is this structure that shows how important this area is and why it is so difficult to hold on to. The second reason is the helplessness of the Afghan Taliban when it comes to controlling the Pakistani Taliban. In the past, when the pressure on the Afghan Taliban increased for Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden after the events of September 11, the Afghan Taliban refused to leave Osama bin Laden's side. Because the Afghan Taliban saw Osama bin Laden as a benefactor who supported them in their jihad against Russia. Now when the Afghan Taliban

did not leave the side of Al-Qaeda at the request of the whole world, why will they leave the side of the Pakistani Taliban at the request of Pakistan? The Pakistani Taliban and the Haqqani network have a history. Those who know this history can understand why the power of the Pakistani Taliban is necessary for the Haqqani network and how much favor the Pakistani Taliban have given the Haqqani network during the twenty-year war in Afghanistan.

Apart from this, we should not forget that Pakistan, like other countries of the world, does not recognize the flag of the Afghan Taliban flying on the Pak-Afghan border. This means that Afghanistan is currently occupied by an armed group that has fighters but not a professional army. Now, in such a situation, whatever relations a state has with another state comes under the category of temporary set-up. This is the reason why statements are issued from Kabul on the provision of evidence by Pakistan, in which these facts are denied. At one point, the Afghan Taliban even said that the territory of Afghanistan should not be used against another country. Recently, the Afghan Taliban issued a statement in which they claimed that they had agreed with the United States and not with the Pakistani authorities. Even the Afghan Taliban denied the death of Al-Qaeda chief Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri under their watch in Kabul. Now the only way out of such a situation is with the international community, especially Afghanistan's neighboring countries China, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, with whom the Afghan Taliban can be brought under pressure.

Chitral intrusion is not the lone incident of tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the same day that Pakistani Taliban based in Afghanistan invaded Chitral, there was also a clash between Pak-Afghan security personnel at Torkham on the Pak-Afghan border. Since then, the Pak-Afghan border of Torkham has been closed to all traffic. Hundreds of vehicles and ordinary Afghan citizens, most of whom came to Pakistan seeking medical treatment, got stuck at the border. Due to this situation on the Pak-Afghan border, Afghan traders have now started moving to Iran's Chabahar port. These are not good signs of border trade between two countries

facing economic challenges domestically. The recently concluded barter trade agreements are of no use if this situation persists. Normally, a large number of Afghan citizen patients visit Pakistan instead of Central Asian states and Iran for medical treatment. But due to such tension on the Pak-Afghan border, these patients now travel to India by air. That is why Pakistan must normalize life on the borders as soon as possible.

Recently, the United States has once again denied the large-scale presence of US-allied weapons in Afghanistan, although there is a report from their committee looking at the defense issues in which they have confirmed the presence of billions of dollars worth of American weapons and other equipment in Afghanistan. In addition,



Pakistan has evidence of the use of this weapon in various attacks by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.

In a weekly media briefing, Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch stated that Pakistan's security agencies were determined to eradicate terrorism from the country. She added that Pakistan has informed the interim Afghan government about its concerns regarding the recent incident along the border.

The FO Spokesperson further said that the issue of terrorist attacks from Afghanistan has been raised with the Afghan authorities. "We do not blame anyone but weapons left

in Afghanistan require global attention since they have fallen in the hands of terrorist groups now," she said.

Back in the US when a journalist drew National Security Council spokesman John Kirby's attention to reports that the \$7 billion worth of weapons in Afghanistan had fallen into the hands of terrorists, the National Security Council spokesman said the military equipment being talked about had been actually handed over to the Afghan Defense forces.

All that military equipment was for the Afghan Defense forces, as it was the US mission to build their capacity and enable them to fulfill their country's security responsibility themselves, said Kirby. He

said it was the Afghan forces themselves that had abandoned that equipment.

So the US believes that these are the weapons that they gave to the Afghan army and on the occasion of their withdrawal, the Afghan army left those weapons in the field. So here one may be convinced that it is being confirmed that weapons worth billions of dollars are present in Afghanistan, but what the US authorities are now admitting is that they were not intentionally left by the United States. Now the problem is that the same weapons are being used by Tehreek Taliban Pakistan fighters and Baloch insurgents in Pakistan, which can become a big problem for Pakistan in the future.



# Tragic Earthquake in Morocco: A Nation's Resilience in the Face of Disaster

By Kanwal Munir

Morocco, a nation known for its rich history, vibrant culture, and stunning landscapes, has recently been thrust into the global spotlight for an entirely different reason. Late on a fateful Friday night, the tranquility of this North African country was shattered by a powerful earthquake of magnitude 6.8, leaving a trail of destruction and sorrow in its wake. This seismic event, the most formidable to strike Morocco in over a century, has had profound and far-reaching consequences, testing the resilience of its people and the preparedness of its infrastructure.

This natural disaster, the most potent in Morocco in 120 years, caught the nation unprepared and has resulted in a significant loss of life and widespread damage to buildings and infrastructure. As the country grapples with the aftermath, this article delves into the harrowing details of the disaster, its impact on Morocco, and the international response that has rallied to aid the nation in its darkest hour.

## The night of terror

The earthquake struck at 11:11 p.m. local time, a time when most people were in the comfort of their homes, completely unaware of the impending catastrophe. With a magnitude of 6.8, it was classified as a "strong" earthquake, and its shallow depth amplified its destructive potential. The epicenter of this seismic event was located approximately 72 kilometers (44.7 miles) southwest of the bustling city of Marrakech, a place teeming with tourists and economic activity.

The shockwaves reverberated through the region, causing widespread panic and confusion. Residents and tourists alike rushed out of their homes and hotels, desperately seeking refuge from the trembling ground. Dishes and wall hangings crashed down, and people were knocked off their feet. The quake brought down walls made from stone and masonry, burying entire communities under a heap of rubble.



## The toll on lives and property

The destruction wrought by the earthquake was felt far and wide, with more than 2,000 lives lost and thousands more injured. The majority of the casualties occurred in Marrakech and the five provinces near the epicenter, where homes and buildings were ill-prepared to withstand such a violent tremor. At least 2,059 people were injured, and a staggering 1,404 of them were in critical condition.

The impact was not limited to human lives; historic sites and cultural heritage were also casualties of this disaster. In Marrakech, the renowned 12th-century Koutoubia Mosque suffered damage, although the extent was not immediately apparent. This mosque, with its iconic 226-foot minaret, is often called the "roof of Marrakech." The earthquake also left its mark on the famous red walls surrounding the old city, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

However, the devastation was most profound in the areas closest to the Atlas Mountains. Remote villages, nestled in these rugged terrains, were cut off from the world as electricity and cellphone services faltered. The quake struck a cruel blow to their already challenging existence.

## Rescue and Relief Efforts

In the aftermath of the earthquake, Morocco was faced with the monumental task of rescue and relief operations. Roads were blocked by debris and damaged by the quake, making access to remote mountain villages a formidable challenge. Rescue teams worked tirelessly to reach these isolated areas, where survivors awaited help amid the ruins.

The Moroccan government activated all available resources to tackle the disaster, and King Mohammed VI ordered the armed forces to mobilize specialized search and rescue teams. A surgical field hospital was also set up to provide medical assistance to the injured.

However, despite the outpouring of offers of assistance from around the world, Morocco had not yet formally requested international aid. The nation aimed to demonstrate its sovereignty by coordinating its search and rescue efforts, a testament to its aspirations as a regional power in Africa.

## International Solidarity

The earthquake in Morocco elicited an immediate and heartfelt response from the



international community. Many world leaders expressed condolences and offered support to the grieving nation. France, with its substantial population of people of Moroccan origin, activated emergency aid funds to assist with humanitarian operations in the affected regions.

Turkey, which had experienced a devastating earthquake earlier in the year, stood ready to send personnel and supplies to aid Morocco's relief efforts. Algeria, despite its strained relations with Morocco, reopened its airspace to allow humanitarian aid and medical flights to travel to and from the afflicted nation.

The United Nations and U.S. President Joe Biden pledged their readiness to provide assistance, while the World Bank offered Morocco its "full support." Countries such as Spain, Ukraine, Russia, and China also extended their condolences and support to the Moroccan people.

## Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

Morocco's devastating earthquake serves as a grim reminder of the unpredictable nature of natural disasters. While the nation had taken steps to improve construction standards following a deadly earthquake in 1960, many buildings, especially in rural areas, remained vulnerable to such seismic events.

As the nation mourns its losses and rebuilds, it must also reflect on the importance of preparedness and resilience



in the face of such catastrophes. The challenge lies not only in responding to immediate needs but also in ensuring that communities are better equipped to withstand future earthquakes.

In the coming days and weeks, aftershocks may continue to test the resilience of Morocco's people and infrastructure. It is a testament to their strength and unity that they stand ready to face these challenges head-on.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Morocco's devastating earthquake of magnitude 6.8 has left an indelible mark on the nation, resulting in an overwhelming loss of life and widespread destruction. The seismic event, the most powerful in Morocco in over a century, struck with a suddenness that caught people

off guard, forcing them to flee their homes and seek refuge from the relentless tremors.

The toll on human lives has been heart-wrenching, with over 2,000 people losing their lives and thousands more left injured. The impact has been particularly severe in Marrakech and the provinces near the epicenter, where buildings, ill-equipped force, crumbled, burying residents under debris.

The response from the international community has been swift and compassionate, with offers of assistance pouring in from around the world. Countries like France, Turkey, Algeria, and the United States have pledged support, standing in solidarity with Morocco during this challenging time.

As rescue and relief efforts continue, the resilience of Morocco's people shines through. They are not only facing the immediate aftermath of the earthquake but also contemplating the long road to recovery and reconstruction. Lessons must be learned from this tragedy, emphasizing the importance of preparedness and resilient infrastructure in regions prone to seismic activity.

Morocco's strength lies in its unity and determination to rebuild. While aftershocks may pose ongoing challenges, the nation's spirit remains unbroken. The world watches with empathy and support as Morocco embarks on the journey of healing and rebuilding, offering solace and solidarity to a nation in mourning.





# European Union and United States Unity: Resilient Responses to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

By Daniyal Wali

One of the most influential military theorists in history, Carl von Clausewitz, famously cautioned in his book "On War" that every conflict is akin to "an unnavigated sea full of cliffs." This profound insight remains highly relevant in the context of the ongoing crisis involving Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While the roots of this conflict trace back through a complex historical timeline, the situation escalated dramatically when, on February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin announced a full-scale land, sea, and air invasion of Ukraine. His initial expectation of a swift, one-sided victory has instead given way to a protracted and multifaceted crisis, defying easy resolution.

From February 24, 2022, to August 13, 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recorded a staggering 26,384 civilian casualties within Ukraine, with 9,444 lives tragically lost and 16,940 individuals left injured. The Kremlin's objectives in this conflict remain shrouded in ambiguity, making it exceptionally challenging to discern Vladimir Putin's realistic goals and areas where he might be amenable to compromise—a matter that invites considerable speculation. The repercussions of the Ukraine conflict undeniably extend far beyond the region, as it exerts a deleterious impact on the European Continent and reverberates across the globe. This crisis has captured the attention of numerous stakeholders, ranging from nation-states to international organizations, attesting to its profound significance and the shared concern it elicits worldwide. Since the start of the conflict to this date, the European Union and the United States have been the greatest support and backup of the Ukrainian forces. The two entities have consistently supported the Ukrainian cause in an inclusive way ranging from diplomatic pressure on Russia to providing military support.

From the commencement of the conflict until now, the European Union and the



United States have stood as the primary pillars of support for Ukrainian forces. Both entities have consistently and comprehensively backed the Ukrainian cause through multiple means ranging from diplomatic efforts to supplying military assistance.

## Russia's War Against Ukraine: European Union Responses

The European Union (EU), consisting of 27 member states, has adopted a diverse array of policy measures in response to Russia's military conflict with Ukraine. One of the central pillars of the EU's response has been the imposition of sanctions against Russia. These sanctions aim to weaken Russia's ability to finance the war, target its elites, and undermine its economic base. The EU has frozen the assets of 207 entities and imposed travel bans on 1,473 individuals, primarily Russian officials and elites. In addition, restrictions on certain banks and companies, transactions with Russia's central bank, and exports of various goods and technologies have been enforced. Notably, the EU disconnected leading Russian financial institutions from the

SWIFT messaging system, a significant move in international finance.

While the EU has sought to target Russia's energy sector, its energy dependence on Russia has posed challenges. The EU has progressively tightened sanctions on Russian energy, including banning most imports of Russian crude oil and petroleum products. The EU has also prohibited oil transport services and exports of oil refining technologies. However, natural gas imports from Russia have not been banned, but the EU is actively working to reduce its dependence on Russian energy. Russia's actions in Ukraine have underscored the EU's need to reduce its dependence on Russian energy imports, particularly natural gas. The EU has set a goal to phase out Russian fossil fuel imports before 2030, emphasizing the importance of energy diversification and transition.

The EU has provided substantial support to Ukraine in the form of military assistance, financial aid, and emergency supplies. Through its European Peace Facility, the EU has committed €5.6 billion in military assistance financing, including lethal equipment and nonlethal supplies. The EU has

also coordinated the delivery of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Financially, the EU, its member states, and European financial institutions have mobilized €37.8 billion in assistance for Ukraine, with further support planned.

Besides this, the United States and the EU have closely cooperated in responding to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with many sanctions measures being identical or similar. The two partners have worked together on enforcing sanctions, trade issues, and energy cooperation. U.S. commitments to help the EU reduce its reliance on Russian gas have been part of this cooperation.

## Russia's War on Ukraine: The United States's Policy

In the wake of Russia's renewed aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, the United States swiftly rallied its diplomatic, economic, and military resources to address the crisis. The conflict, Europe's largest armed confrontation in decades, has had profound implications for international security and stability. The United States has adopted in response to the Russia-Ukraine war, including diplomatic initiatives, sanctions on Russia, assistance to Ukraine, and bolstering its military presence in Europe.

First of all, the United States has taken a leading role in diplomatic efforts to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This aggression is often seen as part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's broader agenda of consolidating power and promoting neo-imperialism. The U.S. has worked closely with international partners, including NATO and the European Union, to assert that Russia's actions are "unprovoked and unjustified." In October 2022, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution ES-11/4, affirming its commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and condemning Russia's actions.

One of the most potent tools in the United States' response to the Russia-Ukraine war has been the imposition of sanctions on Russia. These sanctions, coordinated with the EU and other countries, have evolved into a comprehensive strategy to pressure

Moscow. The measures go beyond those imposed after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and cover sectors such as finance, trade, and technology. The United States has imposed strict sanctions on Russian entities, including limiting the central bank's access to dollar reserves and blocking major Russian banks from conducting transactions in U.S. dollars. Additionally, new investments in Russia have been banned, and export controls have been tightened to limit Russia's access to critical U.S. technologies. These sanctions have targeted thousands of Russian individuals and entities, further isolating Russia on the international stage. The economic impact



of these sanctions on Russia has been substantial. The Russian financial sector has faced losses in the billions, and factories have suspended production due to a lack of foreign-origin parts. International companies have exited the Russian market, contributing to unofficial estimates of higher unemployment rates. Sanctions have also affected global energy prices and the efforts of countries to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar.

The United States has demonstrated its commitment to supporting Ukraine through substantial military and economic aid. Congress appropriated approximately \$90 billion in emergency supplemental funds for military, economic, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. This assistance has played a crucial role in Ukraine's ability to mount defensive and counteroffensive operations. Ukraine has received support from other international

donors as well, with pledges totaling approximately \$85 billion. The European Union, international financial institutions, and individual countries like the United Kingdom have contributed to Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts. However, the challenge lies in sustaining this support amid growing concerns about donor fatigue and the substantial financial needs for Ukraine's reconstruction, estimated at \$400 billion or more.

To deter further Russian aggression and defend NATO allies, the United States has significantly increased its military presence in Europe. This includes deploying

additional armed forces, extending Brigade Combat Teams to Central and Eastern Europe, and stationing troops in countries like Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states. The enhanced NATO defense and deterrence posture in Eastern Europe now includes about 40,000 allied soldiers, part of a rotational presence aimed at rapidly responding to threats.

To conclude, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine presents a complex and protracted crisis, marked by significant civilian casualties. The European Union and the United States have played crucial roles in supporting Ukraine through sanctions, military aid, and diplomatic efforts. While the path forward is uncertain, the commitment to upholding Ukraine's sovereignty and seeking a peaceful resolution remains resolute in the face of this challenging geopolitical landscape.



# Inside Kim Jong Un's luxurious — and slow — armored train

By Adam Taylor

For his first known trip outside North Korea in almost four years, Kim Jong Un has likely returned to a favored mode of transport: a luxuriously decorated, heavily armored and exceptionally slow-moving train.

South Korean media reported Monday, citing government officials, that Kim's train appeared to have left the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, to start its long journey. Russian state media later confirmed that Kim would meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Russia in the "coming days."

U.S. officials have said that Kim is likely to meet Putin in the Russian port city of Vladivostok, a little over 300 miles from the North Korean border, where they are expected to discuss arms shipments that could aid Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine.

Kim has rarely traveled outside North Korea since assuming the leadership of the country after the death of his father Kim Jong Il in 2011, and North Korea largely cut itself off from the wider world during the coronavirus pandemic. Memorably, when Russian diplomats finally left locked-down North Korea in 2021, they used a railroad cart to cross the border.

## Will Kim Jong Un take his train to Russia?

Like his father, who was reportedly scared of flying, and his grandfather — Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea — Kim has predominantly traveled internationally in a specially manufactured train, an unusual mode of transport for a 21st-century world leader.

However, for a high-profile diplomatic summit with President Donald Trump in 2018 he used a Boeing 747 operated by Air China. He used a North Korean airplane to make the relatively short trip to the Chinese city of Dalian in 2018 for his second meeting with President Xi Jinping.



## From gourmet meals to Mercedes, the train is luxurious

Few outside the North Korean elite have traveled aboard the North Korean leader's train. However, photographs from state media, accounts from travelers and reports from intelligence agencies all paint a picture of luxury travel.

The cars are painted a distinctive green and yellow on the outside. Footage from inside shows glossy white interiors, with long tables for briefings and flat-screen monitors. Other images show rooms with red leather armchairs.

On board, there are likely to be other luxuries. One of the most detailed accounts of travel aboard a North Korean leader's train came from a Russian official, Konstantin Pulikovskiy, who recounted a trip across Russia's Far East with Kim Jong Il in a book called "Orient Express." Pulikovskiy's book described a gourmet menu with a wide variety of food on offer.

"It was possible to order any dish of Russian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese and

French cuisine," Pulikovskiy wrote, adding that there were cases of Bordeaux and Burgundy wines and live lobsters. The travelers aboard the train were entertained by young female singers, who were introduced as "lady conductors," Pulikovskiy recounted.

A 2009 article from the South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo, citing intelligence reports, said the train has a total of 90 rail cars. Some may be designed to carry vehicles: Georgy Toloraya, another Russian diplomat who traveled with Kim Jong Il in 2001, later wrote that two armored Mercedes cars were carried on that trip.

As a comparison, the standard Amtrak Acela train has nine cars. However, the U.S. train travels much faster, at a top speed of up to 150 mph. Kim's train has a reported top speed of 55 mph.

## Kim's train is slow and disruptive

The slow speed of the North Korean train is commonly attributed to its immense weight, a result of extra armor that has been installed on the train.

Toloraya, the Russian diplomat, said that during a 2001 inspection of Kim Jong Il's train by Russian technicians, they found there were armored sheets beneath the two main rail cars used by the North Korean leader for residential and official purposes.

The technicians also discovered that the cars were of Soviet origin but had been heavily modified at some later date.

The train causes widespread disruption when it travels, often due to security concerns. The Chosun Ilbo reported that around 100 security agents are sent ahead to stations to sweep them for potential threats, while the power is turned off at stations to prevent other trains from moving. There is also a large logistical support group that includes Soviet-made Il-76 air force transport planes and Mi-17 helicopters, the newspaper reported in 2009.

At the time, an advance train handled security and made sure the tracks were safe, and the third and final train in the group carried support personnel and bodyguards, the Chosun Ilbo reported.

Even with this entourage, trains can prove a relatively inconspicuous way to travel compared with planes, which can be spotted with flight-tracking data or radar. Many of Kim's recent trips have been announced only after their completion.

### For world leaders, trains can sometimes be the best option

The journey time from North Korea to Vladivostok is estimated at 20 hours, far longer than any flight could feasibly take. When Kim traveled to Vietnam for his second summit with Trump, the journey took 65 hours one way.

Kim's father took weeks-long journeys via train during his rule, while Kim Il Sung once completed a train journey to Eastern Europe, via Moscow, in 1984.

In addition to the slow speed, there are other complications. Russia's rail network uses a different size gauge than the one used on the Korean Peninsula, necessitating a considerable wait at the border. China, however, uses the same gauge as North Korea.

Security is likely the most significant reason that the Kims have favored rail travel. One of Kim Jong Il's former bodyguards said that the North Korean leader vowed to "never" travel by air due to concerns about being shot out of the sky.

Though Kim Jong Un is not believed to have the same fears, the aging nature of North Korea's Soviet-made air fleet provides an additional worry. The North Korean leader also regularly travels via train within North Korea, and there are signs that the government venerates rail travel within the country, with a railway museum in Pyongyang showing off past journeys by leaders.

Some rail experts who have visited North Korea in recent years say that its rail network, built under Imperial Japan in the early 20th century, is in a state of disrepair. Ahn Byung-min, a South Korean railway expert, told The Washington Post in 2018 that conditions on the network had

deteriorated since he first visited in 2000, with some journeys reminding him of the runaway mine cart in the film "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom."

The North Korean leader is not the only world leader to recently favor rail travel over air travel. Because of wartime threats to aviation, almost all visitors to Kyiv arrive via Ukraine's rail service. That includes President Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, along with other leaders who travel on specially created VIP trains. (Ironically, Ukrainian trains use the same gauge as Russia, which is different from the one used in Poland, so there is a similar wait at the border.)

Kim's host in Russia also has his own secret luxury armored train. Some journalists suggest that Putin has traveled more regularly by rail since 2021 due to concerns about his own security.

Courtesy [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)





# Diamonds, girlfriends, illicit lobbying: The fall of a former ambassador

By Craig Whitlock

When Richard G. Olson Jr. retired from the State Department in 2016, he was lauded by colleagues for an illustrious, 34-year career that included high-profile postings as the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, as well as risky assignments in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Rick is quite simply one of our most distinguished diplomats,” then-Secretary of State John F. Kerry effused in a statement.

But in the years since, Olson has come under federal investigation for a pattern of conduct atypical of the upright, protocol-observant world of international diplomacy. Previously undisclosed records filed in court reveal that the State Department’s inspector general investigated Olson for failing to report a \$60,000 gift of diamond jewelry to his mother-in-law from the emir of Dubai. As part of a broader investigation, the FBI also questioned him about his extramarital affair with a journalist working in Pakistan while he was serving as the U.S. ambassador in Islamabad, according to the documents.

The FBI learned that Olson had arranged for a Pakistani American businessman — who is now serving a 12-year federal prison sentence for illegal campaign donations and tax crimes — to pay \$25,000 in tuition bills that enabled the ambassador’s girlfriend to move to New York and attend the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Records show that Olson led a complicated love life that could have left him vulnerable to blackmail. While stationed in Pakistan from 2012 to 2015, he dated multiple women even though he was married to another U.S. diplomat, who was serving at the time as the ambassador to Libya, court documents filed by his attorneys show. Olson told the FBI that he had confided in the CIA’s Islamabad station chief about his dating habits, but court records indicate that he did not report his liaisons to U.S. diplomatic security officials in accordance with State Department counterintelligence rules.



Olson, 63, is scheduled to be sentenced in U.S. District Court in Washington on Tuesday after pleading guilty last year to two misdemeanors. On the first charge, Olson admitted that when he was the ambassador to Pakistan he failed to disclose that he received an \$18,000 first-class ticket to fly to London for a job interview with a Persian Gulf investment firm. On the second charge, he acknowledged that he illicitly lobbied U.S. officials on behalf of the government of Qatar in 2017, violating a federal “cooling-off” law that prohibited him from doing so for a year after his retirement from the State Department.

He was not charged with wrongdoing related to the diamonds or his girlfriend’s tuition, but the Justice Department has argued in connection with his sentencing that the episodes show a pattern of unethical behavior. In court filings, prosecutors called the emir’s jewelry “an exorbitant and obviously inappropriate gift” and accused Olson of lying to avoid accountability.

Under federal sentencing guidelines, Olson could receive up to six months in prison, though his attorneys have said he should not have to serve any time behind bars. “His career and service to his country has been nothing but honorable,” J. Michael Hannon, one of his lawyers, wrote in a memo to the court, arguing that his client had been unfairly targeted by overzealous

prosecutors. Hannon declined to be interviewed for the record and did not respond to a list of written questions.

In recent years, the Justice Department has stepped up its enforcement of foreign-influence laws. Members of Congress have also sought to clamp down on the secretive practice of retired U.S. military personnel working as consultants or contractors for foreign powers.

Olson’s legal and romantic problems began after he reported to Islamabad as the U.S. ambassador in 2012. U.S.-Pakistani relations were in tatters because of the daring U.S. military raid on the country a year earlier to kill al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden. Pakistan had also shut down U.S. ground supply routes for the war in Afghanistan in retaliation for a NATO airstrike that killed two dozen Pakistani soldiers.

While Olson’s primary task was to soothe tensions with Pakistan’s powerful military and spy chiefs, he also began seeing Muna Habib, a young television reporter working in the country, court records show. They dated for two years but broke up in late 2014 after Habib, who is a British citizen, discovered that the ambassador had been cheating on both her and his wife, Olson’s lawyers acknowledged in court documents. “Ms. Habib believed that they were dating exclusively, while Amb. Olson was not under

that same impression,” the lawyers wrote.

They resumed contact a few months later. Habib was admitted to the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 2015 but couldn’t afford the \$93,000 she needed to attend. Olson agreed to help by introducing her to Imaad Zuberi, a Pakistani American dealmaker with high-level business and political contacts in Pakistan, China and the Middle East, according to court records.

Zuberi had never heard of Habib before, the records show, but within days he offered to pay \$25,000 to offset her tuition expenses and arrange a \$50,000 loan. Records show that he sent a \$20,000 check to Columbia University and \$5,000 to Habib but never made good on his promise of a loan. Zuberi was sentenced in 2021 to a 12-year prison term in a separate case after he pleaded guilty to tax evasion, campaign finance violations and other charges. An attorney for Zuberi did not respond to a request for comment.

In court filings, Olson’s attorneys said that he “merely made an introduction, a very common practice for a diplomat” and that there was nothing improper about the tuition payment because he was not dating Habib at that point.

But emails submitted to the court indicate that the ambassador and the journalist still had feelings for each other.

“Our break up has been one of the most difficult periods of my life,” Habib wrote on June 16, 2015, while the tuition deal was being sorted out. “I knew how you had behaved in all your previous relationships and I continued to see you. It didn’t matter to me because of how you made me feel loved, special, something that I had never experienced before.”

“Glad we’re still friends,” Olson replied. “I care deeply about you too.”

In a brief phone interview, Habib dismissed questions about her relationship with Olson as “salacious gossip,” adding, “I’m sick and tired of it.” She asked for a list of questions in writing but did not respond to them.

Olson reported his relationship with Habib to the CIA’s station chief at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad but “did not report his contact with Habib in any other way,”

according to notes from a 2019 FBI interview with the ambassador. According to the State Department’s Foreign Affairs Manual, diplomats with high-level security clearances are required to report any “intimate/sexual contact” with foreign citizens to diplomatic security officials for counterintelligence purposes.

Olson’s attorney did not respond to questions from The Washington Post about whether he had properly reported his relationship with Habib or how many other women he dated while in Pakistan. Jennifer McKewan, a State Department spokesperson, declined to comment on Olson’s case.

While Olson was ambassador to Pakistan, he was also fending off a State Department investigation about a different matter.

In 2014, someone tipped off the State Department’s inspector general that 11 years earlier, while Olson was serving as the head of the U.S. Consulate in Dubai, the emir of the Persian Gulf city-state had delivered a velvet box to his office, records show. Inside were four diamonds set in white gold — a pendant, a ring and a set of earrings — that federal officials later valued at \$60,000, according to court documents. They do not name the emir; Dubai has had two different two emirs since 2003.

Under the standards of the Foreign Gifts and Decoration Act in effect at the time, U.S. officials were required to report gifts with worth more than \$285 and could not keep them unless they reimbursed the federal government for the fair-market value.

Olson did neither. He told State Department investigators that the emir had given the diamonds not to him but to his mother-in-law, who was living with him in Dubai, according to correspondence from State Department officials and other documents submitted to the court by his lawyers. He said the emir wanted to express gratitude to his mother-in-law for coming to Dubai to help care for the ambassador’s two children.

Olson’s then-wife, Deborah Jones, was based in Washington at the time as a senior State Department official, overseeing the Office of Arabian Peninsula Affairs. The department also placed Jones under investi-

gation because she supervised U.S. policy in the region and had formerly served as the deputy chief of mission in the United Arab Emirates, records show.

In an interview with The Post, Jones defended the jewels as a legitimate gift to her mother and said neither she nor Olson did anything wrong by failing to report it. She recalled that State Department officials confronted her about the diamonds while she was serving as ambassador to Libya in 2014, and called the investigation “very offensive” and “very unpleasant.” She said her mother considered the diamonds to be a genuine personal gift from the emir, adding, “I find it incredibly sexist that I was somehow pulled into this by virtue of being her daughter.”

The State Department closed the investigation without taking personnel action against Jones or Olson after they successfully argued that Jones’s mother was not their dependent for tax purposes and therefore not covered by the gift rules, records show. Even so, in a September 2016 letter, State Department lawyers asked the couple to voluntarily relinquish the diamonds, saying it was “extremely disappointing that you were not sufficiently concerned with the gift to seek guidance from the ethics office.”

In a November 2016 letter, Olson told the State Department that he couldn’t force his mother-in-law to hand over the diamonds, “which I think she would regard as robbery.” Jones told The Post that she also tried but failed to persuade her mother to part with the jewels. “I said, ‘Mom, look, these are really causing a problem, and they’re causing a problem to me.’ But she said they were hers.”

Jones said that her mother died in December and that she’s not sure what happened to the diamonds. She and Olson filed for divorce in 2018, though she said they have a cordial relationship.

Around the same time, Olson rekindled his romance with Habib, who by then had completed her studies at Columbia University’s journalism school, according to documents filed by his attorneys. They married in June 2019 and now live in New Mexico.

Courtesy [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)



# Draping Democracy

By Sara Danial

Girls who wear abayas are often perceived not only as students but also as representatives of global Islamism, suspected of plotting against the French nation.

During his appearance on national television to mark the beginning of the new school term, French Education Minister Gabriel Attal delivered a distinct message: I have decided that the abaya can no longer be worn in school. When you walk into a classroom, you should not be able to identify the pupils' religion by looking at them. But students will be welcomed and there will be a conversation with them to explain the meaning of the rule.

Several days later, an official announcement was issued, affirming the prohibition of the flowing attire donned by certain Muslim women and girls. The announcement essentially translates into a scenario where any young woman arriving at her school adorned in an abaya risks finding herself outside the classroom, unable to participate in the camaraderie of her peers.

The former education minister, Pap Ndiaye, declined to express a clear position, a decision that critics attribute to his background in American academia and its "woke" value system. Since taking office in July, Gabriel Attal, a youthful supporter of President Emmanuel Macron, has not hesitated to take a firm stance on this matter.

The prohibition on wearing the abaya should be viewed within the context of the colonial relationship that persists between the French state and citizens of French descent who have roots in postcolonial immigration. Its historical narrative is punctuated by three significant events: In 1989, a school principal expelled three teenage girls for wearing headscarves during class. Subsequently, in 1994, a government memorandum introduced a distinction between what it termed "discreet" religious symbols, considered acceptable in schools, and "ostentatious" religious symbols, which were not. Finally, in 2004, a new law was enacted, forbidding



the use of veils or any "conspicuous" religious symbols within state schools. This includes large crosses, Jewish kippas and Islamic headscarves. Unlike headscarves, abayas — a long, baggy garment worn to comply with Islamic beliefs on modest dress — occupied a grey area and had faced no outright ban until now.

France has had a complex relationship with religious attire in public spaces, particularly with regards to Islamic clothing such as the hijab (headscarf) and niqab (full-face veil). The French government has implemented laws that restrict the wearing of overtly religious symbols in public schools, aiming to maintain the principle of secularism in public education. These laws have faced criticism and controversy both within France and internationally, as they have been seen by some as infringing on religious freedom and targeting Muslim communities.

Today, young girls find themselves being denied the privilege of pursuing their education, exercising freedom of

movement within their school premises, or fostering connections with their peers and educators while embracing the abaya. The justification behind this prohibition is grounded in the safeguarding of secularism (secularism is precisely about allowing individuals to dress as they want. It's respecting everyone's freedom). Throughout history, the essence of secularism, known as "laïcité" in France, is aimed at upholding the sacred right to freedom of conscience, compelling the state to maintain unwavering impartiality.

A week subsequent to the enforcement of the prohibition, the level of opposition has remained notably subdued. While there have been isolated instances of defiance — notably, 67 girls steadfastly refused to relinquish their abayas on the first day of the academic term — no discernible signs of a widespread resistance movement have emerged. There is no orchestrated collective donning of abayas, nor any notable sit-ins to protest the measure. Once again, France underscores its distinction from other regions. The nation's preeminent

administrative tribunal, the State Council, has unequivocally rejected attempts to nullify the ban, asserting that it aligns with French law and inflicts no "significant or patently unlawful harm." While outsiders may express incredulity at the abaya prohibition, it is largely met with acceptance among the French populace.

As time has passed and under the sway of partisan motives and political affiliations, secularism has been co-opted to promote a narrative ostensibly focused on upholding gender equality. In essence, this narrative portrays Islam as a patriarchal faith and a challenge to the foundations of French democracy. Consequently, it places the onus on democracy itself to rescue Muslim women from the perceived clutches of Muslim men and, on a broader scale, from the influence of Islamic culture.

Nevertheless, upon attentive examination of some of the arguments supporting the prohibition of abayas in schools, a discernible transformation emerges. It is no longer solely about restricting the wearing of long, flowing garments to liberate young women from perceived Muslim patriarchal control; instead, the focus has shifted towards safeguarding fellow students from the potential proselytizing influence that these abaya-clad adolescents may pose. These

girls are now portrayed as scholastic emissaries of global Islamism.

The irony is that both the right-wing and far-right factions in France concur on categorizing the abaya as a religious attire. Conversely, within the left, a discernible discomfort exists when attempting to categorically define it. While some definitively assert that the abaya does not qualify as religious apparel, others remain uncertain in their stance.

However, anyone delving into this discourse and attempting to construct arguments regarding the essence and importance of an abaya is fundamentally misguided. The very foundation of this debate is rooted in two troubling preconceptions. Firstly, it harbors a sexist presumption, implying that these young girls are objectified through a femininity deemed unconventional. Secondly, it clings to a racist assumption, viewing these adolescent girls through the lens of their Muslim identity, as if their faith dictates every aspect of their existence and conduct. These intertwined sexist and racist ideologies culminate in a third conjecture: that these young women, both as females and as "foreigners," are somehow plotting against the interests of the French nation.

The sole discussion we ought to engage in

does not revolve around the choices young girls make regarding their bodies and intellectual pursuits; instead, it should scrutinize the strategies employed by the French state to regulate the bodies and thoughts of marginalized racial communities.

Let's not forget that on June 27, 2023, a tragic incident unfolded when a 17-year-old Nahel met a fatal end, struck by a bullet fired from a police weapon at close range. This heartbreaking event marked the 21st fatal shooting by French police during traffic stops since 2020, with the majority of victims being of black or Arab descent.

In light of these grim statistics, how can we possibly disconnect the control exerted by schools over the lives of racialized adolescents from the control wielded by the police over the same demographic's lives?

Is it not evident that, to varying degrees and extending across the social hierarchy, young Muslim women and men find themselves categorized within a group subject to extraordinary political scrutiny and treatment? It is rather clear that young Muslim women and men, across different social strata, are consistently placed within a category that subjects them to exceptional levels of political scrutiny and treatment.





# US CENTCOM chief Gen. Kurilla fears Daesh attack in the United States within six months

Gen Kenneth Frank McKenzie, the former head of the US Central Command, asserted in television interviews last week that the militant Islamic State group (IS) has surpassed Al Qaeda as a more enduring threat after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Gen Erik Kurilla, the current Centcom chief, expressed similar concerns in a recent interview, stating that IS could potentially carry out an "external operation" against the United States within six months.

During the withdrawal, Gen McKenzie, who retired in April the previous year, led Centcom, which is responsible for operations in the Middle East, Central Asia, and parts of South Asia, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. When asked about his perspective on Gen Kurilla's warning of an IS attack within "six months," McKenzie asserted his belief that IS had always intended to attack Americans on their soil, describing it as a core tenet and belief of theirs. He added that the withdrawal from Afghanistan has made it significantly more challenging for the United States to pursue its objectives in fighting terrorists.

Gen McKenzie expressed regret over the US evacuation from Afghanistan and deemed it a "wrong decision." He emphasized that IS, particularly in Afghanistan, is exploiting vast ungoverned spaces in the region and appears to be gaining strength since the August 2021 pullout. He warned that history would judge the US withdrawal as a critical error that allowed militants to regain a foothold in the country.

Speaking on the 22nd anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the United States, Gen McKenzie shared his belief that history would ultimately view the decision to leave Afghanistan and the manner in which it was executed as a fatal flaw. He also expressed numerous regrets regarding the US evacuation from Afghanistan, including the fundamental decision itself, which he considered wrong. This decision ultimately facilitated the rapid takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, leading to the evacuation of Americans and refugees



seeking safety, a development Gen McKenzie acknowledged he would regret for the rest of his life.

President Joe Biden issued a message on the 9/11 anniversary, urging the international community to unite against the "rising tide of hatred and extremism and political violence" at home and abroad.

## Taliban victory and challenges for the world

A UN report discussed at a Security Council meeting in New York last month highlighted the link between IS and the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), indicating that TTP and other groups affiliated with the Taliban were supplying Nato-calibre weapons to IS. The report noted that IS and its affiliates, including TTP, continue to pose a serious threat in conflict zones and neighboring countries. While the banned TTP has a history of attacking targets inside Pakistan, IS has also carried out recent attacks within Pakistan, including on a JUI-F convention in July that resulted in the deaths of 40 people.

Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar recently stated that terror groups are now using equipment left behind by US forces to launch attacks inside Pakistan.

However, White House National Security Council Coordinator John Kirby disputed the suggestion that the United States had abandoned weapons and equipment worth US\$7 billion in Afghanistan, which militant groups were now using against Pakistan. Kirby stated that no equipment was left behind by American forces and that any remaining equipment at the airport was rendered unusable as they completed their evacuation efforts.

The security landscape in Afghanistan under Taliban rule has seen a decrease in violence compared to a year ago but still faces pockets of instability. The Taliban's force posture has relaxed in many parts of the country, leading to the dismantling of numerous checkpoints. However, the Taliban are struggling to adapt to their new role in policing cities and areas where they are unpopular, particularly in the north.

The Taliban are currently dealing with two insurgencies: one led by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in the east and parts of the north and the other composed of former government army, police, and intelligence service affiliates in the north. While the Taliban's brutal campaign against IS-KP has weakened the group in the east, IS-KP has adjusted its operations and tactics, even launching cross-border strikes into Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors. The National

Resistance Front (NRF) and other northern insurgent factions have been gaining momentum, posing another challenge to the Taliban.

The Taliban are also managing the risks posed by dormant but dangerous militant groups, including al-Qaeda and other regional or global jihadist organizations. Balancing their presence without provoking them has become increasingly difficult, especially after the US drone strike that killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. The Taliban have faced backlash due to their harsh tactics, including arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, collective punishment, and profiling.



Recognizing the negative repercussions of these tactics, the Taliban have experimented with more nuanced security approaches. They have relocated their security personnel, initiated disarmament efforts, enlisted religious scholars for persuasion, and reiterated a general amnesty for those who abstain from fighting them. The Taliban have also reached out to former adversaries to help rebuild state institutions, including the security forces. However, managing these various challenges and maintaining security remains a complex and evolving task for the Taliban.

While these measures have not yet succeeded in reducing anti-Taliban violence, the threats to the new regime are not currently existential. From the Taliban's perspective, the key question is how to prevent these threats from escalating. There are several potential scenarios that could pose more significant risks to their control: a significant fracture within the Taliban movement itself, the unification of opposition groups, or a revolt by jihadist militants against the

Taliban's efforts to contain them. At present, these developments seem unlikely.

Another potential danger lies in regional and Western powers providing support to proxy fighting forces or engaging in routine airstrikes or unilateral actions against foreign militants on Afghan soil. Such actions could have unpredictable consequences. The discovery of al-Qaeda's leader in the heart of Kabul is likely to lead many foreign governments to question the Taliban's ability or willingness to contain transnational militants. Indeed, the international community has legitimate concerns about the Afghan authorities' apparent lackadaisical approach toward jihadists

who are still (at least for now) affiliated with the Taliban.

Nevertheless, the primary focus for outside powers should be to prevent a return to high levels of violence in Afghanistan. The United States and its allies have indicated their intention to maintain an "over-the-horizon" capability to strike targets from bases in other countries. However, successfully targeting al-Qaeda's leader does not constitute a comprehensive strategy. Increased bombing of militant groups is unlikely to eliminate them. Furthermore, foreign governments should avoid exacerbating violence in Afghanistan by returning to proxy wars. The chances of anti-Taliban rebel groups quickly uniting and prevailing in a civil war, even with foreign funding, are minimal. Instead, such tactics, such as intensifying drone strikes or bolstering the capacity of the Taliban's rivals to use force, could result in civilian casualties, heightened anti-Western sentiment, and potentially increased popular support for the Taliban. These actions would further strain relations

between Western governments and the de facto authorities, hindering potential limited cooperation on matters vital to the well-being of Afghans and potentially pushing the Taliban closer to jihadist groups while encouraging defections to IS-KP.

A more constructive approach would involve holding the Taliban accountable for their commitments, including their pledges to restrain transnational jihadist groups, while offering limited assistance on practical security matters. The West may not be open to security cooperation with the Taliban, but opportunities exist for collaboration, such as assisting the Taliban in curbing arms trafficking and ensuring the safe storage of weapon stockpiles. Donors might consider expanding programs aimed at educating the Taliban about their legal obligations, particularly regarding civilian policing if they wish to see more professionalism in Taliban security forces. Enhanced border management would require international cooperation, benefiting all parties. A substantial effort to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance could involve both the Taliban and external actors. These actions do not necessitate trust in the Taliban; rather, they stem from the international community's doubt that the Taliban will provide security for Afghans and shield other countries from the consequences of Afghan instability, warranting closer scrutiny.

Nonetheless, the primary responsibility for the nation's security now rests with the Taliban. The more they can assume this responsibility responsibly, the better it will be for all stakeholders: the Afghan people, external actors, and the Taliban themselves. As Afghanistan's de facto authorities, they have an obligation to develop security forces that safeguard civilians rather than harm or alienate them. They should prosecute their own members for any abuses, including violations of the important amnesty crucial for reconciliation with former adversaries, to deter misconduct. Ceasing the targeting of entire neighborhoods, tribes, and ethnic groups for the actions of individuals who take up arms against the government is essential. These measures would reduce Afghan fears of a return to war and potentially initiate a challenging but necessary journey towards practical cooperation between the Taliban and foreign governments on fundamental peace and stability issues.

By Javed Mahmood



# What our government is doing to utilize talented youth?



By Anum Akram

Youths are the face and capital of the society; they are the foundation of any society. Any nation's important capital is its youth. Youth with advanced education and skills are crucial to the development of the nation in today's modern day. Because of this, every nation pays particular attention to the achievements of its young people. Fortunately, young people between the ages of 15 and 33 make up 63% of our population. Out of 63 percent of youth, 29 percent are uneducated which are obviously unskilled. So all the social and economic problems somewhere linked to the illiteracy of young people.

Other nations that achieved success prioritize the education of the youth. These nations spent a huge amount on their education system. But unfortunately, we did not spend much on youth. A few years back PTI government decided to utilize the talent of our youth so they launched the national youth policy. The aim of this policy is to empower young people and focus on education, skills, and social protection. The government also launched the Kamyab Jawan Program. The aim of this program was to create jobs in the market for young people and focus on improving their skills.

In December 2022, the government of PML-N changed its name to Prime Minister's Youth Program. The aim of this program is to provide financial help to talented students. Moreover, under this program, the government decided to distribute laptops and cash among talented students. Besides this government also launched several programs according to their need to make them. The aim of launching these programs is to provide our youth with a better environment to learn creative skills and utilize their talent to shape a better society. A talent hunt program was also launched to provide scholarships to those students who belong to a disadvantaged environment. These programs provide financial help to get admission to different universities. The government has launched many programs to help students but unfortunately, there are only a few students who take advantage of these programs based on recommendations but those who are in need are left behind. Corruption in the country is one of the main reasons why these programs are not being used properly.

The government has established many policies to better utilize the youth talent but still some gaps remain and the

government needs some time to fill these gaps. As for whether our youth are satisfied with the steps taken or not, I think the people who benefited from these programs are satisfied. But these programs are of no use to those who have not benefited from them. Very few people are satisfied. The government needs to work hard to make sure all the youth have opportunities to reach their expected potential. In their opinion, giving laptops and cash will not end their problems in the future. The government needs to plan something different for their future, which will help them to overcome their problem. The government needs to create more jobs in public and private sectors. Last year, a report was compiled by the British Council and the Nielsen Research Institute. A very dark picture has emerged from this report. According to this report, the young generation of Pakistan is disillusioned with the government and hopeless about their future. According to the report, the reason for hopelessness is the living conditions of these youth.

Every citizen in Pakistan is saddened by the current state of affairs, especially the young people, who are worried about their future. However, the political

parties are one, and our politicians and bureaucrats have pushed the nation to such a level that there is a risk that it would default like Sri Lanka for their own personal goals and interests. They are occupied with spreading the ruins of their ignorance to others. In today's era, the strength of any country depends on the young manpower of that country with technology. Currently, developed countries such as Germany, which is quite advanced in technology, but due to the lack of young manpower, are setting up policies to attract educated youth from the outside world to bring them to their country. If they fail to do this, then in a few years they will face serious problems.

At present, the continent of Asia and the continent of Africa are full of this young manpower, but unfortunately, the corrupt political system there has made the lives of the people of these countries worse. Because the government fails to fulfill the demands of the youth. The result of this is that in the year 2022, 750,000 educated youths from Pakistan have left the country and gone to foreign countries like Germany and other Middle Eastern countries etc. And those countries will strengthen their economy with our educated youth. Pakistan prepared this manpower for these countries for free and handed it over to them. And now this year 400,000 people left the country only in the first six months.

Well, it was about the youths who go to colleges and universities, and have a good education, on the one hand, there are



youths who never went to school till now and they do different jobs all day long to fulfill the needs of their life. And our government is totally oblivious to such people. Even if they don't go to school, these people have a lot of talent, it's just that they can't be given opportunities to show this talent, due to which they always remain the same throughout their lives. The government should give them an opportunity to hone their skills and give them proper training and jobs so that they can also contribute to the development of the country. Pakistan has unfortunately lacked a clear plan to address youth issues, along with many other sensitive issues, due to which the youth are not only unable to utilize their potential but often end up on a path that is not their own. And was in no way suitable for the betterment of the country.

Our educational system, particularly at the college level, is quite obsolete. Children are receiving nothing but the idea of becoming slaves under this system. The education system is the same as it was 75 years ago. The education system of our university could not instill that confidence in the students that you can start a business with small capital and turn it into a huge company. With this education system, our politicians have exposed these youths to their personal interests. Instead of showing them the right direction, they have made each other enemies by pushing them into their personal political war. I can say with great certainty that Pakistan will be among the world's leaders within the next ten years since most of the population is under the age of 26. If these youths are given the appropriate guidance.





# 35% of female medical graduates in Pakistan are without jobs: Study

## TTI Report

In Pakistan, a substantial number of women doctors are currently unemployed, despite the world's fifth most populous nation's dire need for qualified medical professionals.

Ironically, this predicament unfolds in a nation where the financially constrained government invests significant resources in subsidizing medical education at public universities. Startling statistics have revealed that approximately 35% of women medical doctors in Pakistan are without jobs, according to nationwide research jointly conducted by Gallup Pakistan and PRIDE.

This research draws its basis from the LabourForce Survey 2020-21 and scrutinizes data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics concerning the labor market, particularly focusing on women medical graduates, disseminating its findings to inform the country's policy-making circles.

The crisis-ridden country currently grapples with a severe shortage of qualified doctors, while paradoxically more than 36,000 women doctors find themselves either jobless or opting to abstain from the labor force for various reasons.

Bilal Gilani, the executive director at Gallup Pakistan, highlights the gravity of the situation. "Pakistan has a dearth of trained medical doctors." The survey underscores that there are currently 104,974 women medical graduates in Pakistan. Among these, 68,209, or 65%, are actively employed within private and state-owned medical facilities.

However, the nation also has 15,619, comprising 14.9% of women doctors, who are without any job, while 21,146, constituting 20.1% of the total number, remain completely outside the labor force, as per the survey. The Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) reports that since its establishment in 1947, Pakistan has produced approximately 200,000 doctors -- half of them being women. Alarming, data from the Bureau of Immigration reveals that around 30,000 doctors have migrated from Pakistan since 1970, with nearly 1,000 leaving the country annually. Gilani emphasizes a significant issue among women doctors. "Qualified female doctors are not working," he observes.

A majority of these doctors have received their education at public sector universities, where the government subsidizes their education with billions of rupees. Notably, while private universities charge medical students more than Rs5 million, government institutions offer the same education for less than Rs1 million.

This taxpayer-funded investment appears to go to waste, given that one in three women doctors is not actively practicing, according to the survey. This results in an approximate waste of Rs200 billion in current value, given the investment in almost 50,000 women doctors.

Dr Shahid Naeem, director of policy research at PRIDE, points out that one in every five medical graduates chooses to remain outside



the labor force. The majority of these "out of labor force" women medical graduates are married, indicating a societal trend of pursuing medical education to secure advantageous marriages. Dr Naeem calls upon the government to reconsider its policy of seat allocation, particularly in public-sector medical colleges, to ensure a return on investment.

The survey findings align with the notion of 'doctor brides', a prevalent phenomenon in Pakistan, where families encourage their daughters to pursue medical education to enhance their marriage prospects.

The survey also provides a regional breakdown of employment patterns among these doctors, revealing that approximately 28% and 72% of Pakistan's total medical graduates reside in rural and urban areas, respectively. In rural regions, over half of Pakistan's medical graduates are employed, with a lower proportion choosing to remain outside the labor force compared to the national average. In urban centers, around 70% of medical graduates are employed, with a limited percentage unemployed. However, the proportion of those choosing to remain outside the labor force is notably higher in urban areas.

When examining the 21,146 women medical graduates who opt out of the labor force, data indicates that a significant majority, 76.6%, are in urban areas, with only 23.4% in rural regions. Notably, around 76% of these graduates who opt out of the labor force are married. The survey's age breakdown indicates that the majority of women medical graduates fall within the 25-34 age group.

Conclusively, the survey emphasizes the need for targeted policy efforts to enhance employment opportunities for medical graduates, particularly in rural areas where unemployment rates are elevated. This research encompasses women medical graduates with MBBS, BDS, MS/MSc, MPhil, or PhD degrees in any medical field and is based on data collected from nearly 99,900 households across Pakistan, providing district-level representative results for the first time.

# The TTP's new battleground

*Given Chitral's strategic location, the rise of the militant threat there is a serious security concern*



By Zahid Hussain

**I**t was the most audacious cross-border incursion by the TTP. Reportedly, hundreds of heavily armed militants stormed Pakistani security posts in Chitral last week. The intruders were said to have been beaten back after three days of fierce fighting but the situation in the remote district is far from normal. Tension continues to grip the region.

There were some reports of the militants having infiltrated the border areas of the Kalash valley. The latest attacks in the treacherous mountainous region mark an expansion in the TTP's cross-border operations. The strategically located northwestern part of Pakistan that borders Afghanistan's Kunar and Nuristan provinces has become the TTP's latest battlefield. The two Afghan provinces house the largest sanctuaries for the outlawed Pakistani militant group.

With reports of the militants amassing on the border and tensions building up in the region for some time, the raid didn't come as a surprise. According to some reports, the attacks were led by TTP head Noor

Mehsud. The timing of the attacks seemed well calculated as the country celebrated Defence Day on Sept 6. The clashes left casualties on both sides.

While there has been a significant rise in cross-border raids in the former tribal regions, incidents of terrorist violence have also escalated in recent months, taking a huge toll on Pakistani security forces. The militants have virtually declared a war on the Pakistani state. The TTP is not only active in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but has also extended its operations to the troubled Balochistan province. Meanwhile, the latest incident in Chitral has added to our security concerns.

We are now back to the pre-2016 situation, or even worse, with the resurgence of militant violence. The militants appear more organised and better equipped with sophisticated weaponry. Scores of Pakistani soldiers reportedly lost their lives in August, the bloodiest month, in clashes between the security forces and the militants, with targeted attacks in various parts of KP and Balochistan.

Such a high number of casualties is alarming. The situation is getting worse with reports of tacit support for the TTP from some Afghan Taliban commanders. A major concern for the Pakistani security forces is the militants acquiring modern weapons left behind by the Nato forces and the former Afghan army.

With the interim Afghan Taliban administration refusing to take action against TTP sanctuaries on its soil, security challenges for Pakistan have exacerbated. What is most alarming are reports of the Afghan Taliban also joining the TTP in some of the terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. There was strong evidence of their involvement in the raid on the security post in Zhob district of Balochistan earlier this year. It was among the most lethal attacks in recent years.

The impunity with which such attacks are being carried out against the security forces also raises questions about our own strategy to deal with the existentialist threat. Growing political and economic instability in the country also seems to have given impetus to the militants. The security forces now seem



overstretched, with the expansion of militant operations along the long and porous border with Afghanistan.

Some reports quoting TTP sources maintain that the worsening sectarian tension in the nearby area of Gilgit-Baltistan has also been the reason behind the latest TTP incursion into Chitral. The militants are reportedly regrouping under the TTP banner in the area.

Indeed, the Chitral incident cannot be seen in isolation. Cross-border infiltration and clashes are not a new phenomenon in the region. The neighbouring Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nuristan have long been known as the centre of Al Qaeda-backed, religiously inspired militancy. The area became a safe haven for Pakistani militants fleeing from military operations in this country. The return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan helped them reorganise.

There have been several incidents of cross-border clashes in the district in the past. But the Sept 6 raid was the most serious, with a large number of militants crossing over. A top TTP commander told The Khorasan Diary, a digital news platform, that several villages have fallen to the militants. The claim has not been verified. The area where the infiltration took place is believed to be more vulnerable because of its inhospitable terrain. The mountainous region is covered with snow



for much of the year, making cross-border movement extremely difficult.

Given Chitral's geostrategic location the rise of the militant threat there is a serious security concern for Pakistan. The region not only borders Afghanistan but also Tajikistan and China through the Wakhan Corridor. Because of its sensitivity, there is a large presence of Pakistani security forces in the region. But the tough terrain makes it harder to completely stop the infiltration. The latest cross-border attacks are a grim

reminder of the growing TTP threat to national security.

Indeed, the return of Taliban rule across the border has been a major factor in the resurgence of militant violence in the country but the absence of a clear strategy has also helped the TTP regain some of its lost space. The policy of appeasement has come back to haunt us.

It was a serious mistake on the part of the state to engage in so-called peace negotiations with the outlawed group on the persuasion of the Afghan Taliban administration in 2021. The terms of engagement were set by the militants.

Though the peace talks went nowhere, the state allowed the return of thousands of armed militants. Pakistan also released several militant commanders involved in the killing of thousands of Pakistanis. The returnee militants revived their terror network and went on to challenge the state's authority.

It is that policy of appeasement that the country is now paying for. Indeed, we must put pressure on the Afghan Taliban administration to take action against the militants operating from its soil, but more importantly, we have to set our own counterterrorism policy in order. There still seems to be some confusion over how to deal with the rising TTP threat. The Chitral incident is yet another wake-up call for our policymakers.



# Women's cricket highlights

By Ali Abdullah

Pakistan's women's cricket team defeated South Africa in the T20 series in an exciting and unprecedented turn of events. This victory highlighted Pakistani women's cricket's emerging prowess in the world arena and represented an important turning point for the sport.

The COVID-19 pandemic cast a shadow over the sporting world as the T20 series played out against a difficult background. Both teams were adamant about putting on a remarkable performance despite these obstacles. With South Africa, a tough opponent in women's cricket, travelling to Pakistan, the stage was set for an exciting match.

With the first T20 International, the series got underway, and it was clear that Pakistan had big plans from the get-go. Pakistan's opening pair set the tone with a strong partnership, which had been uncommon in previous matches, after choosing to bat first after winning the toss. Better technique, versatility, and intent were all demonstrated by the batswomen, who also took calculated risks and took advantage of scoring opportunities.

The depth of quality in the Pakistan women's cricket team was shown throughout the series by exceptional individual performances. Muneeba Ali was one name that stood out. The left-handed opener was instrumental in giving Pakistan solid starting positions in numerous games, winning her the Player of the Series honour. It was enjoyable to observe her consistency and shot timing. The seasoned Bismah Maroof, who not only led the team well but also showed her batting prowess, was another important contributor. Maroof's maturity and calmness under duress were evident in spades, anchoring the innings when necessary and accelerating the scoring when necessary.

During the T20 series, Pakistan's bowling assault was nothing short of outstanding. The seamers and spinners, working together, presented the South African batters with ongoing



difficulties. Diana Baig and Fatima Sana, a dynamic pace team, made significant advances and maintained pressure throughout the series.

Nashra Sandhu's deft deliveries and Kainat Imtiaz's leg-spin proved to be a potent duo in the spin area. They frequently claimed wickets in the middle overs, which made it challenging for South Africa to form partnerships and gather momentum.

In the second T20I, Pakistan successfully held on to a low total, which was one of the series' turning points. Pakistan won the match thanks to their precise bowling and energetic fielding, which were demonstrated by their quick runouts and crisp catches. This stunning triumph demonstrated the team's tenacity and self-confidence.

The third T20I had a tense conclusion, with Pakistan winning in the final over, demonstrating their capacity for handling pressure. Cricket fans enjoyed the series because it included cliffhanger moments and tense finishes.

Pakistan's T20 series victory was greatly influenced by their strong leadership and sense of teamwork. On and off the pitch, Bismah Maroof's captaincy was characterised by wise judgement and composed leadership. One key factor in Pakistan's triumph was her capacity to inspire the troops and foster confidence.

The players' cooperation and comradery were obvious throughout the entire series. They exemplified the genuine meaning of team sports as they shared in each other's triumphs and helped one another through difficulties. The T20 series victory by Pakistan over South Africa represents more than just a triumph for the sport of women's cricket. It represents the expansion and advancement of women's cricket in Pakistan and inspires aspiring young cricketers. This triumph disproves preconceptions and provides women in athletics with additional possibilities and recognition.

Pakistan's series victory against South Africa will go down in women's cricket history as a pivotal milestone. It is evidence of the Pakistani women cricketers' talent, tenacity, and hard work. This triumph crosses boundaries and motivates everyone who supports women's equality in sports, not just cricket fans.

As women's cricket in Pakistan continues to evolve, this triumph serves as a reminder that with dedication and belief, anything is possible. Pakistan's stunning T20 series win against South Africa is a celebration of talent, teamwork, and the indomitable spirit of athletes. It's a victory for every girl who dreams of making her mark in the world of sports, and it's a testament to the bright future of women's cricket in Pakistan and around the world.



# Made in Heaven's Tara is the perfect anti-hero

*She's fierce, she's a broken woman, she's a survivor, but most of all, she's a commentary on what we as a society need to unlearn*

By Maheen Humayun

Zoya Akhtar is one of the greatest storytellers of our generation- particularly when it comes to delving into the plight of the South Asian woman. We patiently waited four years for the second season of Made in Heaven and it did not disappoint. I've had so many conflicting feelings about the characters this season, but one thing that stood out was Tara Khanna's embodiment of the perfect anti-hero.

Season one positioned Tara Khanna, played by Sobhita Dhulipala, as this beautiful, creative and talented woman who seemed to be 'girl-bossing' her way through the Indian wedding planning industry. She becomes fashion, every outfit is so intricately woven into a statement and her presence on screen is both breathtaking and astounding. But within her character arc, we see the cracks that begin to form. Season two does a great job of profoundly combing through her own family history and offsetting her as a resilient character who will go to every length to get her way. And while as the audience, we yearn for Tara's redemption arc, we are given quite the opposite.

The series positions Tara as a survivor — she has one grip on reality as she traverses through picture-perfect weddings in equally perfect saris but the reality is darker. Behind a struggling woman who seems to want it all, is a woman who is confronted with distanced friendships, an isolation that continues to grow and a recognition of her lack of power. And maybe that's why we find ourselves drawn towards her. Beneath the stone-cold exterior, there is a broken woman. But she rejects that narrative, and in fact, as the show continues, we see her weaponising that beauty she was once revered for.

On the surface, the series claims to be progressive, there is a clear desire for it to extend itself towards a more inclusive narrative. Personally, I felt like both the Muslim episodes could have delved a little deeper; it was a stereotypical depiction of a Muslim wedding — the second wife phenomenon and the reading of the nikkah while are completely relevant and valid also seem to just skip over the fact that there should be more to the story. Is it tokenism? Is it simply a device to shed light on the different communities in India?

I think as an audience, it is important for us to deconstruct the ways in which Tara's character is problematic. Existing within what is already known to be a patriarchal society, some ideas need to be explained: yes, women need to work harder to be heard; yes, women need to level the playing field; yes, women need to use their resources to build themselves up because society often falls short. The show had already set the precedent of Tara's past and while I still struggle to come to terms with the fact that she was the one who manipulated Adil (Jim Sarbh) and leaked the tape, we grew to empathise with her.

But with season two, that empathy churned itself into a form



of pity and resentment. Her motivations behind tricking Adil and taking ownership of the house his late father built and his mother currently resided in left an incredibly sour taste in my mouth. Her character could not go back from that act. This made me reflect on the way women craft powerful positions in society — it is not an easy ladder to climb. And yet, Tara's actions show us that she wants one thing, over and over again and that is power. A twisted form of self-assurance that pushes her towards the brink of being vilified by everyone in her circle.

## Weaponising beauty

Tara's outfits are a statement in itself: each piece is so carefully curated, a champagne gold sari wrapped to perfection — never showing any cracks, Sabyasachi presenting her as the insider she dreams to be, Malhotra clinging to redefine every mistake she made. She knows when and how to wear each outfit to curate her energy for the occasion. The way she carries a sari with grace a simple fusion of East meets West and the accessories all do the most.

And I applaud this display within the show because fashion has a way of telling a story that is often overlooked. She weaponises her beauty to excel within certain circles, her clothes are an armour wrapped so tightly around her that a simple mis-draping would be her downfall. If we think about the psychology of fashion, it is generally rooted in the environment one comes from. And yet, Tara dresses for the environment she yearns to inhabit.

Maybe Tara's character is a commentary on what we, as a society, need to unlearn — that beauty and power do not co-exist and that unexpected variables are consistently thrown towards women but the onus of how we solve them is the real story. That is how we reclaim our power. Tara may be the perfect anti-hero but she is also a complex, valid and sometimes even uncomfortable representation of desi society and how far we still have to go.

Courtesy [www.images.dawn.com](http://www.images.dawn.com)

# Sharna Burgess shows disappointment to sit out for Dancing with the Stars

*Dancing with the Stars counts Sharna Burgess out in Season 32*



Sharna Burgess will not be present at the 32nd season of *Dancing with the Stars* as it prepares to make cast announcement on Wednesday.

The professional dancer, 38, spoke candidly about her regret at not being invited to compete in the forthcoming season of the competitive reality show.

Burgess discussed how she temporarily left the series last year after giving birth and fully anticipated returning to it on an episode of her new iHeartRadio show *Old-Ish*.

"Last season I was supposed to come back but Zane was only eight weeks old... It just felt like I needed to sit in motherhood with Zane," she said in a conversation with her co-host and husband Brian Austin Green. "It was always, 'I want to come back next year,' and 'Of course, we love you, we'll always have you.'"

The *DWTS* pro claims she found out she wouldn't be getting an invite when her co-stars started getting calls to come back and her phone went silent.

"Because it was such a shock, because I wasn't expecting it, it was tough," Burgess confessed before referencing the time she wasn't asked to return for season 27. "It's not the first time. My last five years on the show have been rocky — not because of the show."

"I love the show deeply, but we had a new executive producer come in, I think five years ago now. I had just won with Bobby

Bones and he decided to not bring me back," she added. "There's a lot of speculation as to why."

In June 2022, Burgess and Green welcomed their son Zane Walker. The couple became partners during season 30 of the dance competition show after getting to know each other through their business manager.

The television celebrity posted a video to Instagram in advance of season 31 in which she defended her choice not to appear on the show.

"I have some news that I have to tell you guys because I keep getting so many DMs about it," she began the video.

"After long conversations and lots of thinking and really trying to sit with what was right, and many conversations with Deena Katz, who's our casting director but also like a second mom to me, I made the really hard decision to not do this season of *Dancing with the Stars*. There's been a list that has been released saying that I would be a pro and I won't be."

"I will be there in some capacity and we're still talking about that," she noted. "I'm at one hundred percent capacity with my body. I feel fit, I feel strong, I'm so ready to dance. I'm about to go to the gym right now. We're going to talk about what that means and how I can be a part of it."

Courtesy The News



# Pain Hustlers review: Emily Blunt is 'the only reason to watch this

*Pain Hustlers, a drama about the opioid epidemic, is "too worried about being a downer to be convincing", writes Caryn James as the film premieres at the Toronto International Film Festival*

By Caryn James

**D**on't confuse the recent *Painkiller*, an earnest Netflix series about a fictionalised pharmaceutical company and the opioid epidemic, with the new Netflix film *Pain Hustlers*, which has a similar story about a different fictionalised company and a tone that goes for entertaining long before it turns earnest too. Why the creators of one of these projects didn't flinch and change the title is a good question.

And while *Pain Hustlers* is a perfectly fine title, the film probably should have been called *Liza Drake*, the name of the sales rep played by Emily Blunt, who single-handedly almost saves this tone-deaf drama from itself. As the rags-to-riches heroine who finds herself in the midst of a morally compromised situation, Blunt creates a character who is engaging, smarter than she's given credit for, and hungry to improve her hardscrabble life as a single mother with an adolescent daughter. She makes the film watchable, but is the only reason to watch.

Her character is a complete invention in a story loosely based on the real-life case of Insys Therapeutics, documented in Evan Hughes' 2018 New York Times article *The Pain Hustlers*, and subsequent book, which this film is based on. Other characters are variations on real people, but the outline of corruption is the same.

Liza is working in a Miami strip club when she meets Pete, a sleazy sales manager for the fictional company, Zanna. He is played by Chris Evans with a street-wise accent so vague and wavering it could be from the New Jersey of *The Sopranos* or any Tough Guy Street USA. He hires her to work for the company, founded by Dr Jack Neel, played by the usually reliable Andy Garcia, whose vaguely Southern accent is all over the place too.

Neel has developed Lonafen, a fast-acting fentanyl-based drug for cancer patients, but



is none-too-scrupulous about how to sell it. Goaded by Pete, Liza sets up a program that skirts the law, paying doctors a speaker's fee that is actually a bribe to prescribe the drug. Blunt lets us feel Liza's relief as the program takes off. We see the difference too, as her wardrobe goes from shabby and slightly tacky to less tacky (still too many sequins) and eventually sleek and upscale. She can support her daughter, played by Chloe Coleman in an immensely likeable performance. But Liza's situation becomes more complicated when Neel decides to market Lonafen illegally, urging doctors to prescribe it for non-cancer patients, who are vulnerable to its addictive and sometimes lethal effects.

The film's biggest problem is that Liza's success seems unconnected to the deadly product she sells until very near the end. David Yates, who directed the last four Harry Potter movies and its *Fantastic Beasts* prequels, knows how to create a fluent narrative even here. But it's as if he and the screenwriter, Wells Tower, were too timid to go all in on being entertaining about such an important subject, but too worried about being a downer to weave the dark side of the story through convincingly. That is a tricky balancing act, as demonstrated by *Painkiller*, which went so far the other way it bludgeoned viewers with the obvious.

In *Pain Hustlers*, one patient says in a quick word to the camera that Lonafen "gave me back my life for a minute", but it's left to us to recognise that minute is the point, even after we later see two of his teeth fall out in his hand. Instead, the story focuses on Liza and Zanna's rise, the tone echoing their euphoria as the company soars from near-bankruptcy to the top of the market. Catherine O'Hara has brief but lively scenes as Liza's wild-child mother, and Brian d'Arcy James plays a venal doctor who is also a buffoon. When the film turns more serious and leans into its moral issue, the shift registers as viewer whiplash.

And as much as Blunt gives her life, Liza is finally too artificial a construction, made to appeal to us as the best version of the pain hustler she is. Her daughter desperately needs medical care that insurance won't cover, a blatant device to justify her choice to keep working for Zanna even after her conscience begins to kick in.

With the final credits we see real-life news reports about the inspiration for Garcia's character, Dr John Kapoor, who was convicted of bribery. By then *Pain Hustlers* has veered too far into fantasyland for anything real to matter.

Courtesy BBC



# 32<sup>ND</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC









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