

Fortnightly

The Truth International

Islamabad - Karachi

15th - 31st December 2023

ABC Certified

War in Palestine

War puts Palestinians through
Terrible Agonies

Finally Election Scheduled
Path paved for General elections on
February 8th

Economy in 2024

After three years of recession, economic
improvement is seen

Tyranny in Gaza Continues



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Remembering Ahmad Saleem



By Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri

Ahmad Saleem, a luminary in the realm of Urdu and Punjabi literature and poetry, left an indelible mark on Pakistan's social and political landscape. He was a mentor to many of us.

I have not read all of his 175-plus publications, but whatever I could read is worth many degrees. His extensive body of work reflects great depth of insight that transcends mere academic pursuits. His influence extends across diverse facets of South Asia's history, politics, and culture, making his contributions invaluable.

Those interested in learning about the evolution of Pakistan's political culture cannot overlook Saleem's seminal four-volume series, 'Pakistan ki Siasi Tareekh' (Pakistan's Political History). For a nuanced exploration of the factors leading to the tragic separation of East Pakistan, his work 'Land of Two Partitions' serves as a poignant resource.

His book 'Rewriting History' vividly narrates stories of friendship and how Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs risked their lives to save each other's during Punjab's communal riots in 1947, offering a compelling alternative perspective on a critical

juncture in the Subcontinent's past. To understand the role of religious minorities in Pakistan's trajectory, his work 'Pakistan and Religious Minorities' is an illuminating read.

Saleem's approach to biographies featuring personalities such as Iskandar Mirza, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Jam Saqi, Saif Khalid, Amrita Pritam, Masood Khadarpoosh, Habib Jalib, Karl Marx and others stands out for its unbiased portrayal. Rather than succumbing to binary perspectives, Saleem skilfully introduces shades of grey, providing a balanced and nuanced understanding of these figures.

The post-Zia era witnessed the ebb of leftist movements in Pakistan. Young Saleem, as a member of the Communist Party of Pakistan's student wing, had first-hand experience of the evolution of leftist movements in Pakistan. He also had the insight into the fall of left politics in Pakistan.

Saleem's publications including 'Roshan Khiali' (Enlightenment), 'Jis Dhaj Se Koi Maqatl Ko Gaya' (The Honour with which One Went to the Gallows), 'Tareekh Ka Aik Gumshuda Warq' (The Lost Page of

History) and others are essential to comprehend the rise and fall of left-wing politics in the country.

His political ideas were influenced by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. He always took pride in being a disciple of Faiz and how he narrated his memories with him – in a way that takes his readers to Faiz's company. Beyond politics, Saleem's exploration of Pakistan's culture and arts, documenting the evolution of PTV, radio, and cinema, showcases his commitment to capturing the nation's multifaceted identity.

Born in Gujrat's village Miana Gondal in 1945, he grew up in Peshawar and started his professional life in Karachi. That multicultural exposure in his formative years embodied the spirit of a true Pakistani in him. That helped him break the taboos and stigmas attached to challenging the policies and practices that bred marginalization and exclusion in smaller provinces.

For doing this, he had to go to jail several times as a prisoner of conscience. However, his commitment to human rights and an inclusive society remained intact.

Noteworthy are the compilations of



Saleem's letters to and from luminaries like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Amrita Pritam, Rajinder Singh Bedi and others. These volumes serve as a window to the burning issues of their time, contrasting sharply with the impersonal nature of contemporary communication mediums such as WhatsApp and emails.

As a poet, Saleem's verses resonate as the voice of the people. His courage is evident in addressing sensitive topics such as the forced conversions of girls and women who were kidnapped or separated from their families on both sides of the border after the communal riots of 1947.

Through his poems, he also showed solidarity with marginalized groups and advocated for labourers and farmers' rights. His poetry reflects a commitment to social justice and a keen awareness of the challenges faced by various segments of society.

My first interaction with Ahmad Saleem was in 2001. At that time, he was the editor of Urdu and vernacular language publications at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). His unwavering belief in translating policy research into local languages underscored his commitment to making information accessible to a broader audience.

When I compile a list of my lifetime accomplishments, one of the most significant will be retaining him at the SDPI for almost two decades. He remained associated with the

SDPI until he breathed his last. He started working at a very young age and stayed at the SDPI longer than any other organization in his career - spanning over six decades.

While at the SDPI, one of his initiatives was to recognize the lifetime achievements of writers and poets through the SDPI's lifetime achievement awards.

Saleem's legacy extends beyond his literary contributions. At the SDPI, he was drawing a decent salary, and he used to spend all of it on buying second-hand and new books and magazines. At times, after purchasing books, he was left with no money to meet his daily needs.

Noting this, we started paying his salary in weekly instalments, but this did not make much difference as he started buying books on deferred payments, paying the seller as soon as he had any money in his pocket. He believed in disseminating knowledge and established a resource centre (comprising more than 30,000 books) that became a global hub for researchers studying South Asia.

I remember my first visit to his house in Islamabad. He was unwell, and I went to enquire about his health. It seemed I had entered a book warehouse in Urdu Bazar, Lahore. Everywhere, from floor to roof and on and around his bed, were piles of books and newspapers. He was lying in bed in the middle of those piles with his signature smile.

The washroom door was slightly open, and guess what? There were books piled up in his washroom, too. Out of curiosity, I intentionally went there, and it was the first and last time I saw the combination of a study room and a washroom. Only Ahmad Saleem could do it.

We used to believe that his books were his only love, but he proved us wrong. During the SDPI's financial crisis in 2008, he surrendered his gratuity and provident funds to help pay off the organization's liabilities. He also decided to work for the SDPI without salary and continued working under this arrangement for almost a year until the organization's financial situation improved. This demonstrated his strong commitment to the SDPI's mission.

His resilience against health challenges, including a liver transplant in 2013 and a battle with Parkinson's disease during the last two years, symbolizes the courage and fortitude that defined his life. Neither cancer nor Parkinson's disease could stop him from reading and writing. It was with Parkinson's that he compiled his memoir 'Meri Dharti Meray Log' (My Land, My People) last year.

Ahmad Saleem's passing on International Human Rights Day, (December 10 2023) marks the end of an era. While he may no longer be with us, his legacy will continue through his writings, his resource centre, and the countless lives he touched with his intellectual contributions. May his soul rest in peace.

Israel-Gaza war: What is the price of peace?



By Jeremy Bowen

Just getting to the end of the day and surviving the night must feel like a miracle in the Gaza Strip. Palestinians "plead for safety", wrote Philippe Lazzarini, head of UNRWA, the main UN relief agency in Gaza, in an "endless, deepening tragedy... hell on earth".

It must be just as hellish for the hostages taken by Hamas and for the families of their victims. War is a cruel furnace that puts humans through terrible agonies. But its heat can produce changes that seemed impossible.

It happened in western Europe after World War Two. Old enemies who had killed each other for centuries chose peace. Will the war in Gaza shock Israelis and Palestinians into ending their century of conflict over the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river?

The widow of Muhammad Abu Shaar

I've been watching a video of a woman wracked by grief, sitting next to the body of her husband, Muhammad Abu Shaar. As Israel and Egypt are not allowing journalists to enter Gaza, I have not met her. I haven't been able to find out her name, which was not

posted alongside those of her dead husband and children.

In the video, it is as if she hopes, somehow, that the power of her grief will bring him back.

"I swear, we promised to die together. You died and left me. What are we supposed to do, God? Muhammad, get up! For God's sake my beloved, I swear to God, I love you. For God's sake get up. Our children Nour and Aboud are here with you. Get up."

The two children were with their father because all three of them had just been killed by Israel. An air strike destroyed the house they were hoping would shelter them in Rafah.

Yonatan Zeigen

I visited Yonatan Zeigen at his flat in Tel Aviv. It was a comfortable home, full of his children's toys. Among the family photos I recognised his mother, Vivian Silver, who was one of Israel's leading campaigners for peace with the Palestinians. Vivian was in the family home in kibbutz Be'eri, on the border with Gaza, when Hamas attacked on 7 October.

The first time I met Yonatan, in the days after their kibbutz was attacked,

he was hoping his mother had been taken into Gaza as a hostage.

When he heard the air raid sirens in Tel Aviv, he rang Vivian. They switched to WhatsApp as they heard gunfire and explosions in the kibbutz, hoping that if she made no noise, Hamas would bypass the house.

He read out the texts they exchanged, first some black humour and suddenly serious and full of love as she realised a massacre was happening.

"She wrote me, they're inside the house, it's time to stop joking and say goodbye," he tells me.

"And I wrote back that 'I love you, Mum. I have no words, I'm with you'. Then she writes, 'I feel you'. And then that was it, that's the last message."

The next day, I visited her house in the kibbutz and saw it was burnt out. It took weeks for investigators to find Vivian Silver's remains in the ash left behind in the safe room. Yonatan has given up his career as a social worker to campaign for peace.

"They came into my country and killed my mother because we didn't have peace. So, to me, this just proves the point that we need it," he says.

"It could go either way. Catastrophes like this create changes in societies in the world. And I believe that it can lead to a better future."

Issa Amro

Issa Amro is a Palestinian activist in Hebron in the West Bank. The city is holy to Muslims and Jews, who revere it as the burial place of the prophet Abraham. It has been a flashpoint for decades.

Issa is well known in Hebron and considered a troublemaker by Israeli soldiers who have enforced a curfew on Palestinians who live near the Jewish settlement in the heart of the city. He told me he was detained and beaten after the 7 October attacks.

Like Yonatan Zeigen in Tel Aviv, Issa Amro believes that the war could produce a chance for Israelis and Palestinians to lead better and safer lives.

"I think it's two opportunities. Either we choose to make it deeper and worse, or we make it as an opportunity to solve the conflict and to solve the occupation, to solve the apartheid and make living together possible because the security solution failed... only peace is the solution."

The prospects for peace

It might seem a long way off now, and many more people are going to be killed before it happens, but like every war this one will stop.

All the wars in and around Gaza since Hamas seized control there in 2007 have ended the same way, with a ceasefire deal. The ceasefires all came with a fatal flaw that guaranteed the next war between Israel and Hamas. That was because no attempt was made to end a century of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.

The killing and destruction in this war are of such a different order that no one can pretend there is any kind of normality to restore. This time it must be different. That much is accepted by Palestinians and Israelis and the outside powers that matter the most.

The problem is agreeing which future to try to create. The Israeli government is heading for a diplomatic row with the United States, its most important ally, about what

happens after the ceasefire.

President Joe Biden is exasperated by what he called Israel's "indiscriminate bombing" of Gaza. Even so, he continues to back Israel, as he has since the start of the war, by deploying aircraft carriers, sending planeloads of weapons and vetoing ceasefire resolutions at the UN Security Council.

In return, Joe Biden wants Israel to agree that the only way forward is revive talks to establish an independent Palestinian state. That was the objective of the Oslo peace process, which failed after years of negotiations.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not said much about how Gaza would be governed if and when he declares victory over Hamas. But he has rejected Joe Biden's plan.



One constant in Netanyahu's long political career has been opposition to the independent Palestinian state that Oslo tried and failed to produce.

Total victory and the unconditional surrender of anyone left alive in Hamas remain Israel's objectives. Annihilating Hamas, Mr Netanyahu believes, is the only way to rescue the hostages.

A few hours before Mr Biden said Israel's bombing was indiscriminate, Mr Netanyahu made his own speech.

"I will not allow Israel to repeat the mistake of Oslo," he said. "After the great sacrifice of our civilians and our soldiers, I will not allow the entry into Gaza of those who educate for terrorism, support terrorism and finance terrorism. Gaza will be neither Hamastan nor Fatahstan."

Fatahstan is a derogatory reference to the Palestinian Authority, the rival to Hamas, which recognises Israel and co-operates with it on security.

Israeli domestic politics feed into Mr Netanyahu's calculations. Opinion polls indicate that many Israelis blame him for the intelligence and security failures that allowed Hamas to break into Israel with such force. By doubling down on his opposition to Palestinian self-determination, Mr Netanyahu is trying to regain the trust of the right-wing Jewish nationalists who support his government.

Yonatan Zeigen, the son of the slain peace campaigner Vivian Silver, says his mother would have been heartbroken to see the war, believing that wars cause more wars.

"I think she would have said 'not in my

name'... a war, if we're not too naïve, should be a means, right? But it feels like this war is a cause in itself, of revenge."

Yonatan senses a new opportunity, to put peace back on Israel's political agenda.

Peace campaigners were prominent in Israel until they were discredited as an armed Palestinian uprising erupted after the Oslo process collapsed in 2000. The idea of peace with the Palestinians vanished from mainstream Israeli politics. Now, Yonatan hopes, it is inching its way back.

"Absolutely. You couldn't even say the word. And now people are talking about it."

Issa Amro, the Palestinian activist in Hebron, told me life there is much harder for Palestinians since 7 October.

"It got much worse. Ten times worse. More

restrictions. More violence. More intimidation. People don't feel safe at all. People don't have enough food to eat. People don't get any access to a social life. No schools, no kindergartens, no work. It's a collective punishment inside an area which is very restricted."

Issa got into a verbal spat with a group of Israeli soldiers while we were walking with him through the centre of Hebron. One of them, in combat gear, with an assault rifle and large pistol in a holster, wearing a black mask that only exposed his eyes, listened closely as Issa told me that peace was the only way ahead as there was no military solution to the conflict. The soldier wouldn't give his name when he butted into the conversation.

"You don't know what it's like to grow up in Israel with neighbours like this," he said. "Gay rights, they beat the women, I saw this with my eyes. Yes. They kill their daughters if they have an affair with someone they don't like. They [Palestinians] are violent. I know them, I live with them. They don't want peace... They hate me. You know I can feel it. I know all the stuff they are telling. I don't talk to them."

A chance for a peaceful future, for an independent Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel that the Americans, the British and many other countries say they

want, will not emerge without sustained diplomatic and political will and determination.

The old Oslo format, of negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis brokered by the Americans, ended in failure.

If there is a next time, one idea mentioned by senior Western diplomats is to make Palestinian independence a crucial part of a broader package of change in the Middle East. Israel would be offered the prize of mutual recognition with Saudi Arabia, if they made the concessions necessary for Palestinian independence. Jordan and Egypt would be crucial players, as countries who have made lasting peace with Israel. Also vital would be Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, immensely wealthy Gulf states. Like the Saudis, they need peace in the Middle East as they spend hundreds of billions establishing themselves as global players.

A blueprint already exists. Twenty years ago, the Saudi peace plan offered Israel full recognition and peace with Arab states, in return for a viable and sovereign Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, with a capital in East Jerusalem. It could be relaunched by extending the existing Abraham Accords between Israel and some Arab countries, but adding to it the

price tag of a Palestinian state.

It is an ambitious idea, that would not happen without new Israeli and Palestinian leaders who believed in the project.

The Americans could mediate, though they would have to be even-handed, something they have never managed before. Both sides would have to be prepared to make painful compromises on cherished beliefs, especially concerning territory. Political storms would break over leaders prepared to take risks for peace.

Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist in 1995 when he tried to make peace with the Palestinians. An Islamist extremist killed Egypt's President Anwar Sadat because he made peace with Israel.

And the war in Gaza would have to end as soon as possible. If it spreads, nightmare scenarios include desperate Palestinians breaching the Egyptian border as Israeli tanks close in and the escalation into full-scale war of the current cross-border exchanges between Israel and the Lebanese militia group Hezbollah.

So much needs to go right for peace to have a chance. So much has already gone wrong that peace might just be impossible.



India's Supreme Court has scrapped Article 370. Now What?

Amidst disappointment from Kashmiri leaders and international observers, the Indian Supreme Court's decision to uphold the Article 370 revocation prompts debates over Kashmir's future and the ramifications for the region's demographics and geopolitics

By Dr Moonis Ahmar

On December 11, a five-member bench of the Indian Supreme Court, headed by the Chief Justice, upheld the revocation of Article 370 from the Indian Constitution. The judgment, reserved in September after 16 hearings, also called for the conduct of elections in Jammu & Kashmir by September 30, 2024, and the restoration of the state of J&K.

While former Chief Minister of J&K Mehbooba Mufti and President of the Democratic Progressive Party Ghulam Nabi Azad expressed their disappointment over the Supreme Court's judgment, the BJP termed the verdict a vindication of the August 5, 2019 decision of the Indian Parliament, which repealed Article 370, providing autonomy to the state of J&K. Justice Kishan Kaul, another member of the bench, called for the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to probe human rights violations in J&K by the state and non-state actors since the 1980s to initiate healing.

How will the verdict of the Supreme Court impact the Kashmir conflict? Will the Indian state use the verdict to further consolidate its hold, particularly in the Muslim-majority Valley, by altering the demographic composition of the region? What are the options for Kashmiri independence movements after the Supreme Court's verdict? How will Pakistan deal with the changing legal status of J&K, and will Islamabad follow New Delhi's example by annexing Gilgit & Baltistan and Azad Kashmir? These are the questions raised in the aftermath of the verdict of the Indian Supreme Court endorsing the August 5, 2019, J&K Reorganization Act and scrapping the autonomy of J&K as mentioned in Article 370.

According to the Washington-based Kashmir Awareness Forum, "The Supreme Court of India upholds the decision of the



Modi government to strip the occupied Jammu & Kashmir of special status. The verdict, though disappointing, does not come as a surprise. This is the same court that confirmed the death sentence on Afzal Guru, notwithstanding the fact (own admission of the Chief Justice) that evidence for the alleged crime was not conclusive. The judgment came "to satisfy the collective conscience of the nation."

Now the Indian state will be more confident in crushing any protest demanding the restoration of J&K's autonomy. The All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) challenged the verdict of the Supreme Court, calling it a farce and biased, which will not end the aspirations of the people of J&K for seeking sovereign status.

The same court, a few years ago, issued a judgment giving the Hindu majority the right to build a temple in place of the Babri Mosque. This decision came as a shock to legal luminaries who cast aspersions on the acumen of the judges of the highest court of the land. Any single or group of individuals expecting a fair judgment from Indian courts is exhibiting their naivety, as the rule of law has been buried under BJP Hindutva rubble by the Indian government. The reality is that the Hindu nationalist BJP regime has deepened its hold over the

pillars of the Indian state – from the bureaucracy, to the judiciary, military, and security agencies, the BJP has consolidated its hold over power, and the likelihood of the party using a Supreme Court verdict to win the 2024 general elections cannot be understated.

If Mehbooba Mufti, Omar Abdullah, Ghulam Nabi Azad, and other Kashmiri leaders expressed their resentment over the Supreme Court's judgment, will their reaction cause any impact on Indian control over Jammu & Kashmir? The Supreme Court, in its verdict, has cleverly tried to vindicate the stance of the Indian state on revoking Article 370 and placate the grievances of the people of Jammu & Kashmir at the same time. On the one hand, after months of hearings, it has endorsed the Jammu & Kashmir Reorganization Act and Presidential power to end the special status of J&K as guaranteed in the Indian Constitution under Article 370 by calling it a transitory measure, and on the other hand, it called for the holding of elections in J&K by September 2024 and restoring the statehood of J&K. In view of the surge of Hindu nationalism and its penetration in the pillars of state power, it was wishful thinking to expect the Indian Supreme Court to give a verdict contrary to

the position of the BJP regime. It had to legitimize the stance of the Indian government on J&K. The suggestion to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for J&K will be a non-starter unless New Delhi withdraws its huge military force, ends the brutal suppression of Kashmiri Muslims, and ends massive human rights violations.

The judgment of the Supreme Court failed to redeem the ramifications of revoking Article 370, which had given special status to India's only Muslim-majority state J&K, like non-locals were not given the right to vote in elections and to buy property. Since August 5, 2019, the Indian state has embarked on a policy of promoting the influx of non-locals in Jammu & Kashmir, enabling them to get a domicile certificate, cast a vote in local elections, and buy property. As a result, the Muslim majority in the Valley of Kashmir will be seriously undermined. The BJP regime has tried to show the world that normalcy has returned to the once conflict-ridden and violent Valley of Kashmir. The holding of the G20 tourism conference in Srinagar and the planned beauty contest tend to paint a rosy picture of J&K that elides the fact that the fragile peace, particularly in the Valley of Kashmir, is a reality only due to the deployment of around half a million Indian security forces in the region.

According to The Guardian's report of December 11, entitled, "India's Supreme Court upholds the decision to strip Kashmir of special status": "Monday's supreme court ruling is a victory for the government of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), which has been promising to revoke Article 370 for years. The party had justified the action on the basis of bringing the security situation in the state under control, though militant attacks have continued since. There was anger at the verdict among Kashmir's political leaders, who have faced house arrest and harassment since August 2019. Mehbooba Mufti, the former chief minister who was deposed from power, said revoking article 370 was "unjust, illegal and unconstitutional" and that its justification by the Supreme Court was "no less than news of a death sentence not only for Jammu and Kashmir but also for the idea of India." "No verdict is final, even if it is from the Supreme Court," she added. "This is a political fight which has been going on for the past several decades.

Our people have given huge sacrifices for achieving the dignity of life, and we will not leave it unfulfilled."

Whereas, Amit Shah, India's union home minister, while speaking at the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian parliament) on December 11, criticized India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru by lamenting that "Former PM Jawaharlal Nehru was overseeing (accession of) Jammu and Kashmir (after Independence) and he left it incomplete. So many regions of the country that seemed more difficult than J&K joined India, but why was Article 370 imposed for Kashmir."

The Rajya Sabha also passed the Jammu-Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Bill and Jammu-Kashmir Reorganization (Amendment) Bill 2023 on Monday, the same day the Supreme Court upheld the abrogation of Article 370. The two bills were passed by the Lok Sabha last week. It means both the Indian Parliament and the Supreme Court have sided with the BJP regime while Amit Shah has made it abundantly clear that Narendra Modi will be elected for the third time in the forthcoming general elections.

How the Indian Supreme Court legitimized the scrapping of Article 370 needs to be analyzed from three angles. First, now the Indian state will be more confident in crushing any protest demanding the restoration of J&K's autonomy. The All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) challenged the verdict of the Supreme Court, calling it a farce and biased, which will not end the aspirations of the people of J&K for seeking sovereign status. But it is yet to be seen how the order of the Supreme Court to hold elections in J&K by September 2024 will be implemented. If anti-BJP parties unite in the future J&K elections, one can expect a major upset for Narendra Modi. If the people of J&K accept the status quo following the verdict of the Supreme Court and there is no popular expression for restoring the rights of the people of J&K, it would mean greater legitimacy for the BJP led regime.

The verdict of the Indian Supreme Court upholding the scrapping of Article 370 by the Indian government on August 5, 2019, will dampen hope for Kashmiri freedom, particularly when Pakistan is economically and politically in dire straits and there is no

cogent international support for the Kashmiri freedom movement.

Second, Pakistan's caretaker Foreign Minister, in a press conference on December 11, rejected the verdict of the Indian Supreme Court and made it clear that Islamabad will continue to render political, diplomatic, and moral support to the people of J&K in their struggle. But he was unable to spell out how India can be compelled to restore Article 370, particularly when both the Parliament and the Supreme Court revoked that article and endorsed New Delhi in this regard. Merely by approaching the UN, European Union, and OIC will not achieve much, because in the past the same strategy has failed to mobilize international support for the cause of Kashmir.

For Pakistan, Kashmir is like being trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea, because it cannot choose the path of military confrontation with India over Kashmir, and its capability to exert pressure over Delhi from the international community is limited. The option to merge Gilgit and Baltistan along with Azad Kashmir into Pakistan may be counter-productive, as it will contradict Islamabad's stance on the UN Security Council resolutions and will be tantamount to accepting the Line of Control as an international border. Finally, the lack of bold voices in India for restoring Article 370 and granting the people of J&K their legitimate rights will further diminish prospects for an inclusive, rather than an exclusionary political system, particularly in the Valley. If the intention of the Modi regime is to replicate the Israeli policy of ethnic cleansing in Gaza and the West Bank and patronize Jewish settlements so as to gain a demographic edge over the Palestinians, it would further marginalize Muslim Kashmiris.

The verdict of the Indian Supreme Court upholding the scrapping of Article 370 by the Indian government on August 5, 2019, will dampen hope for Kashmiri freedom, particularly when Pakistan is economically and politically in dire straits and there is no cogent international support for the Kashmiri freedom movement. Needless to say, one needs to live with the reality of the Indian absorption of J&K and the failure of Islamabad to achieve its age-old dream of transforming J&K as a part of Pakistan into a reality!

Changing face of Warfare in the 21st Century



By Ayeza Areej

The advent of nuclear weapons, technological developments, geopolitical shifts in relations, and globalization have transformed the nature of warfare in the contemporary world. The tactics of warfare are transforming from traditional to nontraditional or asymmetric methods of warfare. In the twenty-first century, Cyberwarfare, space warfare, information warfare, robotics, precision-guided munitions, terrorism, autonomous weapons, and asymmetric warfare are being used against the adversary, impacting the conduct of war. However, some scholars believe that these disruptive technologies are disrupting the lines and distinction between combatants and noncombatants, posing challenges to the fundamental principles of IHL.

This article will analyze the evolution of stratagems and warfare with the passage of time and changing dynamics. It will also elucidate the generations of warfare and its transformation in the twenty-first century. Moreover, it will analyze the concept of hybrid warfare with a case study of Indian hybrid warfare. Lastly, it will analyze the evolution of warfare and its relevance to international humanitarian law.

First four generations of warfare

The nature of warfare has transformed with time through various generations, with

each generation having distinct tactics and strategies. The idea of "Generations of warfare" is an approach to classifying how techniques of waging warfare have changed with shifting dynamics. The first generation of Warfare marked the use of swords, arrows, shields, bows, and specific uniforms for soldiers from 1648 to about 1860. It manifested the authority of the state to conduct a war. The second generation marked the use of artillery, chemical weapons, gun fires, airplanes, surveillance, firepower, trench warfare, etc. This generation of warfare is closely linked with the World War 1 era. The third generation involved the element of surprise and steadiness, like the Blitzkrieg strategy. It introduced the use of tanks, infantry, and aircraft. First, three generations were focused more on the regular tactics of warfare; however, the fourth generation involved the active participation of the terrorists, insurgents, and nonstate actors as the irregular tactics of warfare.

Characteristics of warfare in the 21st century

With the evolution of new and autonomous technologies, ways of waging warfare have been revolutionized. Now, the states do not indulge themselves in direct and traditional wars because of the fear of "Mutual Assured Destruction." However, there is

more reliance on asymmetric and irregular warfare in this era of hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare is the blend of irregular, asymmetric, and traditional methods of warfare that includes lawfare, subversion, political warfare, military, economic warfare, proxy wars, terrorism, cyber warfare, Precision Guided arm, information warfare, propaganda, deception, and psychological warfare to knock out the enemy and attain the strategic objectives. Anthrax attacks and the Arab Spring are the manifestation of hybrid warfare. In Anthrax attacks, letters having anthrax spores were sent to the media houses of the US as a means of asymmetric warfare just after the 9/11 incident, which the US perceived as a threat to their national security.

Moreover, the Arab Spring which was a series of insurgencies and protests against the authoritarian governments initiated from Tunisia and increased in the Middle East. It included the use of information warfare and propaganda tactics. In addition, the Stuxnet attack on the Iran nuclear facility and DDoS attacks on Estonia and Crimea are prime examples of disruptions to crucial government infrastructure. Moreover, the introduction of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) along with artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons, and cyber warfare are the critical elements of warfare in the twenty-first century. For instance, UAVs

played an instrumental role in the recent conflicts in Iran and Afghanistan. Their impact has been strengthened by US projects by the amalgamation of AI with UAVs for Surveillance purposes.

Case study of Indian Hybrid Warfare

India and Pakistan have a history full of conflicts and wars, but these two nuclear powers cannot go into a full-scale war with each other; instead, they rely on hybrid warfare to destabilize the other side. India has been using different means like information warfare, propaganda, deception, political, economic, proxy wars, terrorism, cyber warfare, etc. India is using



the tactic of information warfare by utilizing various social media platforms to sabotage Pakistan. EU, this info lab claimed that there are approximately more than 260 fake websites driven by India for disinformation campaigns against Pakistan. Moreover, Bollywood movies like URI also portray Pakistan as a terrorist-sponsoring state with an aim to demoralize and disintegrate Pakistan. Also, after the Pulwama attack, Indian websites and media were propagating that Pakistan sponsored that attack. In addition, an Indian spy, Kulbhushan, under the concealed identity of Hussein Mubarak, admitted to various terrorist attacks like attacks on the Pakistan stock exchange, Quaid Residency, PC hotel at Gawadar, the Chinese consulate, and many more. Also, India has made several technological innovations like the development of "S400 technology, UAVs, Rafael, space technologies, Artificial intelligence, cyber and ISR capabilities, Ballistic missile defense system," etc., in contemporary times, which revolutionized the tactics and strategies of warfare.

Challenges to the International Humanitarian Law

The constantly changing dynamics of warfare are posing severe challenges to the tenets and practices of "International Humanitarian law" in its efforts to govern armed conflicts. IHL basically talks about the protection of those impacted by armed conflicts. Despite the existence of established legal frameworks, like the four Geneva Conventions and the Hague laws, the constant evolution in technology and military strategies continually challenges the relevance and applicability of these laws in the present era. With the advent of

technology, states are more reliant on cyber warfare, information warfare, and autonomous weapons, which is blurring the difference between the noncombatants and combatants, challenging proportionality and distinction due to the integrated nature of the cyber domain and autonomous weapons, causing sensor errors. Autonomous weaponry and AI have been raising concerns about artificial intelligence's self-governing decisions, accountability, and enforcement regarding IHL.

In the realm of cyber-attacks, it is challenging to attribute responsibilities to certain parties, given the complexities in tracking the source of the attack. Moreover, it is challenging to identify the attack, whether it is deliberate or an error through autonomous weapons. Non-State actors, such as insurgents, terrorists, etc., are further exacerbating the compliance and execution of IHL. Although IHL extends its applicability to the non-state entities under the umbrella of non-international armed conflicts (NIAC), it presents significant

challenges to enforcement and compliance. Non-State actors do not take the legal responsibilities as a sovereign entity, which is challenging for IHL. To tackle these problems, it is crucial to reinforce the compliance systems and accountability for any war crimes and breaches of IHL principles. The "Unable and unwilling Doctrine" is relevant in context with the evolving nature of warfare, especially nonstate actors such as terrorists who work inside the state and the state is "unwilling or unable" to stop them from carrying out those illicit activities.

Consequently, other states might resort to the use of force against those non state entities in circumstances of self-defense. In addition, states might even cross the territory of another country for their self-defense in such scenarios. This doctrine tackles the problems and obstacles brought by the terrorists and the asymmetric conflicts. However, it holds the risk of violating Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which forbids the use of force within the territory of a state without its consent unless its self-defense challenges the foundations of IHL. However, Martens Clause continues to remain helpful in the context of the changing face of warfare. With the emergence of new and lethal technologies, there could be circumstances under which IHL conventions and agreements are not applicable. This clause highlights the security of individuals in various armed conflicts according to the globally recognized standards of humanity and justice, regardless of the absence of particular laws of IHL.

Conclusion

The changing face of warfare in the twenty-first century involves the use of hybrid warfare, precision-guided arms, AI, cyber, information, non-state actors, political and economic warfare, etc., to subdue the enemy, which has challenged the compliance and effectiveness of International Humanitarian Law and blurring the distinction between the combatants and civilians which is threatening the application and conventions of IHL. However, Martens's clause is applicable in situations where IHL is not pertinent, providing safety to the combatants as well in case of armed conflicts.

Global Significance of Wakhan Corridor

By Zainab Imran Malik

Nestled in the Pamir mountain range, the Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of land, sharing borders with China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. Extending northeast from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province to the Chinese border, with Tajikistan to the north and Pakistan to the south, the corridor spans approximately 10,300 square kilometers, hosting a population of around 15,000 inhabitants, primarily Wakhis and Kirghiz. The Wakhi population, followers of Ismaili Islam, shares cultural ties with the people of Hunza and Ghizer in Gilgit Baltistan. The Kyrgyz inhabitants, descendants of Turko Mongolian nomads from Chinese Turkestan, add to the region's rich diversity.

The Wakhan Corridor is marked by the presence of three of the world's highest mountain ranges: the Karakoram Range, reaching 500 km in height; the Hindukush Range, elevating to 7,705 km; and the Pamir Range, soaring to 7,649 km. Significantly, the Darkot Pass connects Gilgit Baltistan (Yasin) to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Chitral) and links Wakhan through the Baroghil Pass. This strategic location underscores the corridor's importance as a meeting point for diverse cultures and a gateway to challenging terrains.

Strategic Significance

The Wakhan Corridor, a 220-mile stretch in north-eastern Afghanistan, stands as a strategic marvel due to its geopolitical placement and historical resonance. Nestled between Tajikistan, Pakistan, and China, this corridor acts as both a buffer zone and a gateway to Central Asia, showcasing multifaceted strategic significance.

Foremost, the Wakhan Corridor serves as a natural barrier, isolating Tajikistan from potential instability and violence emanating from Afghanistan. Its geographic seclusion contributes to maintaining relative calmness in the Central Asian region, historically resisting military incursions owing to its challenging topography.



Secondly, with its historical role as a commercial route, the corridor has connected South and Central Asia through the Silk Road. This historical pathway facilitated the movement of goods, ideas, and cultures across diverse regions. Despite shifts in trade routes due to contemporary technology, the Wakhan Corridor remains emblematic of economic integration. This is particularly relevant in the context of renewed interest in revitalizing the historic Silk Road, exemplified by initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Moreover, the corridor's proximity to China's Xinjiang province enhances its strategic importance. China perceives the corridor not only as a trade route but as a potential conduit to the Arabian Sea and Gulf. This underscores China's expanding influence in the region, positioning the Wakhan Corridor as a crucial element in its geopolitical calculations.

All in all, the Wakhan Corridor's strategic significance lies in its role as a stabilizing buffer, a historical commercial conduit, and a potential key player in future trade routes. Its position as a crossroads of history and modern geopolitics makes it an area of heightened global attention.

Chinese Stakes

China's robust engagement in the Wakhan Corridor is primarily propelled by the expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a monumental infrastructure and economic development project spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. This initiative aligns with China's broader objectives of fostering

connectivity and trade. By leveraging the Wakhan Corridor, China envisions gaining access to crucial energy resources and markets in Central Asia.

The corridor's strategic proximity to Xinjiang, China's western autonomous region, is a focal point of concern for Beijing. The Chinese government apprehensively associates the corridor with potential Uighur separatist activities originating in neighboring Afghanistan, where the Uighur Muslim minority resides. This worry compels China to intensify its influence in the Wakhan Corridor as a strategic imperative to mitigate security threats and stabilize its western border.

China's multifaceted involvement encompasses economic investments, infrastructure development, and diplomatic initiatives within the corridor. Collaborative efforts on border management and road construction projects with Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the two nations bordering the corridor, underscore China's commitment to the region. Diplomatically, China actively pursues channels to foster regional stability and counter security threats, consolidating its role as a major stakeholder in the Wakhan Corridor.

China's stake in the corridor extends beyond immediate security concerns. The multifaceted strategy, intertwining both security and economic considerations, is driven by the corridor's significance as a potential trade route. The corridor's adjacency to Xinjiang amplifies its importance, making it a linchpin for China's geopolitical and economic objectives,

especially those tied to the expansive Belt and Road Initiative.

Recent Meetings

In a significant diplomatic development on October 5th, 2023, during the Third Trans-Himalaya Forum for International Cooperation, China and Afghanistan deliberated on opening a strategic corridor to strengthen trade relations. Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi engaged in discussions with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Tibet, as reported by an Afghan official.

The focus of the talks was the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip in the far northeast of Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. Functioning as a pivotal route, the corridor connects Afghanistan with Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Xinjiang, China. Both nations mutually agreed to enhance trade relations along this critical corridor, highlighting its strategic importance in fostering economic cooperation.

A post on X by Aman Afghan, an official from the Afghan Foreign Ministry, detailed the discussions between Muttaqi and Wang. The diplomats explored various aspects, including bilateral relations and the prospect of opening the Wakhan Corridor to facilitate trade between Beijing and Kabul. Notably, Muttaqi, who serves as the spokesperson for the Taliban, acknowledged the pivotal role of the corridor in shaping regional economic dynamics.

During the meeting, the two sides not only discussed trade and economic ties but also delved into the forging of diplomatic relations. The potential opening of the Wakhan Corridor carries broader implications for the geopolitical landscape, especially for the small region's residents, with approximately ten thousand people inhabiting the corridor.

Muttaqi expressed gratitude for China's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations, citing Wang's appointment as a permanent ambassador to Kabul as evidence of the enduring friendship between the two nations. This move underscores the depth of the relationship, further solidified by China being the first country to post a new ambassador, who recently presented credentials to acting Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund.

The prospect of enhancing trade relations and opening the Wakhan Corridor holds promise not only for China and Afghanistan but also for neighboring Pakistan. If the plan materializes, it could pave the way for Pakistan to foster relations with Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. This collaborative effort has the potential to reshape regional dynamics, opening avenues for economic cooperation and diplomatic ties.

The recent diplomatic discussions between China and Afghanistan regarding the Wakhan Corridor signify a pivotal step toward regional collaboration. The potential opening of this strategic corridor has broader implications for trade, economic ties, and diplomatic relations, offering a pathway to strengthen ties between Beijing and Kabul while reshaping the geopolitical landscape in South and Central Asia.

Implications for Other Countries

The Wakhan Corridor, strategically situated at the crossroads of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, extends beyond Afghanistan's borders, holding profound significance for neighbouring nations. This corridor, acting as a crucial link between these countries, plays a pivotal role in shaping regional dynamics.

By acting as a natural buffer zone, the Wakhan Corridor serves as a protective barrier, preventing direct contact between Tajikistan and the potential instability emanating from Afghanistan. However, this safeguard comes with a double-edged sword. There is a looming risk that the corridor could be exploited as a hub for extremist and illegal activities, adding complexity to Tajikistan's approach to Afghanistan and intertwining the corridor's stability with Tajikistan's national security.

Pakistan, too, is directly affected by the Wakhan Corridor's dynamics. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a monumental infrastructure project, envisions connecting Gwadar Port in Pakistan to the northwest region of China. The success of CPEC hinges on the stability of the Wakhan Corridor, as any disruptions could jeopardise the secure transit routes vital for commercial

endeavours.

China's perspective further amplifies the corridor's geopolitical importance. Embraced within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, China envisions the Wakhan Corridor as a potential gateway to Central Asia and beyond. The stability of this corridor becomes paramount to safeguard Chinese investments and facilitate the secure movement of goods and resources through the region. Heightening concerns about the potential spread of extremism and separatist sentiments have positioned the Wakhan Corridor at the core of China's regional security considerations.

Russia, with historical ties to Central Asia, closely monitors developments in the Wakhan Corridor. The potential for unrest in this region holds consequences for Central Asian nations, even beyond the immediate purview of Russia's influence. The corridor's strategic importance extends to regional stability, influencing the geopolitical balance in the broader Central and South Asian region.

The primary advantages bestowed by the Wakhan Corridor upon neighboring countries encompass trade, security, and regional connectivity. Balancing these elements is crucial to preserving geopolitical equilibrium, arresting the spread of extremism, and fostering peaceful economic activities across the region.

As the world observes the evolving dynamics in Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor emerges as a critical geopolitical turning point. While the excitement about its potential is palpable, careful calibration is essential. Balancing security risks with regional connectivity, trade, and cooperation becomes imperative. The corridor's latent potential must be fully harnessed to transform it from a perceived geopolitical barrier into a genuine opportunity for regional cooperation and prosperity.

In achieving this transformation, cross-border cooperation, diplomatic finesse, and a shared commitment to stability will be indispensable. The Wakhan Corridor, with its intricate geopolitical tapestry, has the potential to shape the destiny of the nations it connects. It stands as a testament to the delicate balance required in navigating the complexities of regional geopolitics.

CPEC Skepticism: Debating the Risks and Concerns for Pakistan's Future



By Hussnain Ahmad

CPEC is a game-changer for Pakistan's economy. CPEC, a symbol of China-Pakistan cooperation, promised infrastructural development, economic prosperity, and improved connectivity. After the dust calms and initiatives begin, the corridor's grand ambitions are questioned. Its goal is to analyse the risks and concerns that have become critical elements in the CPEC debate. While the promises were lofty, the reality offers a complex picture, prompting a critical evaluation of whether CPEC is a beacon of wealth or a labyrinth with unanticipated ramifications for Pakistan's future.

From the start, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was seen as a key to Pakistan's economic transition. In 2013, this ambitious initiative sought to strengthen China-Pakistan economic ties and boost growth through a complex infrastructure network. The initial promises to invest \$60 billion in energy, transport, and industry over several years were massive. This unprecedented cash infusion might revolutionise Pakistan's energy problems, transportation networks, and economy.

CPEC promised to accelerate infrastructure development, a key to economic growth. Highways, trains, energy projects, and the Gwadar Port were planned to improve connectivity in Pakistan and beyond, tapping into China's Belt and Road Initiative. The purported benefits were not confined to connectivity alone; the infusion of capital was expected to trigger a multiplier effect, leading to increased industrial activity, heightened trade, and a surge in employment opportunities.

In concrete terms, the CPEC portfolio included flagship projects such as the Karakoram Highway upgrade, the development of the Gwadar Port, and a series of energy ventures, including coal-fired and renewable energy plants. These projects were projected to add a substantial 16,400 megawatts to Pakistan's electricity grid, thereby alleviating the persistent energy crisis that had long stifled economic progress³. The potential economic windfall extended to job creation, with estimates suggesting that CPEC projects could generate employment for hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis, particularly in the construction and manufacturing sectors.

As the euphoria surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) settled, a chorus of skepticism emerged, challenging the rosy narrative of unbridled progress. Skeptics, drawing attention to critical aspects, voiced concerns that have become focal points in the ongoing discourse surrounding CPEC.

Skeptics worry about Pakistan's CPEC debt sustainability. Pakistan's external debt from CPEC projects will reach \$40 billion by 2022, according to hypothetical economic analyst studies. This number has sparked discussions about the country's economic future. Critics say China's large loans could lock Pakistan in a debt trap, making repayments difficult.

The cost of CPEC has been scrutinised. With an estimated cost of \$60 billion, infrastructure projects are criticised for their high costs. According to reports from financial experts, this figure raises questions about the feasibility of repayment without exerting undue strain on Pakistan's economy. The need for transparent financial arrangements and a clear repayment schedule has been underscored to ensure that the

weight of financial obligations does not overshadow the benefits promised. In navigating the labyrinth of skepticism, these concerns demand careful consideration and analysis, prompting a reassessment of the cost-benefit dynamics inherent in CPEC's ambitious agenda.

CPEC, beyond its economic aspirations, unfolds a complex geopolitical narrative that intertwines with Pakistan's relations on the global stage. As the corridor takes shape, it casts a shadow on the geopolitical landscape, raising concerns about the delicate balance of alliances and dependencies. CPEC has undeniably solidified the strategic partnership between China and

While building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), transparency and governance become crucial factors that could make or break its ambitious projects. Deal-making and governance methods are opaque, raising concerns about corruption and project efficacy.

CPEC deal transparency is a significant concern for skeptics. China-Pakistan agreements, primarily financial and project details, are generally secretive. This opacity breeds skepticism and questions about the partnerships.

Governance difficulties in CPEC projects increase skepticism. The cost of CPEC has been scrutinised. With an estimated \$60

exploring potential strategies is vital to ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of this ambitious economic venture.

To alleviate concerns related to transparency, both China and Pakistan could commit to increased openness in CPEC dealings. This involves disclosing detailed project agreements, financial terms, and pertinent clauses to the public. Implementing transparent practices will foster trust among stakeholders and dispel suspicions that shroud the nature of the collaboration. Recognising CPEC's global implications fostering international collaboration can bring in valuable expertise and oversight. Engaging with international organisations, financial institutions, and independent observers can provide an additional layer of scrutiny, ensuring that projects adhere to best practices and global standards.

Addressing governance challenges within CPEC requires robust mechanisms to prevent corruption and ensure efficient project execution. Strengthening local institutions, implementing anti-corruption measures, and incorporating international best practices can contribute to effective governance. As CPEC evolves, a proactive approach to solutions is essential to dispel scepticism and build a foundation of trust. By embracing transparency, engaging in international collaboration, and fortifying governance mechanisms, China and Pakistan can pave the way for a CPEC that not only fulfills economic promises but also stands as a testament to responsible and sustainable development.

CPEC is at a crossroads, where the choices made today will shape Pakistan's future trajectory. The economic promises, while tantalising, must be approached with a discerning eye, and the concerns, though daunting, present opportunities for course correction. As China and Pakistan navigate this problem, a balanced and measured approach—one that embraces transparency, engages in international collaboration and fortifies governance structures—can unlock the true potential of CPEC and contribute to a sustainable and prosperous future for Pakistan. The CPEC journey, with all its complexities, stands as a testament to the intricate dance between ambition and pragmatism in the realm of economic development.



Pakistan. However, this closeness has sparked apprehension among other nations, mainly traditional allies of Pakistan. The deepening economic and military ties between Islamabad and Beijing have raised eyebrows in diplomatic circles, with questions about the potential implications for regional stability.

The infusion of Chinese investments and expertise into CPEC projects has triggered concerns about Pakistan's growing dependence on China. While the financial injections have jump-started development, skeptics argue that this reliance may compromise Pakistan's ability to assert an independent foreign policy. Economic growth must be evaluated against strategic autonomy loss. CPEC affects regional geopolitics beyond China-Pakistan. India, a significant omission from the corridor, perceives CPEC as a geopolitical move that might encircle the subcontinent. India and Pakistan's already hostile relationship has become more complicated.

billion cost, infrastructure projects are criticised for their high costs. The execution and management of these massive infrastructural undertakings require robust governance structures. Concerns revolve around the effectiveness of these structures in ensuring accountability, preventing corruption, and safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders.

The lack of transparency and potential governance lapses within CPEC projects heighten the risk of corruption. Large-scale infrastructure projects, by their nature, attract significant financial flows and present opportunities for unethical practices. Addressing these corruption risks is paramount to the success and sustainability of CPEC.

As skepticism surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) persists, the need for constructive solutions becomes imperative. Acknowledging the identified risks and concerns is a crucial step, and

Pakistan's Economic Outlook for 2024



By Ashraf Malkham

After enduring years of economic challenges, Pakistan's economy appears to be on the cusp of a transformative phase, drawing optimism from international financial institutions and local economists alike. This positive momentum is primarily attributed to political stability and the government's proactive measures, particularly in the restructuring of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs).

State of SOEs and Privatization:

The caretaker government, empowered with the authority to revive struggling SOEs, is demonstrating a strong commitment to privatize entities such as Pakistan International Airlines, which has been incurring substantial losses annually. Additionally, the identification of Pakistan Steel as a distressed unit underscores the government's resolve to address fiscal inefficiencies. Swift and strategic actions in this domain are crucial for long-term economic sustainability.

Energy Sector Challenges and Solutions:

One of the immediate challenges confronting the government is addressing capacity payments to Independent Power Producers, where Chinese

companies are major players. Negotiating with these entities is proving to be a complex task. To overcome this hurdle, the government must focus on enhancing the transmission and distribution systems urgently. The optimization of electricity production and improvement of distribution channels, potentially managed by professionals and independent boards, can serve as a turning point in resolving this critical issue.

Role of IFIs and the IMF:

The turning point in Pakistan's economic trajectory is closely linked to agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Extended Fund Facility and Stand by Arrangement agreements have set the stage for the government to secure long-term financing spanning 3-5 years. The forthcoming IMF program in June 2024 is anticipated to include a policy rate cut aimed at revitalizing the industrial sector, reducing government interference, and fostering a more conducive business environment, as highlighted in recent reports by various IFIs.

In November, the IMF provided preliminary approval for a \$710 million loan tranche, expected to be disbursed before January 15, 2024. The govern-

ment's commitment to successfully completing the Stand By Arrangement agreement has positioned Pakistan to negotiate a new longer-term deal with the IMF post-March 2024, emphasizing the need for sustained political stability.

Political Stability and Economic Continuity:

Political stability is deemed paramount for sustaining positive economic trends. The establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), led by the Prime Minister and including the Army Chief, signals a commitment to policy continuation and serves as an attractive proposition for foreign investments. With the general election scheduled for February 11, 2024, the inclusion of the Army Chief in SIFC is indicative of powerful establishments supporting policy continuity. This assurance is crucial in ensuring that the new government adheres to IMF terms and successfully completes the ongoing program.

Long-Term Financial Commitments and Debt Management:

To meet its external debt obligations and import requirements, Pakistan is estimated to require approximately \$30 billion annually until 2028. This neces-

sitates a comprehensive approach, including improving tax collection mechanisms, expanding the tax base, and enhancing governance within the tax machinery. The role of the Federal Board of Revenue under the Finance Ministry in implementing major decisions recommended by the IMF team is pivotal in achieving these objectives.

As of now, foreign exchange reserves stand at \$7.3 billion, emphasizing the need for stable conditions around the February elections and uninterrupted IMF aid to avoid undershooting growth projections. Despite positive economic indicators, the overarching threat remains political instability, a factor highlighted by major IFIs like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and IMF.

Projected Economic Recovery:

Bloomberg's projection for Fiscal Year 2024 paints a picture of economic recovery for Pakistan. The estimated growth rate of 3.2% between June and October 2023 is attributed to the crucial aid received from the IMF in July. This aid played a pivotal role in boosting economic activity, which had contracted by 8.5% between January and June. Further financial injections from creditor countries and multinational lenders, coupled with the removal of import restrictions by the central bank, are expected to bolster foreign currency reserves and facilitate increased production.

Anticipated rate cuts by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) in 2024, coupled with expanded farming acreage and increased agricultural output, provide positive indicators for growth in the upcoming year. Official data showcases significant increases in rice, cotton, and maize cultivation areas, underlining the resilience of the agricultural sector. The general elections in February are anticipated to contribute to greater political stability, thereby boosting investor confidence and further supporting economic growth.

Challenges and Headwinds:

While the path to economic recovery seems promising, certain challenges and headwinds need careful navigation. Elevated taxes, high fuel and energy bills, and increased debt servicing costs due to higher interest rates have collectively constrained consumer spending power, posing potential obstacles to sustained growth.

Inflation Dynamics and Policy Rates:

Hikes in energy prices to meet IMF aid terms have contributed to elevated inflation in the current fiscal year. Rupee depreciation has further exacerbated the situation, resulting in 29% inflation in July-November. Expectations are that inflation will witness a decline to an average of 24% in fiscal year 2024, down

from 29% in June 2023.

Improved domestic agricultural production is anticipated to play a pivotal role in curbing food inflation in 2024. The government's strategic reduction of retail petrol prices since October, coupled with the prospect of lower global crude oil prices, is expected to result in further cuts in the coming months. Additionally, a high year-earlier base of comparison is projected to contribute to the reduction in inflation.

The SBP, having raised rates by 600 basis points to 22% in the first half of 2023, has kept rates unchanged since July. A significant rate cut is anticipated in 2024, with the SBP likely to commence this process from March onwards, aligning with the expected fall in inflation below the current policy rate level.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Pakistan stands at a critical juncture where the collective efforts of the government, international financial institutions, and the private sector are aligning towards economic recovery and stability. Sustaining this momentum requires a steadfast commitment to political stability, effective management of SOEs, adherence to IMF terms, and proactive measures to address domestic challenges. While challenges persist, the positive indicators and strategic initiatives offer hope that Pakistan's economy is poised for a brighter future.



SC verdict about civilians' trial and indictment of Imran Khan and Qureshi jolts business confidence

Notably, in recent months, the benchmark KSE-100 index has gained more than 50 percent value backed by positive developments



By Javed Mahmood

The rapidly growing stock market in Pakistan fell deeply on December 13, 2023, when the Supreme Court reversed its earlier decision and allowed the trial of the civilians in the military courts while at the same time, another court indicted Imran Khan and Shah Mahmood Qureshi in the Cipher case.

Both developments occurred within an hour and it was shocking for investors in the stock market who hastily offloaded their shares and the KSE-100 index fell by more than 1200 points after breaching the record high 67000 points in intra-day trading on December 13, 2023.

Before these two judicial decisions, the stock market in Pakistan continued to move forward steadily, hitting the record-high benchmark almost daily. On Dec 13, 2023, the KSE-100 index edged up to over and above 66,500 points. The index breached the 67,093 level for the first time, but profit-taking descended the index to 66,500 points on Wednesday at 1 pm. Nonetheless, the investors resorted to panic selling and profit-taking that derailed the

fastest-growing stock market in the country. Another shocking news for the entire nation was the fatal terrorist attack on the soldiers in Dera Ismail Khan early morning on December 13, 2023. The incident saddened the people as 25 soldiers were martyred in one of the most tragic terror attacks in the country.

Notably, in recent months, the benchmark KSE-100 index has gained more than 50 percent value backed by positive developments.

The recent important developments are the entry of Saudi Aramco in Pakistan with the acquisition of GO Petroleum company while the second major development is the Islamabad High Court's decision to acquit Nawaz Sharif in the Al-Azizia reference case on Tuesday. The decision will enable Nawaz Sharif to contest upcoming elections and form the next government in case his party garners a majority in the Parliament even with the support of PML-N allies, including JUI-F.

Meanwhile, on Dec 12, the Monetary

Policy Committee (MPC) decided to maintain the policy rate at 22 percent. The decision does take into account the impact of the recent hike in gas prices on inflation in November, which was relatively higher than the MPC's earlier expectation. The Committee viewed that this may have implications for the inflation outlook, albeit in the presence of some offsetting developments, particularly the recent decrease in international oil prices and improved availability of agricultural produce. Further, the Committee assessed that the real interest rate continues to be positive on a 12-month forward-looking basis and inflation is expected to remain on a downward path.

The MPC noted several key developments since its October meeting. First, the successful completion of the staff-level agreement of the first review under the IMF SBA program would unlock financial inflows and improve the SBP's FX reserves. Second, the quarterly GDP growth outcome for Q1-FY24 remained in line with the MPC's expectation of a moderate

economic recovery. Third, recent consumer and business confidence surveys show improvement in sentiments. Finally, core inflation is still at an elevated level and is coming down only gradually. Taking stock of these developments, the Committee assessed that the current monetary policy stance is appropriate to achieve the inflation target of 5-7 percent by the end of FY25. The Committee reiterated that this assessment is also contingent upon continued targeted fiscal consolidation and timely realization of planned external inflows.

Real sector

The MPC viewed that the recovery in real GDP during FY24 is expected to remain moderate. According to the first estimates,



real GDP grew by 2.1 percent y/y in Q1-FY24, compared to 1.0 percent in the same quarter last year. As per earlier expectations, recovery in the agriculture sector was the major driver of this growth. The manufacturing sector also recorded a moderate recovery, with growth in large-scale manufacturing becoming positive after contracting in the preceding four quarters. Unlike the commodity-producing sector, growth in the services sector remained subdued.

External sector

The MPC observed a significant improvement in the current account balance, as the deficit narrowed by 65.9 percent y/y to \$1.1 billion during Jul-Oct FY24. While imports declined, exports inched up on the back of food items, especially rice. Further, workers' remittances also improved in

October and November 2023 as compared to the corresponding months last year, incentivized by SBP and government initiatives to transfer funds through formal channels, and normalization of the Kerb premium. However, tepid official inflows since July and ongoing debt repayments have led to a gradual decline in the SBP's FX reserves. In this regard, the Committee expected that the successful completion of the first review of the ongoing IMF program is likely to improve financial inflows as well as the FX reserves position.

Fiscal sector

The Committee noted that the improvement in fiscal indicators continued, as both tax and non-tax revenues have

shown strong growth. During Jul-Nov FY24, FBR tax collection grew by 29.6 percent, while non-tax revenues also increased amidst substantial growth in petroleum development levy and transfer of sizable SBP profit. Further, overall expenditures in Q1-FY24 were contained at last year's levels. The MPC emphasized the importance of continuing the ongoing fiscal consolidation, preferably through broadening the tax base and restraints on non-essential expenditures, for achieving macroeconomic stability.

Money and credit

The broad money (M2) growth decelerated to 13.7 percent y/y as of November 24, 2023, from 14.2 percent as of end-June. This deceleration is attributed to net retirements in private sector credit and more than seasonal decline in commodity

operations financing. Reserve money followed a similar trajectory, slowing down from June, primarily due to a significant deceleration in currency in circulation. The Net Foreign Assets of the SBP and the overall banking system have expanded since June due to considerable FX inflows in July. This, along with the contraction in Net Domestic Assets since June, has improved the compositional mix of broad money and reserve money.

Inflation outlook

The MPC noted that the higher-than-expected increase in gas prices contributed 3.2 percentage points to the 29.2 percent y/y inflation in November 2023. Further, core inflation remained sticky at 21.5 percent during the month, only slightly lower from its peak of 22.7 percent in May 2023. Inflation expectations of both consumers and businesses, though improving in recent months, remain at an elevated level. Nevertheless, barring further sizable increases in administered prices, the MPC continues to expect that headline inflation will decline significantly in the second half of FY24 due to contained aggregate demand, easing supply constraints, moderation in international commodity prices, and favorable base effects.

Foreign Exchange Reserves

The national foreign exchange reserves with the State Bank of Pakistan decreased by \$217 million, to \$ 7.18 billion during the week ended on November 17, 2023. According to the central bank, the reserves fell because of debt repayments. The total liquid foreign reserves held by the country stood at \$ 12.302 billion during the week ended on 17th November 2023. Net foreign reserves with the commercial banks stood at \$ 5.12 billion at the end of this week.

Inflows of remittances

In October 2023, data from the State Bank of Pakistan revealed a surge in overseas workers' remittances, reaching \$2.5 billion—an 11.5% increase compared to September's \$2.2 billion. Yearly figures also depicted a 9.6% rise compared to the same period the prior year.

These remittances are pivotal in bolstering

Pakistan's external accounts, fueling economic activities, and supporting households dependent on these funds. Analysts attribute this rise to improved exchange rates, stemming from measures against currency smuggling and hoarding, narrowing the gap between open and inter-bank market rates. However, the overall influx for July-October FY24 stands at \$8.8 billion, marking a decline of over 13% compared to \$10.14 billion in 4MFY23.

Breaking down the numbers:

Saudi Arabia contributed the highest remittance of \$616.8 million in October 2023, showing a 15% monthly increase and nearly 6% rise from the previous year. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) observed a 19% monthly rise, hitting \$473.9 million in October compared to \$399.8 million in September. On a yearly scale, it marked an 11% increase from the same month last year. Remittances from the United Kingdom totaled \$330.2 million, reflecting a 6% increase from September 2023.

The European Union witnessed a substantial 28% year-on-year leap, reaching \$297.5 million in October 2023. Remittances from the US stood at \$283.3 million in October 2023, showing an 8% increase compared to the previous year.

Saudi Aramco and GO Petroleum Pact

A significant milestone has been achieved as Aramco, a global powerhouse in energy and chemicals, formally expresses its intention to acquire a substantial 40% stake in Gas & Oil Pakistan Limited (GO), as announced in a joint press release by both entities. GO, renowned for its diverse downstream operations covering fuels, lubricants, and convenience stores, stands tall as one of Pakistan's largest retail and storage entities. This agreement, detailed in definitive contracts, hinges on meeting customary conditions, including regulatory approvals.

This strategic acquisition marks Aramco's debut in Pakistan's fuels retail sector, in line with its broader vision to strengthen its global downstream value chain. It signifies Aramco's dedication to expanding its

footprint in international markets. The proposed deal not only provides Aramco access to an expansive network of retail outlets for its refined products but also creates fresh avenues for market growth, particularly for Valvoline-branded lubricants—a move that follows Aramco's earlier acquisition of Valvoline Inc.'s global products business in February 2023.

Mohammed Y. Al Qahtani, Aramco Downstream President, emphasized the strategic importance of this move, stating, "Our second planned retail acquisition this year aligns with Aramco's downstream expansion strategy, paving the way for the growth of an integrated refining, marketing, lubricants, trading, and chemicals portfolio globally." He highlighted GO's impressive



storage capacity, high-quality assets, and growth potential, underscoring how these attributes will aid in introducing and establishing the Aramco brand in Pakistan. As Aramco continues to diversify and fortify its global presence, the acquisition of a significant stake in Gas & Oil Pakistan Limited emerges as a pivotal step in expanding its downstream operations and cementing its position in the ever-evolving energy landscape.

Fitch Ratings and Pakistan's Economic Outlook

Fitch Ratings has upheld Pakistan's Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'CCC,' clarifying its tendency to not assign outlooks to sovereigns rated 'CCC+' or lower. The rating

agency foresees the completion of Pakistan's ongoing standby program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—a critical agreement that averted sovereign debt default.

There were expectations of an improved rating for Pakistan due to reforms initiated by the caretaker government to fulfill IMF requirements. A former finance ministry advisor expressed surprise at the unchanged rating, attributing it to uncertainties regarding external matters, impending elections, and potential fiscal deviations. Fitch's 'CCC' rating reflects substantial risks in external funding amid considerable medium-term financing needs. While acknowledging Pakistan's commendable performance within the current IMF

arrangement, Fitch warns of risks stemming from delays and uncertainty in negotiating a follow-up IMF program post the March 2024 agreement conclusion.

Fitch anticipates scheduled elections in February but expresses concerns over potential political volatility that could jeopardize recent reforms. The rating agency also highlights Pakistan's historical challenge in implementing or reversing reforms agreed upon with the IMF across different political spectrums.

While Fitch foresees an unproblematic approval process for the IMF loan, it emphasizes Pakistan's necessity to adhere to the IMF path and prepare for a new program. Structural reforms in energy deregulation, investment, and domestic revenue mobilization are deemed imperative for sustainable growth.

Navigating IMF Aid and Strategic Rate Cuts for 2024 Pakistan's Recovery



By Anum Akram

In November, the interim Finance Minister, Shamshad Akhtar, signaled Pakistan's urgent need for additional financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), contemplating the possibility of seeking another loan. This declaration follows the nation's preliminary approval for a tranche under its existing program, emphasizing the critical role the IMF plays in stabilizing Pakistan's fragile economy. The recent staff-level agreement committing \$700 million as part of a \$3 billion program underscores the severity of the economic and political challenges Pakistan faces, particularly as it approaches elections in February 2024.

IMF Deal and Economic Reforms

A delegation from the IMF, led by Nathan Porter, conducted deliberations in Islamabad from November 2 to November 15,

2023. This visit aimed to conduct the initial review of Pakistan's economic program, supported by an IMF Stand-By Arrangement (SBA). The subsequent staff-level agreement reflects a commitment to disburse \$700 million, addressing economic challenges. Economists note that since reaching this agreement and implementing reforms, there has been a noticeable upswing in economic activity, improved business environment, and restored investor confidence.

As Pakistan grapples with a burgeoning debt nearing almost a dollar, the IMF aid becomes crucial. The looming elections add another layer of complexity to an already challenging economic scenario. The administration's commitment to economic stability and balanced development involves managing national debt, instituting governance changes in government agencies, and prioritizing development projects.

Stock Market Soars Amidst Optimism

The Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) witnessed a historic surge, surpassing the 57,000-point threshold with a gain of over 700 points. Investor optimism stemming from the staff-level agreement between Pakistan and the IMF contributed to this remarkable upswing. Industries such as fertilizer and exploration and production (E&P) played a significant role in this positive trajectory. The KSE100 index broke beyond 57,000, setting a new record high of 57,397. E&P and fertilizer sectors, including companies like Oil and Gas Development Company, Pakistan Petroleum, Engro Fertilizers, Pakistan State Oil, and Mari Petroleum, added 427 points to the index. However, certain sectors, such as Bank AL Habib, Millat Tractors, and Bank Alfalah, caused a minor drop of 63 points.

Economic Outlook and Growth Projections

Despite contracting in the current fiscal year, Pakistan's economy is poised for a rebound with an anticipated growth of 2.1 percent in 2024. Factors contributing to this growth include the alleviation of supply bottlenecks, a favorable scenario of lower interest rates, and sustained assistance from the IMF. Bloomberg economists suggest that Pakistan's economic outlook has improved since the approval of the \$700 million IMF loan tranche in November. They project a further acceleration of the growth rate to 4.8 percent by the fiscal year 2025.

According to Ankur Shukla, a Mumbai-based economist, "More aid from the IMF is needed. We think this will materialize. In addition, the central bank will likely start cutting rates in March to boost demand." The IMF projects that Pakistan will require approximately \$30 billion annually until fiscal year 2028 to meet external debt obligations and facilitate import expenditures. With foreign exchange reserves at a modest \$7.3 billion, additional support from the IMF, along with dollar loans from creditor countries and multinational lenders, will strengthen reserves, allowing for increased purchases of machinery and raw materials, fostering production.

Sectoral Impact and Profit Predictions

Commercial banks are anticipated to increase their net profits by 12% in 2024, despite lower earnings expected due to rate cuts and a 40% tax on windfall income from speculative rupee-dollar exchange business. Economist Sana Tawfik predicts that the policy rate drop will indirectly benefit the energy industry, including electricity businesses and corporations involved in oil and gas development.

Shukla notes that increased farming land is expected to yield more agricultural products, overcoming difficulties seen in 2022 due to flooding. Official statistics for the July-September quarter indicate a 21% increase in rice-planting areas compared to 2022, a 5% increase in maize cultivation, and an 11% increase in cotton production areas. The low base of comparison from the previous year, where the economy shrank by 0.2 percent, provides a favorable backdrop for future expansion.

Inflation Trends and Policy Adjustments

Inflation, averaging 29% in the first five months of the current fiscal year, is expected to drop to 24% in 2024. This reduction is attributed to a high base effect, decreased global oil costs, and increased domestic

agricultural production. The policy adjustments, including rate cuts and a 40% tax on windfall income, are anticipated to impact commercial banks positively. The government's initiative to lower retail gas prices and falling global crude oil prices are expected to contribute to further reductions.

Challenges and Cautionary Notes

While the economic outlook is optimistic, challenges remain. High taxes, elevated energy and fuel prices, and rapid increases in debt servicing expenses have limited consumer purchasing power and government expenditure. Increased political stability and investor confidence are expected with the upcoming general election in February 2024. Shukla expresses confidence that the incoming administration will successfully complete the current program and adhere to IMF requirements. However, he warns that obstacles stemming from elections or interference with IMF assistance could hinder growth.

In conclusion, the economic resurgence in Pakistan, fueled by IMF aid, strategic rate cuts, and sectoral optimism, paints a hopeful picture for the nation's recovery in 2024. While challenges persist, the commitment to reforms and international assistance positions Pakistan on a trajectory of sustainable growth and stability.



Afghan Repatriation & Transit Trade Standoff

By Amir Jahangir

The repatriation of Afghans faces a major hurdle, not from the Afghan Taliban's Interim Government, but from a persistent issue between Pakistan and the United States. The US Embassy in Islamabad has presented a list of 25,000 Afghans, along with individuals from other countries, to the Pakistan Government, urging against their deportation.

These individuals, mostly former employees of the US forces during their occupation of Afghanistan, served as agents, informers, and translators. Originally intended to be settled in the United States or Europe, their relocation faced delays. The US deliberately kept them in Pakistan, as explained by the Middle East Institute, a Washington-based think tank, the move consented to by the PDM Government during their tenure as an obligation for an alleged regime change in Pakistan.

The United States appears to have strategic motives behind retaining these Afghans in Pakistan. Firstly, it ensures that they continue to serve the US interests. Secondly, any untoward incident involving them could be attributed to either the Afghan-Interim Government or considered a routine blame on all Afghans. In reality, these individuals are officially recognized as US agents stationed in Pakistan.

With Pakistan's recent policy to repatriate all illegal foreigners, the US finds itself under pressure, as these individuals could potentially be sent back to Afghanistan. This raises the risk of the Afghan Government treating them as traitors and executing them, given their past roles. These individuals pose a dual threat to Pakistan, being trained US agents, who could be used against both the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan itself.

Presently, the US Ambassador Donald Blome appears to be using delaying tactics by suggesting that these individuals be allowed to stay in Pakistan until their documentation process for relocation is completed. However, skepticism arises as it seems that if the US were genuinely committed to settling them in America or



Europe, this process could have been completed in the past two years.

The protection of migrants and their rights is underpinned by various international laws and agreements, including provisions in the United Nations Charter. One cornerstone document is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. The UDHR emphasizes the inherent dignity and equal rights of all individuals, explicitly stating in Article 13(2) that everyone possesses the right to leave any country, including their own, and to return.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted in 1966, further solidifies these principles. Article 12 of the ICCPR recognizes the right to freedom of movement, encompassing the right to leave any country, the right to enter one's own country, and the prohibition of arbitrary interference with these fundamental rights.

Complementing these civil and political rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), also adopted in 1966, acknowledges the right to work and favourable conditions of work for everyone, including migrants. It underscores the importance of ensuring that migration does not compromise the economic and social rights of individuals.

For a more specific focus on the rights of migrant workers and their families, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) was adopted in 1990. Addressing issues such as the right to work, protection against violence, and the right to an effective remedy, this convention seeks to ensure comprehensive safeguards for migrants.

In the context of combating migrant smuggling, the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, known as the Palermo Protocols, were adopted in 2000. These protocols emphasize the protection of the rights of smuggled migrants and aim to prevent and combat migrant smuggling.

The application of international laws and agreements to Afghan migrants and other undocumented immigrants in Pakistan is a complex and multifaceted issue. Under the UDHR, Afghan migrants and undocumented immigrants are entitled to rights such as the freedom to leave any country and protection against arbitrary interference. Similarly, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognizes their right to freedom of movement. However, challenges arise when individuals are considered illegal immigrants, facing potential restrictions and deportation.

Moreover, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) asserts the rights of undocumented immigrants, including the right to work and just conditions. Yet, practical challenges often hinder their access to formal employment, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) addresses migrant workers' rights but may not fully apply to undocumented migrants.

The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants emphasize protecting the rights of smuggled migrants. Afghan migrants and undocumented immigrants may face risks of exploitation or abuse, and these protocols aim to prevent and combat such activities. Goal 10 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seeks to reduce inequalities, including facilitating safe and regular migration. However, the legal status of Afghan migrants and other undocumented immigrants in Pakistan may not align with this goal if they are considered illegal.

Crucially, the rights and status of Afghan migrants and undocumented immigrants in Pakistan are significantly shaped by national laws and policies. The enforcement of Pakistan's immigration laws and government policies influences how these individuals are treated. In practice, they often encounter challenges related to legal status, access to basic services, and protection of their rights. Addressing the needs and safeguarding the rights of this vulnerable population requires humanitarian considerations, international cooperation, and adherence to the principles outlined in international agreements. The effectiveness of these protections depends on the political will and commitment of the involved nations.

In Pakistan, the legal status and treatment of undocumented migrants, including Afghan migrants, are primarily governed by immigration laws and regulations. The cornerstone legislation addressing these issues is the Foreigners Act, 1946, which provides the legal framework for regulating the entry, stay, and departure of foreigners in Pakistan. Empowering the government to oversee the entry, movements, and

departure of foreigners, this act establishes penalties, including deportation, for violations.

The Passport Act, 1974, is another crucial piece of legislation outlining requirements for obtaining passports and travel documents, addressing offenses related to their illegal possession, forgery, or misuse. Complementing these acts are immigration rules and regulations established by the government, detailing procedures for entry, stay, and registration. In the context of national security, the National Action Plan has been implemented, emphasizing measures to regulate and monitor the movement of foreigners, particularly in border areas, to address issues related to illegal immigration and enhance border security.



In Pakistan, the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) and the National Alien Registration Authority (NARA) manage the registration and documentation of individuals. NADRA is tasked with registering Pakistani citizens and issuing Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs), while NARA — operating under the Ministry of Interior — is responsible for registering and documenting foreign nationals, issuing Alien Registration Certificates (ARCs) as official identification for aliens residing in Pakistan. Both agencies collaborate to ensure effective information sharing and coordination between databases of citizens and foreign nationals. They contribute to border control and security measures, verify the identities of foreign nationals, and play a vital role in preventing illegal immigration. NARA is particularly involved in the

registration and documentation of refugees, including the issuance of Proof of Registration (PoR) cards to Afghan refugees. Together, NADRA and NARA uphold data integrity and security, essential for accurate and up-to-date information in their respective databases. Top of Form

Bottom of Form

While Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it has historically hosted a significant number of Afghan refugees, leading to the implementation of various policies and agreements, including the issuance of Proof of Registration cards for Afghan refugees. The treatment of undocumented migrants can vary based on factors such as nationality, circumstances of presence, and overall geopolitical

situation, with enforcement involving collaboration between government agencies, including law enforcement, immigration authorities, and refugee agencies. As the legal framework and government policies regarding undocumented migrants may evolve, it is advisable to consult the latest versions of relevant laws and regulations for the most accurate information.

Simultaneously, Pakistan has taken measures for the effective monitoring of the Afghan Transit Trade, citing an increasingly challenging economic climate and a deteriorating law and order situation. This move reflects a careful consideration of the delicate balance between economic facilitation and security concerns. However, it also raises questions about the potential impact on regional trade dynamics and the broader geopolitical landscape. The decision to

temporarily block Afghan Transit Trade underscores the complexities surrounding cross-border trade, prompting a reassessment of commitments and obligations made by the state to various stakeholders. As authorities navigate these challenges, strategic planning becomes crucial to mitigate the potential consequences on both economic interests and national security. The impact on regional trade dynamics and the broader geopolitical landscape will require careful consideration and strategic planning in the face of these complex challenges.

Trade relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have undergone a significant evolution, shaped by historical agreements, changing geopolitical landscapes, and economic aspirations. The foundation of Afghan-Pakistan trade relations was laid with the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA) of 1965, a bilateral commitment between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This agreement provided landlocked Afghanistan access to international seas, in adherence to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (1958).

The ATTA identified two transit routes – Peshawar-Torkham and Chaman-Spin Boldak – to facilitate the movement of goods between the two nations. Afghanistan, being landlocked, was destined to be the primary beneficiary of this agreement, gaining access to Indian and Chinese markets via Pakistani sea ports and land crossing points.

As the years passed, the need for a new agreement became apparent due to the changing dynamics of multi-modal transportation. This led to the crafting of the Afghan-Pak Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) in 2010, a successor to ATTA, aimed at easing the flow of trade and providing more extensive economic benefits. The APTTA marked a paradigm shift, allowing Afghan exporters to use their trucks for exports to Pakistani sea ports and the Wagah border, providing a significant boost to the Afghan economy.

APTTA introduced several key elements, including the recognition of Pakistani and Afghan driver's licenses, harmonization of regulations for inspecting and certifying trucks, and the establishment of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade

Coordination Authority (APTTCA) for monitoring and facilitating agreement implementation.

While the agreements opened doors for enhanced trade, challenges such as border delays, security issues, smuggling, and infrastructure limitations have persisted. Addressing these challenges has been crucial for sustaining the positive momentum in Afghan-Pakistan trade relations.

Afghanistan's trade portfolio isn't confined to Pakistan alone. Kabul has transit agreements with Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, Pakistan continues to be a major player, with 34% of Afghanistan's trade passing through its borders.

In 2021, both Pakistan and Afghanistan showcased distinctive economic profiles, each with its own set of strengths and challenges. Pakistan experienced a notable surge in its export performance, reaching \$833 million and securing the 9th position globally out of 202 nations. The key driver behind this success was the export of rice, which contributed significantly with a value of \$121 million. Despite its relatively complex economic structure, as reflected by an Economic Complexity Index (ECI) of -0.55, Pakistan positioned itself at 87th among 131 countries.

Pakistan's Gross Domestic Product stood at \$348 billion during the period 2011-2021, positioning the country at 42nd among 204 nations. Notably, Pakistan demonstrated an impressive GDP growth of 63.1% in 2021, securing the 34th position globally. The GDP per capita for Pakistan was \$1,505 in 2021, ranking 174th among 204 countries, and it experienced significant growth of 39.9% in GDP per capita, placing it at the 48th position.

In contrast, Afghanistan faced unique economic circumstances in 2021. Despite exhibiting a less complex economic structure with an ECI of -1.2, ranking 116th among 131 countries, Afghanistan emerged as the top global exporter, recording exports worth \$595 million and securing the 1st rank out of 121 countries. Raw cotton played a pivotal role in Afghanistan's export landscape, contributing \$156 million to its export revenue. However, Afghanistan encountered challenges on the economic front. The overall GDP for the

country was \$14.6 billion in current US dollars during the period 2011-2021, positioning Afghanistan at 129th among 204 countries. In 2021, the country experienced a notable decline of -19.8% in GDP growth, ranking 195th globally. The GDP per capita for Afghanistan was \$364 in 2021, placing it at 203rd among 204 countries, and it saw a decline of -41.5% in GDP per capita, ranking 198th.

These narratives highlight the contrasting trajectories and economic landscapes of Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2021. Looking ahead, the evolution of Afghan-Pakistan trade dynamics holds the promise of fostering regional connectivity and economic growth. Initiatives that reduce border delays, enhance security measures, and invest in infrastructure can further solidify this evolving partnership.

The agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan on transit trade holds significant implications in the context of the law of the sea and the rights of landlocked states. With 16 landlocked states in Africa and 44 globally, access to the sea through transit states is crucial for these nations to exercise their rights under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The freedom of transit is a general right, and the terms and modalities are typically determined through agreements between concerned states.

The recent developments between Pakistan and Afghanistan echoes the principles outlined in UNCLOS, emphasizing the need for cultivating mutually beneficial agreements that safeguard the rights and interests of landlocked states and the transit country's rights as well.

The Pakistan Business Council's (PBC) report, titled "A Framework for Renegotiating the Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement August 2020," presents a comprehensive analysis and proposes a potential framework for renegotiating the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). The report emphasizes the need to fortify the existing checks and balances within the treaty to prevent misuse, offering valuable suggestions to enhance its efficacy. One notable observation highlighted in the report is that the beneficiaries of diversion and evasion are

not limited to Afghan traders alone; Pakistan and UAE-based businesses are identified as complicit in these activities. The porous borders and weak controls contribute to this issue, with Customs and Frontier Constabulary often working independently, allowing full containers to re-enter with transit goods.

PBC underscores the economic incentives for evasion, pointing out the high import duty in Pakistan, coupled with the compounding impact of sales tax, which creates a tempting incentive to engage in such practices.

Furthermore, the report asserts that Pakistan's negotiation strength has significantly increased since 2010 when the agreement was influenced by the United States. It emphasizes the imperative for Pakistan to enhance the cost-effectiveness, speed, and reliability of logistics and border handling. In addition, Pakistan's access to Central Asia is no longer solely reliant on Afghanistan, as the Kashgar route provides an alternative, albeit operational for seven months of the year.

In terms of financial transparency and compliance with international standards, the Pakistan Business Council recommends that transit goods be imported under letters of credit drawn on banks operating in Afghanistan, rather than third countries like the UAE. Additionally, it advocates for payments not to be made from third countries, aligning with the principles of transparency and compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and Anti-Money Laundering laws.

Pakistan has not acquiesced to the US stance thus far, but the longevity of this resistance remains uncertain, given historical challenges in navigating such delicate situations.

In recent developments, Pakistan has articulated a robust policy position regarding its role as a transit country for commercial imports destined for Afghanistan, indicative of a nuanced evolution in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Transit Agreement (APTTA). The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) and the Ministry of Commerce have issued a series of notifications, introducing measures aimed at curbing illicit activities such as smuggling and enhancing the effectiveness of regulatory

frameworks governing transit trade.

The Ministry of Commerce, through SRO 1397(1), has prohibited the transit of various goods through Pakistan into Afghanistan. This includes categories such as fabrics, tyres, black tea, home appliances, toiletries, cosmetics, and nuts, which have been deemed "prone to smuggling" by the ministry.

Furthermore, acting on the ministry's recommendation, the FBR has imposed a 10% processing fee on major categories of Afghan transit commercial goods. This processing fee, according to the notification, applies at the rate of 10% ad valorem on goods imported into Afghanistan via Pakistan, encompassing confectionery, chocolates, footwear, machinery (mechanical and electrical), blankets, home textiles, and garments.



In response to concerns about smuggling-prone items, the FBR has proposed stricter controls on transit trades, introducing measures such as increased scanning of consignments after the Goods Declaration (GD) has been signed. Additionally, draft resolutions suggest mandating a bank guarantee equal to duties and taxes on the consignment to ensure that Afghanistan-bound goods reach their final destination, with the possibility of encashing guarantees if the goods do not reach Kabul.

The recent collaboration between civil and military leadership under the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) has expedited these measures. The urgency is underscored by the impact of smuggling on Pakistan during a period of restricted imports and a balance of payments crisis.

The Ministry of Commerce notes a substantial 67% increase in the volume of Afghan Transit Trade via Pakistan during FY 2022-23, reaching US \$6.71 billion from US \$4.016 billion in FY 2021-22.

This surge is perplexing, considering Afghanistan's economic challenges, limited exports, and the imposition of sanctions on the interim government. The growth in transit imports is attributed to a decrease in Pakistan's imports of the same goods, as part of measures to curtail the import of non-essential and luxury items to improve the country's current account deficit.

The decision to tighten transit trade regulations is not only a response to the economic impact on Pakistan but also aims to preserve the effectiveness of government measures to curb imports. With a looming balance of payments crisis and the risk of defaulting on debt, Pakistan has taken a reactive approach to address the pressing issue of smuggling.

However, questions linger about the timeliness of the decision, especially as import restrictions on some items have been eased. The move might have political implications, considering recent hostilities on the border regions. For Afghanistan, the increased transit costs, including the processing fee through Pakistan, could push the country toward exploring alternative transit routes, potentially affecting Pakistan's role as a transit country.

The intricate interplay and the love triangle between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States, exacerbated by the challenges in Afghan repatriation, underscores the delicate nature of diplomatic relations in a post-conflict landscape. The unresolved issue of former US-employed individuals in Pakistan adds a layer of complexity, with potential repercussions for all stakeholders. As the region grapples with the evolving dynamics of trade agreements, transit routes, and economic aspirations, the need for nuanced diplomatic strategies becomes paramount. Washington's reluctance to expedite the relocation of these individuals, coupled with Pakistan's firm stance on repatriation, sets the stage for a continued diplomatic tussle. It remains to be seen how these unfolding events will shape the future trajectory of regional collaboration and cooperation.

Road to the Uncharted

Economy for real takes a back seat



By Naqi Akbar

In the backdrop of unforeseen conflicts and the rise of rogue hybrid politics, Pakistan's economy resembles an uncared-for orphan, neglected and seemingly forgotten by those in power. The upcoming general elections in February 2024 are a critical juncture for the nation, potentially shaping its destiny amid global uncertainties and the looming threat of a global conflict. Neglecting the economy at this crucial juncture could have far-reaching consequences, not only on the nation-state but also on its proclaimed status as a 'national security state.'

Addressing the economic challenges requires a departure from the prevailing trend of allowing those in power, visible or invisible, to dictate economic policies. The absence of independent experts in national policymaking has resulted in short-term solutions that fail to address long-term contradictions.

A historical overview of Pakistan's economic trajectory reveals a reliance on investment inflows, remittances, and sporadic export opportunities, such as the

early "Korean Boom," to project an impressive economic performance. However, a critical examination shows a lack of efforts to create an environment where stakeholders contribute to a comprehensive and objective-oriented economic growth strategy.

Comparisons with neighboring India underscore the importance of stakeholder input in economic policy-making. India's tradition of incorporating business input during the freedom struggle laid the foundation for a continuous dialogue between industry and political leaders. In contrast, Pakistan's leaders, primarily focused on personal interests, failed to engage the business community in shaping economic policies.

The divorce between the private sector and overall policymaking has contributed to the high-cost nature of Pakistan's economy over the last three and a half decades. Continuous IMF interventions, without considering private sector aspirations, have led to a macroeconomic quagmire. The government's primary concern has been

compliance with IMF dictates, neglecting strategies for sustainable trade-based growth.

Despite being an agricultural country, Pakistan failed to formulate an agenda to safeguard its interests in the international market under the WTO trade regime. The country missed opportunities to protect its renowned products, such as Basmati Rice, losing out to India's engineered version. While India strategically engaged with global economic forums, Pakistan was preoccupied with internal crises and foreign wars.

The civilian supremacy regime post-2008 did little to shift the economic paradigm, as the focus remained on maintaining a client-state status, reliant on external aid. The economic policy lacked long-term vision, with attention diverted to budgetary support from the Coalition Support Fund and the Kerry Lugar Bill.

The upcoming elections in 2024 present an opportunity for a change of guard, but historical patterns suggest that economic

decisions will be driven by political considerations rather than sincere efforts to benefit the economy. The prevailing system, marked by political maneuvering and geo-political positioning, is likely to continue the cycle of economic injections and bonanzas that benefit a few while managing the economic meltdown, not eliminating it.

A call for genuine reform echoes through the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach. The business community must shift its focus from cultivating relationships with the powerful to actively contributing to economic development. The urban middle class, a critical mass that can potentially turn the tide, must rise to the occasion and demand meaningful change.

The Importance of an Inclusive Economic Vision

The heart of the matter lies in crafting an inclusive economic vision that values stakeholder participation. The absence of a continuous dialogue between the private sector and policymakers has stifled innovation and hindered the development of a sustainable growth strategy. It's crucial to learn from India's example, where business leaders actively engage with political leaders, irrespective of the political ideology in power. This proactive approach allows for the customization of economic policies that align with the needs of the industry.

Pakistan's leaders, historically driven by personal interests, need to recognize the significance of building bridges with the business community. This shift from a client-state mentality to an inclusive economic vision will require concerted efforts and a departure from traditional power dynamics. Instead of short-term fixes dictated by international financial institutions, the emphasis should be on nurturing an environment where the private sector actively contributes to policy formulation.

The Missed Opportunities in International Trade

Pakistan, despite being an agricultural powerhouse, has consistently missed opportunities to safeguard its interests in

international trade forums. The advent of the WTO trade regime in 2005 should have prompted a strategic agenda to protect key agricultural products, such as Basmati Rice. However, the lack of a comprehensive strategy left Pakistan vulnerable, and India, with its engineered Basmati, capitalized on exclusive rights under the WTO.

The failure to leverage Pakistan's position in international trade not only hampers economic growth but also highlights the need for strategic foresight. While the world witnessed India safeguarding its stakes in the Doha Round, Pakistan was entangled in local crises and foreign wars. The dividends of a thriving economy could have dissuaded many from resorting to extremism, redirecting their energy toward constructive pursuits.



The Need for a Holistic Economic Policy

The prevailing economic policy, marked by continuous IMF interventions, lacks a holistic approach that considers the aspirations of the private sector. Compliance with IMF dictates takes precedence over long-term economic strategies, resulting in a perpetual macroeconomic quagmire. It's imperative to break free from this cycle and embrace a growth strategy that prioritizes sustainable trade-based development.

The forthcoming general elections in 2024 present an opportunity for a recalibration of economic policies. However, historical patterns suggest that decisions will be driven more by political considerations

than a sincere commitment to economic well-being. The prevalent system, characterized by political maneuvering and geopolitical positioning, is likely to perpetuate the cycle of economic injections that benefit a few while merely managing the economic meltdown.

A Call for Genuine Reform

The call for genuine reform is a plea to break free from the shackles of short-term fixes and embrace a sustainable economic strategy. The business community must transition from a focus on cultivating relationships with the powerful to actively contributing to economic development. The urban middle class, a critical mass

capable of turning the tide, must rise to the occasion and demand meaningful change.

The dream of a prosperous Pakistan hinges on challenging the status quo and envisioning a future built on sustainable and inclusive economic policies. As the world watches the unfolding events in Pakistan, the nation has a unique opportunity to redefine its economic trajectory. The upcoming elections could mark a turning point, but only if they usher in a new era of genuine economic reform. It's time to transcend the limitations of the past and forge a path toward economic prosperity that reflects the aspirations of the people. The journey ahead is challenging, but the potential rewards for Pakistan's economic transformation are immeasurable.

Exclusive Interview

The key economic priorities of the Caretaker Government encompass critical areas such as fiscal discipline, investment, competitiveness, energy sector, enhancing exports, improving income and employment opportunities, and leveraging capital market for domestic resource generation, with a short-term focus

Dr. Shamshad Akhtar, Minister for Finance, Revenue & Economic Affairs

ICMA: What are your key economic priorities as Caretaker Finance Minister and how do you plan to tackle them?

Minister: The FY2023-24 started with multiple challenges for Pakistan's economy. Several macroeconomic adversities have been encountered that are testing the resilience of our nation. Pakistan had to confront the devastating impact of unprecedented floods in the previous year, further straining our resources and facing a decline in external capital inflows, crucial for financing fiscal and current account deficits.

The global landscape also posed new obstacles as we witnessed the ramifications of the conflict in Ukraine. Pakistan, like many other nations, found itself vulnerable to the cascading effects of this turmoil. The collateral impact of these challenges has constrained our fiscal space, affecting essential development and social sector expenditures, thereby hindering our growth momentum. The situation therefore, necessitated swift and decisive actions.

In response to these formidable challenges, the government made a steadfast commitment to restore macroeconomic stability, instil market confidence, and attract investors. The key economic priorities of the Caretaker Government encompass critical areas such as fiscal discipline, investment, competitiveness, energy sector, enhancing exports, improving income and employment opportunities, and leveraging capital market for domestic resource generation, with a short-term focus.

ICMA: What specific economic recovery reforms has the caretaker government introduced to improve the country's economy, and how do they ensure long-term benefits for the nation?

Minister: After the pandemic shock, Pakistan's economy experienced multifaceted crises. In FY2022, the government

followed the expansionary fiscal policy that led to 6.1% growth but with high fiscal and current account deficits. In FY2023, economic growth slowed to 0.29% accompanied by spiking inflation. In these challenging times, it had been more pertinent for the government to respond to the economic situation through an overwhelming plan for economic revival with a multipronged focus to make inclusive efforts to put the country on the sustainable growth trajectory. The specific economic recovery reforms which the Caretaker Government plans include:

- 1) Revenue enhancement, involving tax revisions in sectors such as retail, agriculture, and real estate, as well as the implementation of a wealth tax on movable assets as deemed appropriate.
- 2) Tax exemptions to limit to essential sectors only like food and medicine, and supply chains to digitize.
- 3) Austerity measures to rationalize government expenditures, along with review of subsidies and grants.
- 4) Review of the Development plan and emphasis on Public Private Partnership (PPP) projects.
- 5) Compliance with quarterly budget targets and IMF agreements, including tax collection and debt liabilities.
- 6) The SEs framework (Exports, Equity, Empowerment, Environment, and Energy) addresses socio-economic challenges, including export expansion and business facilitation.
- 7) The use of Information Technology to digitize the economy and expand the tax net.
- 8) State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) reforms will be enacted, including an SOE policy, Central Monitoring Unit (CMU), and SOE performance reports.



- 9) Focus on implementation of a Treasury Single Account (TSA), remittance incentives, energy conservation, and price controls.
- 10) The Privatization Commission will undertake the privatization of selected Public Sector Enterprises, using various modes such as strategic sales and concessions. The initiatives encompass assessing privatization options for DISCOS, exploring restructuring possibilities for PIAC, and conducting unbundling studies for SNGPL and SSGC.
- 11) Capital market development will focus on reducing corporate taxes, improving non-bank finance, and promoting the capital market.
- 12) For export enhancement, implementation of Weighted Average Cost of Gas (WACOG), operationalization of EXIM bank, and faster clearance of sales tax refund are priority short-term measures.
- 13) The Board of Investment will implement short-term initiatives aimed at business facilitation and investment promotion. These initiatives include the Asaan Karobar plan, which involves establishing a central e-registry, developing the Pakistan Business Portal, and establishing the National Regulatory Delivery Office.

Additionally, they will implement a zero time to start' policy.

- 14) IT exports will be boosted through training, a Startup Pakistan Program, and policy interventions. In telecommunications, reforms aim to foster growth and introduce 5G technology.
- 15) In maritime affairs, initiatives include reducing freight charges, enhancing ship recycling, developing port master plans, and revitalizing the fisheries sector.
- 16) Pakistan Railways will focus on governance, private sector participation, technology, and digitalization, and increasing the number of freight trains.
- 17) The National Highways Authority (NHA) will restructure resources, focus on maintenance and optimization, and seek private-sector financing.
- 18) The Petroleum Division will implement price reforms and attract foreign investment, along with other initiatives.
- 19) In the power sector, short-term actions include an anti-theft campaign, cost reduction through solar initiatives, and renegotiating IPP agreements.

ICMA: Can you highlight any specific progress or improvements in economic indicators under the caretaker government's initiatives?

Minister: Despite domestic and global challenges during FY2023, fiscal and external sector stability has been achieved through various stabilization measures and structural reforms. Fiscal deficit stood at 7.7% of GDP during FY2023 as compared to 7.9% last year.

Current account deficit FY2023 narrowed down by 87.2% to \$2.2 bn against a deficit of \$ 17.5 bn in FY 2022. Trade deficit contained by 38.7% in FY2023 as compared to expansion of 36.4% in FY2022.

The caretaker government took charge in a very tough economic environment. Turning around the economy is a challeng-

ing task and requires careful economic planning, policy consistency, and a favourable external economic environment. The government is quite vigilant of the challenges/risks emanating from the domestic and external sides and taking timely measures to address them.

The government has taken some short-term actions to overcome speculations, smuggling, cartelization, and theft of publicly provided resources. Encouragingly, the timely actions carried out by relevant government regulatory agencies have begun yielding positive outcomes.

Hard earned gains on the fiscal and external accounts have started to translate into a pick-up in economic activity during first four months of FY2024 such as:

- Cotton production posted exceptional growth of 127% (11.5 million bales) for 2023-24. Rice production is also showing growth of 27.8 percent.
- Cotton arrival as on 15th Sep 2023 recorded at 3.93 million bales compared to 2.19 million bales same period last year, observed an increase of 80%.
- Jul-Sep FY24, credit to agriculture sector increased by 30.1% to Rs 499.3 billion (Rs 383.7 billion last year).
- LSM posted a positive growth of 2.5% in August, reversing 14 months of downward spiral in the manufacturing sector. Removal of restrictions on imports, clearance of outstanding L/Cs, and improved dollar liquidity in the markets are contributing to economic activity.
- Jul-Sep FY24, total cement dispatches increased by 23.4% to 11.9 million tons (9.6 million tons last year).
- Jul-Sep FY24, production of fertilizer increased by 8.2% to 2.4 million tons as against 2.2 million tons last year,
- During Q1-FY2024, the strong revenue performance led to a primary surplus of Rs 417 billion (0.4% of GDP) against the target of Rs 87 billion under the IMF SBA.
- FBR revenues clocked in at Rs 2,748 billion (27.3% growth) compared to the

target of Rs 2,682 billion during Jul-Oct FY2024,

- Non-tax revenue also posted a significant increase of more than 100% in Q1 with higher collection on Petroleum Levy and dividends of SOEs.
- Overall, the fiscal deficit stood at 0.9% of GDP in Q1- FY2024 as compared to 1% of GDP during same period last year.
- The PKR recovered 9% since 5th September due to reforms initiated on the exchange companies and crack-down against illegal transactions.
- During Q1-FY2024, CAD has declined further by 58.8% to \$0.95 billion, largely reflecting an improvement in trade balance. The trade deficit contained by 99.4 percent.
- During Jul-Oct FY2024, CPI inflation stood at 28.5% against 25.5% during same period last year. In October, CPI inflation clocked in at 26.9% on YoY basis as compared to 31.4% in Sep-2023.
- KSE-100 index crossed 52,000 points mark and recorded at 52,342 points as on 1st November 2023.

The current performance indicates that the economy is gearing up to achieve the growth target set for FY2024.

ICMA: What outcomes do you anticipate from the upcoming visit by the IMF delegation to Pakistan?

Minister: As the first review of the SBA was successfully concluded, a Staff Level Agreement (SLA) has been reached. This is subject to approval by IMF's Executive Board. Upon approval, Pakistan will have access to SDR 525 million (around US\$ 700 million).

ICMA: How do you expect inflows from other multilateral institutions once the IMF's tranche is received?

Minister: Government of Pakistan (GOP) anticipates raising approximately \$4.5 billion from multilateral and bilateral sources, excluding the IMF in the current fiscal year. For the second quarter (Q2), the government expects to receive over \$1.6 billion from these sources. Major creditors

include the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. These inflows comprise both project-based and program-based funds. Negotiations for some program loans have been completed, and disbursements are expected. The country is currently meeting its debt obligations in a timely manner and intends to continue doing so in the future.

ICMA: What steps will you take to address economic challenges such as inflation and currency stability in Pakistan?

Minister: In the modern era of globalization and industrialized markets, prices are influenced not only by domestic factors but also by global ones, exerting equal pressure. As Pakistan heavily relies on imports for food and petroleum products, any international disruptions in their supply contribute to inflationary pressures within our economy.

Relevant studies indicate that fluctuations in exchange rates and food prices have been the primary drivers of inflation in Pakistan in recent years. Consequently, the caretaker Government has implemented various administrative measures to mitigate disruptions in demand and supply. As a result, prices have been consistently decreasing over the past five months. It's worth noting that in May 2023, Food Inflation peaked at 48.1%, but it has since decreased to 28.9% in October 2023, marking the lowest point since August 2022.

The crackdown on hoarding of foreign currency and food items has led to an appreciation of the PKR and an improved supply of essential items, raising expectations of lower food prices in the future. Clearly evident is the PKR's remarkable rebound, transforming it into the world's top-performing currency. Initially hitting a record low of 307 rupees against the US\$ in early September, it has since surged by over 8.3%, trading at 283.42 in the first week of November 2023 against the dollar. This downward trend in the exchange rate is expected to further reduce inflation and enhance the overall economic outlook.

ICMA: What are the main reasons for approx. Rs. 500 billion losses in the SOEs and the steps taken by the Government to address their financial challenges?

Minister: Pakistan has around 200 State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) which are engaged in a diverse range of activities and provide and manage a significant share in the country's infrastructure, communication and utilities sectors. These SOEs, however, are facing financial losses due to various factors, including poor management, inadequate strategic planning, lack of transparency and accountability, absence of a consistent and overarching policy, and institutional malpractices. During the fiscal year 2019-20, the SOEs collectively incurred a significant loss amounting to Rs. 485 billion. Despite this, the total profit generated by the SOEs amounted to Rs. 329 billion, resulting in a net loss of Rs. 156 billion. The major contributors to these losses were observed in the Power sector, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), National Highway Authority (NHA), and Railways.

It is worth pointing out that the Power sector is undergoing progressive reforms, with a long-term restructuring process currently underway. The substantial losses faced by the National Highway Authority (NHA) primarily result from loan repayments, and efforts are underway to address and resolve these financial burdens. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and Pakistan Steel Mills are actively included in the privatization agenda, along with several other financially challenged entities. The interim government is actively engaged in addressing these challenges and facilitating the privatization process.

The Government of Pakistan has also taken various steps to bring legislative, institutional and administrative reforms in the SOEs. Some of these reforms are stated as under:

- Timely determination of tariffs
- Full cost recovery of tariffs
- Reforms in the accountability structure of the SOEs
- The SOEs (Governance and Operations) Act, 2023 was promulgated on 2nd February, 2023. The salient features of the Act are (1) nominations of independent directors institutionalized (2) majority of independent directors (3) security of tenure: removal criteria defined (4) establishment of

CMU (4) separation of office of Chairman from the CEO office (6) PPRA rules exemption and (6) enhanced board independence- appointment of CEOs and policy directions to be issued with approval of Cabinet.

- Establishment of Cabinet Committee on SOEs (CCSOEs) under the SOEs Act, 2023 to periodically review the performance of the SOEs.
- CMU has been established through an interim placement in Finance Division. CMU will maintain electronic database of financial and operational performance of SOEs, information related to business plans, half-yearly and annual SOEs reports and any other information prescribed in the SOEs Policy.
- Under the SOEs Act, 2023, the SOEs (Ownership and Management) Policy, 2023 has been developed in consultation with the line Ministries/Divisions, SOEs and other stakeholders. After completion of all procedural formalities, the SOEs Policy, 2023 was submitted to the Cabinet Committee on SOEs (CCSOEs). The Committee considered the Policy in its meetings held on 21st & 28th September 2023, respectively and approved it on 15th November, 2023. The SOEs policy is now submitted for the approval of the Cabinet.
- The Government of Pakistan has embarked on a journey to implement gradual structural reforms within the governance framework of all State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), aligning them with the SOEs Act of 2023. As part of this initiative, the first phase involved successfully amending the Acts of four SOEs: the National Highway Authority, Pakistan Post Office, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, and Pakistan National Shipping Corporation. These amendments have been carried out successfully and are at an advanced stage of promulgation.

The Editorial Board thanks Dr. Shamshad Akhtar, Minister for Finance, Revenue & Economic Affairs for sparing from her precious time to give exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.

Judicial Interventions and the Unraveling of Election Uncertainties in Pakistan



By Ashraf Malkham

The unfolding events in Pakistan surrounding the announcement of the general election scheduled on December 15 exposed the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) vulnerabilities. The Lahore High Court's suspension of the ECP's order to appoint Deputy Commissioners as District Returning Officers (DROs) added complexity to an already intricate electoral system. This article delves into the multifaceted legal and procedural challenges that emerged, shedding light on the decisive role played by the judiciary, particularly Chief Justice Qazi Faez Esa, in navigating and resolving the issues.

Judicial Maneuvers

The Lahore High Court's initial suspension of the ECP's order cast doubt on the feasibility of conducting the general elections on February 8. Notably, the ECP's decision not to file an immediate appeal compounded the uncertainty, creating a potential roadblock in the election timeline.

Chief Justice Qazi Faez Esa, recognizing the urgency of the situation, swiftly intervened. A meeting between the Chief Justice and the Chief Election Commissioner led to the ECP filing an

appeal against the Lahore High Court's judgment. In response, Chief Justice Qazi Faez Esa constituted a full court, which expediently issued a crucial verdict, ultimately clearing the path for the general elections to proceed as scheduled on February 8, 2024.

Election Commission's Response

In compliance with the Supreme Court's directives, the Election Commission of Pakistan issued the long-awaited election schedule on the same night, dispelling uncertainties surrounding the February polls. This decisive move injected renewed enthusiasm and festivity into the political landscape, reaffirming the democratic process.

Supreme Court's Decisive Verdict

The three-member bench of the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Esa, played a pivotal role in resolving the legal impasse. The court not only suspended the Lahore High Court's order against the appointment of Returning Officers but also directed the ECP to promptly announce the

election schedule. This judicial intervention not only restored the election process but also underscored the judiciary's commitment to upholding democratic principles and ensuring the sanctity of the electoral process.

Election Schedule and Procedure

The election schedule outlined by the Election Commission involves several key milestones. The public notice, set to be issued by the Returning Officers on December 19, signifies the commencement of the nomination filing period from December 20 to December 22. Following this, the publication of nominated candidates' names on December 23 will be succeeded by the scrutiny of nomination papers from December 24 to December 30.

The timeline further stipulates that the last date for filing appeals against the RO's decisions is January 3, with the appellate tribunal deciding on appeals by January 10. The revised list of candidates will be published on January 11, and candidates can withdraw their candidature until January 12. Election symbols will be



allotted to political parties on January 13, leading up to the eagerly anticipated polls on February 8, 2024.

Challenges and Controversies

The legal battle surrounding the appointment of District Returning Officers and Returning Officers sheds light on the intricate nature of Pakistan's electoral landscape. The Lahore High Court's initial suspension of the ECP's order prompted concerns about potential delays and disruptions to the election process.

The Supreme Court's intervention, spearheaded by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, not only resolved the immediate crisis but also underscored the need for a robust and efficient electoral framework capable of withstanding legal challenges. This episode revealed the necessity for a thorough examination of existing protocols and the formulation of clear guidelines to ensure the smooth functioning of democratic processes.

Furthermore, the broader implication of this legal tussle is a reevaluation of the mechanisms in place to guarantee the integrity of the electoral process. It raises pertinent questions about the balance of power between the judiciary and the electoral body, emphasizing the need for a harmonious relationship that safeguards the democratic values enshrined in the Constitution.

Reforming Electoral Processes

As Pakistan reflects on these recent challenges, there is an opportune moment to consider reforms that enhance the resilience and transparency of its electoral system. One aspect that warrants attention is the appointment of Returning Officers and District Returning Officers. Clear guidelines on the selection criteria, favouring individuals with a background in election administration or the judiciary, could mitigate future controversies and legal disputes.

Moreover, the training of election officers is paramount to the smooth conduct of elections. The interruption in the ongoing

training of DROs and ROs due to the Lahore High Court's order highlights the need for a streamlined training process that is resistant to legal challenges. Establishing standardized training modules, potentially developed in collaboration with judicial and election experts, can ensure the competence and impartiality of election officers.

Enhancing Legal Clarity

The legal challenges faced during this episode also underscore the importance of legal clarity in electoral laws. Reviewing and revising existing electoral laws to address potential ambiguities and loopholes



could prevent similar legal disputes in the future. Clarity on the jurisdiction of different courts, the appellate process, and the timeline for legal challenges can contribute to a more efficient and predictable electoral process.

The Role of Political Parties

Political parties play a crucial role in the electoral process, and their active participation in the legal proceedings surrounding the election schedule is a testament to this fact. However, it is imperative for political entities to engage constructively in the democratic process, prioritising national interests over partisan gains. Encouraging dialogue and cooperation between political rivals can contribute to a more stable political environment.

Public Awareness and Engagement

While legal and institutional reforms are essential, fostering public awareness and

engagement is equally critical. The citizens of Pakistan, as the ultimate stakeholders in the democratic process, should be informed and involved. Public awareness campaigns, civic education initiatives, and the utilization of digital platforms can empower citizens to actively participate in the electoral process and hold institutions accountable.

International Observers and Collaboration

The inclusion of international observers in the electoral process can enhance its credibility and transparency. Collaborating with international organizations and

electoral experts can provide valuable insights and best practices, contributing to the continuous improvement of Pakistan's electoral framework.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent events leading to the announcement of the general election schedule in Pakistan unveiled the vulnerabilities within the electoral system. Judicial interventions, particularly by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, played a crucial role in ensuring the timely conduct of the elections. The Election Commission's swift response and adherence to the Supreme Court's directives ultimately restored confidence in the electoral process.

As the nation gears up for the upcoming elections, the importance of a resilient and transparent electoral system remains paramount. The recent legal challenges underscore the need for comprehensive reforms to address vulnerabilities and ensure the smooth functioning of democratic processes in Pakistan.



ELECTION COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN **NOTIFICATION**

Islamabad, the 15th December, 2023

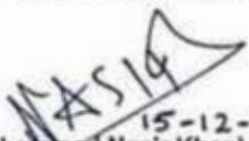
No.F.2(3)/2023-Cord. Pursuant to the announcement of Poll date by the Election Commission of Pakistan vide Notification No.F.2(3)/2023-Cord-Vol-I, dated 3rd November, 2023 as **08th February, 2024**, the Election Commission of Pakistan in terms of Article 224(2) read with Article 254 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Section 57(2) of the Elections Act, 2017 (Act No. XXXIII of 2017) and all other powers enabling it in that behalf, hereby calls upon the electors of the National Assembly and the Provincial Assemblies of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan to elect their representatives from each of the constituencies to the General Seats and in connection therewith, appoints the following dates for various activities of the election to the aforesaid Assemblies:

ELECTION PROGRAMME

Sl. No.	EVENTS	DATE
1	2	3
1.	Public Notice to be issued by the Returning Officer on	19.12.2023
2.	Dates for filing of nomination papers with the Returning Officer by the candidates	20.12.2023 to 22.12.2023
3.	Publication of names of the nominated candidates	23.12.2023
4.	Last date for Scrutiny of nomination papers by the Returning Officer	24.12.2023 to 30.12.2023
5.	Last date for filing of appeals against decisions of the Returning Officer rejecting/accepting the nomination papers	03.01.2024
6.	Last date for deciding of appeals by the Appellate Tribunal	10.01.2024
7.	Publication of revised list of candidates	11.01.2024
8.	Last date for withdrawal of candidature and Publication of revised list of candidates	12.01.2024
9.	Allotment of Election Symbol to contesting candidates	13.01.2024
10.	Polling day	08.02.2024

2. The above mentioned Election Programme shall also apply to the Seats Reserved for Women & Non-Muslims in the National Assembly and the Provincial Assemblies of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Last date of filing of separate Priority List for Seats Reserved for Women & Non-Muslims before the Returning Officers is **22nd December, 2023**.

By Order of the Election Commission of Pakistan.


15-12-2023
(Muhammad Nasir Khan)
Deputy Director (Coord.)

The Manager,
Printing Corporation of Pakistan Press,
Islamabad

[For publication in the Gazette of Pakistan,
Extraordinary (Part-III) of today's date]



Kohistan in the limelight again

By Zahiruddin

Kohistan, a region nestled in the remote corners of the country, finds itself thrust into the limelight yet again. Recent incidents, characterized by honor killings and a pervasive gender apartheid-like atmosphere, have drawn attention to the stifling restrictions on women's mobility within the society. These intermittent episodes of violence against women prompt media coverage and activism from human rights organizations, only to gradually fade from public consciousness over time. However, the global community first directed its gaze towards Kohistan in 2012 when a shocking event unfolded, famously known as the 'Kohistan video case.'

The Kohistan video case, unraveling in May 2012 in Palas Valley, a sub-division of Kohistan district at the time, centered around the brutal honor killing of up to five girls. A video depicting a boy dancing while four girls clapped and sang along surfaced on the internet, providing a disturbing glimpse into the harsh realities of the region. Afzal Kohistani, the brother of the two boys in the video, paid the ultimate price for exposing the incident when he was shot dead in Abbottabad in March 2019. His courageous act of revealing the truth unleashed a wave of violence, signaling a grim warning to anyone challenging the area's deeply entrenched traditions. Notably, the media reported a case last year where a husband murdered his wife and a 13-year-old boy, justifying the act in the name of 'honor,' perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence under the guise of tradition.

In the intricate tapestry of Kohistan's societal dynamics, social media emerges as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it acts as a powerful tool for exposing the ruthless killings, instantly broadcasting signals of these heinous acts globally, dismantling the notion that these are merely 'internal matters' confined to familial boundaries. On the other hand, the same platforms can be manipulated to perpetuate fabricated narratives, intensifying societal prejudices and injustices.



The last two months witnessed Kohistan resurfacing in both social and mainstream media, not for its scenic landscapes but due to the decrees issued by clerics and tribal elders. These decrees mandated that unmarried officials of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the area must enter into forced marriages with locals if they wished to continue their work or face expulsion from the region. This alarming development once again brought to the forefront the deeply entrenched traditional norms that govern life in Kohistan, challenging the principles of individual freedom and choice.

The most recent incident, a gruesome murder of a young girl orchestrated by her own father and uncle, thrust Kohistan back into the media spotlight. The teenage girl became a victim of a local Jirga's decree, which was triggered by a video showing her and another girl dancing with local boys. The Jirga, adhering to local traditions, labeled the girls as 'thieves' and issued a death sentence. Timely intervention by the police saved the life of the second girl seen in the video. However, subsequent investigations revealed that the video was manipulated, combining various clips and images to create a false narrative. Despite this revelation, the victims, trapped within the web of societal expectations, continue to believe that their 'honor' has been tarnished in the public eye through the social media platforms.

In the broader context of legal frame

works, stringent laws against honor killings have yet to prove effective in deterring perpetrators. The act of murdering in the name of honor is punishable by death or imprisonment for life. Even if the accused is pardoned by the Wali (guardian) or other family members of the victim, the court retains the authority to impose a sentence of life imprisonment. Shockingly, according to Amnesty International, 384 individuals fell victim to honor killings in the year 2022 alone, highlighting the persistent challenges in eradicating this deeply ingrained practice.

To comprehend the multifaceted challenges that Kohistan grapples with, it is imperative to delve into the historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that shape the region's ethos. The complex interplay between tradition and modernity, patriarchal norms, and the influence of local power structures contributes to the perpetuation of harmful practices, particularly against women.

In conclusion, Kohistan's recurring appearances in the limelight unveil the urgent need for comprehensive interventions. Beyond sporadic media coverage and reactive measures, a sustained commitment to education, awareness, and legal reforms is essential. Breaking free from the shackles of tradition requires a collective effort to challenge deeply ingrained norms, protect the rights of vulnerable individuals, and pave the way for a more equitable and just society.

Echoes of Tragedy: Unraveling Complexities in Gilgit-Baltistan



By Daniyal wali

The serene landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan's Chilas was shattered on 2nd December when a passenger bus, carrying 45 individuals from various parts of Pakistan, fell victim to a terrorist attack. Nine lives were tragically lost, and 25 others were injured in the assault that took place in the Hudur area of Chilas. Among the victims were not only innocent civilians but also two Pakistan Army soldiers, making the incident even more devastating. The incident occurred at 6:30 pm when the bus, starting its journey from Gahkuch in Ghizer, came under fire and subsequently collided with an oncoming truck. Diamer DC Captain (Rtd) Arif Ahmad confirmed the unfortunate event, labeling it a "cowardly act of terrorism." The attackers targeted a diverse group of passengers, hailing from regions across Pakistan, including Kohistan, Peshawar, Ghizer, Chilas, Roundu, Skardu, Mansehra, Swabi, and even one or two individuals from Sindh.

Diamer Superintendent of Police Sardar Shehryar highlighted the immediate

response by law enforcement agencies. The first responders, primarily police officers, swiftly moved to secure the area, provide assistance to the injured, and collect evidence. The Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan, Haji Gulbar Khan, strongly condemned the attack. He assured the affected individuals that the government would spare no effort in bringing the perpetrators to justice and supporting the injured.

A special team was formed to investigate the incident, emphasizing a thorough inquiry to ensure justice. The government pledged to cover all expenses for the injured individuals, providing them with the best medical facilities. Strict orders were issued to law enforcement agencies for the immediate arrest of the criminals, with the Inspector General of Police overseeing the process.

Survivor's Tale

Shah Bulbul, a survivor of the Chilas attack, shared a harrowing account of the incident. Bulbul, along with his wife Bibi

Roshan and their two children, was on a bus bound for Karachi, seeking a fresh start in the face of economic challenges. The journey turned into a nightmare when the bus came under attack.

Bulbul described the chaos and fear that enveloped the bus as gunfire erupted. His wife, despite being hit by six bullets, shielded their children, instructing Bulbul to focus on their safety. The attackers targeted the bus on a steep road, making it difficult for the driver to maintain control. The bus eventually collided with another vehicle, intensifying the ordeal. Amidst the darkness and panic, Bulbul's wife ensured their survival by placing their two-year-old son on the bus floor and shielding the family. The bus came to a stop after a tumultuous ten minutes, but it felt like an eternity to those on board.

With the bus immobilized, Bulbul, carrying his children, witnessed the aftermath of the attack. Some passengers were dead, others injured, and the entire scene was chaotic. In the absence of immediate communication,

locals who heard the gunfire rushed to the scene, providing crucial aid to the injured. Bulbul's wife, despite sustaining severe injuries, survived due to timely medical intervention. The family eventually made their way to Gilgit, where Roshan underwent extensive surgeries. Bulbul expressed gratitude for the stroke of luck that enabled them to access medical assistance.

Unraveling Sectarian Complexities

The Chilas attack serves as a grim reminder of the deep-seated sectarian tensions in Gilgit-Baltistan. Rooted in a historical and political context, the region's diverse religious landscape, economic disparities, and political manipulation contribute to ongoing sectarian strife. Theological differences between Shia and Sunni communities, demographic factors, economic disparities, and external influences all play a role in perpetuating these conflicts.

Major Incidents of Sectarian Violence

The historical trajectory of sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan unveils a complex interplay of religious, political, and economic factors. Delving deeper into the historical context of sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan, the roots can be traced back to the region's accession to Pakistan in 1947. The invasion of Jammu and Kashmir involved the manipulation of local militias and religious sentiments, leaving a lasting impact on the socio-political landscape.

Until the 1970s, all communities in Gilgit-Baltistan—Shia, Sunni, Noorbakhshi, and Ismailis—lived peacefully without any sectarian tensions. However, the government's adoption of a more exclusive definition of Muslimness in the 1970s marked a turning point, leading to the first reported sectarian clash during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime. Sunnis objected to Shias building a stage in the middle of a road for delivering speeches, resulting in police firing, injuries to protestors, and incidents of kidnapping and property destruction.

In 1983, a major clash erupted over a dispute about the sighting of the moon, triggering violent clashes in Gilgit town, resulting in two deaths and several injuries. The Jalalabad tragedy of 1988, a clash

between Shias and Sunnis, led to widespread violence, with Sunni ulemas declaring a jihad against Shias. This event saw external support for militant organizations, further intensifying the conflict.

Throughout the 1990s, the proliferation of militant sectarian organizations contributed to a rise in sectarian killings and violent clashes in Gilgit-Baltistan. The Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria (TNFJ) became a formidable political force, and tensions escalated during the 1991 election, leading to accusations of constituency manipulation favoring the Sunni community.

In 1999, a controversy over amended textbooks based on Sunni beliefs and practices emerged, causing unrest among the Shia community. The textbook issue persisted for years, resulting in protests and sporadic violence. The killing of Shia scholar Syed Agha Ziauddin Rizvi in 2005 intensified the controversy, eventually leading to the withdrawal of controversial textbooks from the curriculum.

The Rizvi episode, coupled with the earthquake in 2005, further fueled sectarian violence. In 2008, sectarian violence claimed the lives of eighteen people, including the director of the agriculture department of Gilgit. The year 2009 saw the assassination of Syed Asad Zaidi, the deputy speaker of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly.

The 2009 elections, held based on the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order, exacerbated sectarian tensions, with voting largely occurring along sectarian lines. The years 2010 and 2011 witnessed sporadic sectarian attacks, contributing to the overall climate of sectarian strife in the region. The Karakoram Highway (KKH), a vital link connecting China to Pakistan, became a focal point for sectarian violence. Sectarian attacks on the KKH, such as the killing of Shia pilgrims in 2012, heightened tensions and disrupted travel, further dividing the communities in Gilgit-Baltistan.

In another tragic incident that shook the serene Nanga Parbat base camp in northern Pakistan, 10 climbers, hailing from nations such as the United States, China, Ukraine, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Nepal, fell victim to a ruthless attack by the Taliban faction

known as Junood ul-Hifsa in 2013. Clad in uniforms resembling local security forces, at least 15 gunmen orchestrated a meticulously planned assault on the climbers, forcing them to kneel before mercilessly shooting them in the head. This shocking event, the deadliest attack on foreigners in Pakistan in the past decade, has dealt a severe blow to the nation's already struggling tourist industry. Tragically, this incident is just one among several instances of extremism and terrorism plaguing the region, casting a dark shadow on its image.

The Need for a Comprehensive Strategy

With a diverse demography, Gilgit has endured decades of violent acts, necessitating the formulation of a comprehensive and effective strategy to eradicate the menace of terrorism from the region. The urgency to address these issues is not only a matter of national security but also crucial for restoring the region's reputation and ensuring the safety of those who wish to explore its natural wonders. To mitigate sectarian violence, an inclusive approach is imperative. Political dialogue, economic development, and efforts to enhance inter-sectarian understanding and tolerance must be prioritized. Engaging with local communities, promoting education that fosters unity, and addressing economic disparities can contribute to building a more harmonious Gilgit-Baltistan. The survival and resilience of individuals like Shah Bulbul and his family highlight the importance of confronting these challenges head-on to create a more peaceful and inclusive future.

To conclude, the Chilas attack encapsulates the multifaceted challenges faced by Gilgit-Baltistan, where historical, religious, and political factors intersect, creating a volatile environment. Navigating these complexities requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond immediate responses to address the root causes of sectarian violence. As survivors like Shah Bulbul demonstrate resilience, the region must collectively strive for enduring peace, understanding, and unity. The tragic incident in Chilas serves as a somber reminder of the urgent need for sustained efforts to build a future where the diverse communities of Gilgit-Baltistan can coexist peacefully.

The Inspiring Journey of Tariq Sharif Bhatti



By Romana Afsheen

The trend of emigrating from the beloved homeland for a safer and peaceful life began in the early 1980s. However, at that time, there was not significant enthusiasm or urgency for this desire, and hence, illegal means were often employed for moving abroad. Lives were risked and launched on boats not only for economic necessities but also due to the allure of Western lifestyles and amenities. Even in those times, young people were motivated to go abroad not just for financial needs but also to escape the societal and familial pressures associated with the conservative norms of the region.

It was an era when not only economic necessities but also the desire for a better lifestyle and prosperity drove the youth to prefer migrating towards Arab states in the Middle East. The ambition to earn money and the fear of societal expectations and regional norms prompted many to choose the path of migration.

Nonetheless, it is essential to note that this is a story from the 1980s, a time when not only economic necessities but also the desire for a Western lifestyle and comforts influenced the youth to consider moving abroad. People used various illegal means, and lives were put at risk to fulfill these desires or necessities. Even though the focus was on economic needs, the allure of Western lifestyles played a significant role in encouraging the youth to move towards Arab countries in the Middle East.

This story is centered around the Tehsil of Gujar Khan, specifically the town of Gujar Khan, also known as the heart of Pothohar. The land is renowned for its military valor, with Captain Sarwar Shaheed and Sowar Muhammad Hussain being recognized for their courage. The mention of this region also brings to mind former Chief of Army Staff General (Retd.) Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and the current head of the ISI, General Nadeem Anjum, who have connections to the same area.

Prominent literary figures such as Professor Ahmed Rafique Akhtar, Akhtar Imam, Rezavi, former Prime Minister and National Assembly Speaker Raja Pervez Ashraf, and others, including the fast bowler Shoaib Akhtar, have their roots in the Tehsil of Gujar Khan. Additionally, several business individuals residing in the UK also hail from Gujar Khan. It's worth noting that Tariq Sharif Bhatti, whose father had a military background and was part of the second World War, is associated with the same region. His services were acknowledged by the British government, leading to the announcement of a Tadhah Mission.

Tariq Sharif Bhatti, born and raised in the distressed village of Badhal in Gujar Khan, after completing his education from Government College, found employment under the renowned film producer and philanthropist Malik Mumtaz. Despite working in the cinema industry, Tariq's ambitions and projects did not have any direct connection with his intelligence,

education, thoughts, or future aspirations. He mentions, "When I painted the walls of the under-construction cinema, it felt as if I was painting my dreams with my own hands. Thumping nails felt like sealing my path of progress firmly."

He further explains that during school and college days, his involvement in social and literary activities had molded his poetic nature. He served as the Chairman of the Young Speakers and Editor of the College Magazine "Kaneez." He contributed light-hearted articles to various newspapers and actively participated in social, literary, and sports activities. However, his role in the progress and projects related to his dreams was not confined to these endeavors.

Tariq Bhatti recalls, "When I was the editor of 'Young Speaker' and 'Kaneez,' the school and college literary activities had given my nature a poetic and benevolent touch." The school and college period had left a profound impact on his personality, pushing him towards contributing to social and literary fields actively. He acknowledges that light-hearted articles written for various newspapers and his active involvement in social, literary, and sports activities were not the sole contributors to his progress and project-related dreams.

Furthermore, the reason for obtaining various awards was that my mental level and thinking were significantly different from other people. When I compared my

abilities and achievements with the laborious struggle of manual labor, I would become anxious and often stay in a melancholic state. Despite my friends noting that I spoke faster due to my introverted nature, I was merely stuck in purposeless physical exertion, which was aimed at alleviating the financial constraints of the family and fulfilling daily necessities, leaving me in a perpetual state of restlessness.

So, later on, Tariq Bhatti pursued further employment opportunities based on his educational aptitude. He joined a well-known tobacco company in a white-collar position, but within just six months, the situation there also became unfavorable. So, he bid farewell to that job as well. During his college days, Tariq appeared for exams and interviews for the position of a general duty pilot in the Air Force, achieving notable success. Training began in Kohat, where the forces' strict rules and regulations, time constraints, and even the schedule for sleeping and waking were adhered to.

While the environment in the forces was structured, Tariq Bhatti, with his free-spirited nature in literature, poetry, and various aspects of life, found it difficult to adjust. Eventually, he felt that the structured environment of the Air Force was not suitable for him, and he returned home, resuming his college life. During this time, financial companies started emerging in the country, and Tariq Bhatti decided to venture into this field. A friend suggested that he should secure a job in a financial company, as the pay was good. The result of his B.A. exams had been declared, and he had achieved impressive grades, making him an eligible candidate for the position.

Raja Pervez Ashraf, who later became a significant reference in the politics of Gujar Khan, was the branch manager of this financial company. Raja Pervez Ashraf's ancestral village is in Gujar Khan, and he had land in Sindh, so initially, he mostly resided there. In any case, my interview with him exceeded both our expectations, and I began working as an assistant manager with him. To ensure the success of the branch, I needed to collect financial deposits. When I required financial support for this, I requested my father, Aziz, relatives, and well-wishing friends to help me collect a substantial amount. However, within a

year, a financial crisis erupted nationwide in various financial companies, and people started demanding the return of their collected funds.

Company offices were closed, and the matter reached the police station. In short, the issue was not about collecting money from individuals but rather the repayment of the collected funds, which was such a substantial amount that even if a high-paying job had been available, it would not have been sufficient to meet the demands. Consequently, after seeking advice from others, I made the decision to go abroad, and thus the reasons for my journey to Germany emerged. The journey



to Germany was fascinating but challenging due to financial constraints and the uncertainties of a first international trip. Upon reaching Frankfurt, after a short period, a work permit was obtained. During that time, obtaining political asylum was relatively easy.

Here begins a new chapter in Tariq Bhatti's life, which brought him to his current position. In response to various questions posed, he shared that the initial challenge in Germany was the language barrier. He worked tirelessly day and night to secure his survival and success, engaging in various small businesses, from selling warm socks on the pavement to clearing snow from roads and footpaths. During this period, he learned the German language

and adopted the prestigious manners of the German community, gaining a lot from these experiences.

Life became somewhat easier, but the desired goals were still far away. Although he was satisfied to a certain extent in Germany, the family's and relatives' difficulties persisted. While he had obtained a German passport, according to his favorite poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz's decree, his heart echoed the sentiment, "Watan ki fikr kar nadaan mujhe watan toh jaad hoga." So, the intention to go to France arose.

Thus, once again, a new life commenced amid the streets, lanes, and unfamiliar faces

of Paris. However, this new beginning led me to the extremes of success. At that time, Paris was experiencing a construction boom, and I immediately found work. Yet, the roar of the laborers' struggle was heard while standing in the queue. With a determined spirit, I left the construction site, got on the data tap, rose, and then walked away.

During this job, I arranged for my skilled workers from Pakistan, who were specialists in cinema work, to undergo training from a reputable institution, obtaining certifications in the best practices of painting, coloring, and related arts. They proved extremely valuable during this phase of my life. I presented them to the contractor of my construction company, and he was astonished. "And just a few

days later, instead of boarding the train, I was giving orders to the laborers. Soon after, my name appeared in the list of contractors. Eventually, it happened that either God or fate intervened, and I found myself making waves in Paris. Establishing the Raoul Hotel in the additional areas of Paris, setting up an insurance company, buying old properties, and initiating their renovation and decoration. To the extent that in a city like Paris, Tariq Bhatti from Gujranwala became Pakistan's Tariq Bhatti, whose name reverberated from the Pakistani community residing in Paris to the French aristocracy and government chambers.



Tariq Bhatti further explained that the Pakistani embassy specifically invited me to their ceremonies, where I met French personalities as well. The Pakistani government appointed me as an honorary commercial consul in the French embassy. French authorities also started inviting me to their governmental and personal events. It reached the point where I had access to the French President, Francois Mitterrand, and even beyond.

On the other hand, all troubles had ended in Pakistan. My father had begun construction work after acquiring land and had expanded from Gujranwala to Islamabad. But as they say, time waits for no one, and indeed, where the previous era had passed, this time also did not remain consistent.

So, when the government changed in France, the new administration did not appreciate the free access and camaraderie with high-ranking Pakistani officials. This closeness to the former government became a reason for estrangement from the new government, and once again, the era of troubles began. However, this time, nature was different. Obstacles in new construc-

tion projects, heavy taxation, the application of new laws and regulations started affecting my businesses. Because I was also getting hints that in France, Muslim organizations' funding and my connections with significant figures were casting doubt on my loyalty to the French government.

Every time important Pakistani politicians visited France, their arrival was mandatory at my residence, and then, in their honor, events, feasts, and small ceremonies were attended not only by the Pakistani community but also by significant French personalities.

Then it happened that some officials from

the local administration asked my guests about their purpose of visit. I realized that the French land was becoming constricted for me. There is a significant population of Mauritians in France, and this country under French administration is thriving. Although the comparison of Mauritian women to the beauties of Paris may not hold true, their maturity, household skills, and loyalty are filled to the brim. Due to these virtues, I entered into two marriages in France, both women hailing from Mauritius, who were not just companions in my ups and downs but also partners in my businesses.

Eventually, I quietly left both my wives and moved to London. There, I met an artist friend associated with the Television Commission, from whom I learned the technical secrets and nuances of this field so swiftly that my friend was left amazed. He said, 'The work that took me my entire life to learn, you've mastered in just a few years.' Later, we both moved to Italy and started the Television Commission business. In a few years, the peak of my business in Italy was such that I was the first

non-native in Italy who established such an extensive network of Television Commission working in 18 countries worldwide and that too with unparalleled efficiency.

After raising the banner of success in Italy, Tariq Bhatti went to his in-laws in Mauritius for some peace and tranquility in life, where he has resorts and other successful businesses. However, he never completely disconnected from his homeland. He developed residential projects in Gujranwala, including Pothohar University, a hospital, mosque, and parks, encompassing several public, agricultural, and social centers. Tariq Sharif Bhatti's story is not only fascinating but also a lesson that he began life with great difficulties and is now on the pinnacle of a peaceful life. In fact, it's such a story of courage, steadfastness, determination, honesty, goodwill, and relentless effort, from which much can be learned. Moreover, it's commendable that Tariq Bhatti, wherever he resided, not only contributed valuable services to Pakistan and Pakistanis but also never severed ties with his land, friends, and loved ones even in prosperity. His unwavering commitment to his roots showcases a remarkable blend of success and humility.

Tariq Sharif Bhatti's journey is emblematic of resilience and adaptability. From the challenges faced in his early years to establishing himself as a prominent figure in various countries, he exemplifies the spirit of overcoming obstacles with determination.

As he reflects on his life, Tariq Bhatti's story encourages aspiring individuals to pursue their dreams despite adversities. The narrative underscores the importance of perseverance, continuous learning, and embracing opportunities with an open heart.

To sum up, Tariq Sharif Bhatti's life serves as an inspiration not only for the Pakistani community but for anyone striving to turn hardships into triumphs. His legacy extends beyond geographical boundaries, leaving an indelible mark on the diverse landscapes he has touched. Through his remarkable journey, Tariq Bhatti exemplifies the potential for greatness that resides within every individual, urging them to reach for the stars while staying connected to their roots.

COP28 in Dubai: A Pivotal Moment for Global Climate Action



By Kanwal Munir

The 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) convened in Dubai, UAE, from November 30 to December 12, 2023. Against a dire backdrop of escalating climate crises, including devastating floods, heatwaves, and unprecedented wildfires, COP28 emerged as a pivotal moment in the worldwide endeavor to cap global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The urgency was palpable as world leaders, government representatives, and stakeholders gathered to address the critical challenges posed by climate change. COP28 played a central role in shaping global strategies, policies, and commitments necessary to combat the unfolding climate emergency and pave the way for a sustainable and resilient future.

The urgency of Climate Action

Amidst the Earth's record-breaking hottest summer, the urgency for decisive climate action had never been more evident. The Global Stocktake (GST), akin to a comprehensive report card on climate progress, starkly highlighted the significant disparity

between ongoing efforts and the ambitious targets established in the Paris Agreement. This sobering assessment underscored the pressing need for accelerated and collective global responses to curb climate change. Against the backdrop of these alarming realities, COP28 assumed a pivotal role as a critical juncture for world leaders to confront the escalating climate crisis head-on. The outcomes of COP28 were poised to shape the trajectory of international efforts, marking a crucial step toward fulfilling the commitments of the Paris Agreement and mitigating the severe impacts of climate change on a global scale.

COP28 Agenda and Themes

1. **Fast-Tracking the Energy Transition:** COP28 placed a central emphasis on expediting the transition to renewable energy sources and sustainable agricultural practices. The deliberate focus on fast-tracking this energy transition reflected a global commitment to diminishing reliance on fossil fuels. The urgency stemmed from the recognition of the far-reaching consequences of climate change, prompting a collective effort to

mitigate environmental impacts. By prioritizing the adoption of renewable energy and sustainable agricultural methods, COP28 sought to address the critical need for transformative actions that would contribute to a more sustainable, low-carbon future, aligning with the broader goals of the Paris Agreement.

2. **Fixing Climate Finance:** COP28's primary objective was to prioritize climate finance, particularly for vulnerable nations in the Global South. The discussions were centered on adaptation finance, aiming to support communities grappling with the impacts of climate disasters and enhance resilience in the face of a changing climate. This thematic focus underscored the urgent need to rectify the disproportionate impact of climate change on developing nations. By directing attention and resources toward these vulnerable regions, COP28 sought to foster equitable and sustainable global climate solutions that acknowledged and addressed the unique challenges faced by countries in the Global South.
3. **Nature, People, Lives, and Liveli**

hoods: COP28 underscored the profound interconnectedness of nature, human lives, and livelihoods. Delving into critical discussions, the conference explored topics such as food systems, nature-based solutions, and strategies to shield against extreme weather events and biodiversity loss. This holistic approach acknowledged the intricate relationships between ecosystems and human well-being. By fostering a comprehensive understanding of these interconnections, COP28 aimed to formulate strategies that not only mitigated the impacts of climate change but also promoted sustainable practices that safeguarded both natural environments and the welfare of communities worldwide.

Challenges and Controversies

1. **The Choice of President:** Controversy surrounded the appointment of Sultan al-Jaber, CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Co., as the president of COP28. Critics questioned the credibility of a leader from one of the world's largest oil-producing companies leading climate discussions. The debate over a phase-out of fossil fuels faced skepticism as discussions turned toward carbon capture techniques rather than the complete abandonment of fossil fuels.
2. **Civil Society Concerns:** Over 200 civil society organizations, including

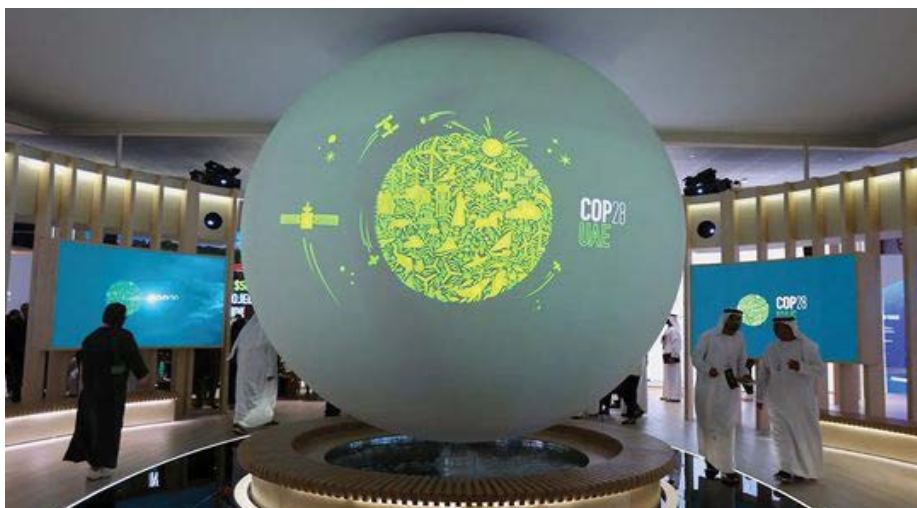
ing to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The first-ever Global Stocktake provided a comprehensive analysis of countries' progress toward the Paris Agreement, serving as a critical tool for refining climate action plans due in 2025.

4. **Participants and Attendees:** COP28 attracted over 140 heads of state, senior government leaders, and approximately 70,000 participants. Notable figures, including Britain's King Charles III, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, were confirmed attendees. However, the absence of U.S. President Joe Biden raised questions about the level of commitment from the world's second-largest emitter. The summit's structure, featuring both a "blue zone" for state representatives and a "green zone" for the public and civil society, aimed to foster diverse participation.

Conclusion: A defining moment for global collaboration

As COP28 unfolded in Dubai, it stood as a defining moment for the international community to demonstrate a unified commitment to addressing the climate crisis. The urgency of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius necessitated bold and immediate actions. While challenges and controversies loomed, the themes of fast-tracking the energy transition, fixing climate finance, prioritizing nature and livelihoods, and promoting inclusivity underscored the multifaceted approach required to confront climate change successfully.

As the world watched, COP28 provided an opportunity for leaders to turn rhetoric into action and pave the way for a sustainable and resilient future. The decisions made in Dubai shaped the trajectory of global climate efforts for years to come. World leaders rose to the occasion, bridging gaps, and forging meaningful collaborations to address the climate crisis head-on. COP28 was not just a summit; it was a call to action for the future of our planet.



4. **Inclusivity in Climate Management:** COP28 championed inclusivity by acknowledging the significance of diverse perspectives, actively involving youth, and enhancing communication across various sectors and agencies. The primary objective was to cultivate an inclusive environment where all stakeholders, regardless of age or background, contributed to shaping comprehensive and collaborative climate management strategies. By prioritizing diverse voices, COP28 sought to ensure that the resulting initiatives authentically reflected the needs and concerns of a broad spectrum of stakeholders. This commitment to inclusivity underscored the importance of fostering a united and cooperative global effort to effectively address the complex challenges posed by climate change.

Amnesty International, raised concerns about COP28's choice of president and the involvement of the fossil fuel industry in climate discussions. The open letter to the UAE government demanded labor reforms, a halt to plans for increased oil and gas production, and assurance of privacy for COP28 attendees. These concerns highlighted the need for transparent and accountable climate governance.

3. **Global Stocktake and Climate Ambitions:** COP28 occurred against the backdrop of a sobering UN report indicating record-high levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Current climate plans, if unchanged, were projected to result in only a two percent reduction in global carbon emissions by 2030, falling far short of the 43 percent required to limit warm-

Endangered rare wild goat Ibex saved from extinction



By Amir Latif/Anadolu

The Chiltan ibex, a rare wild goat native to southwestern Pakistan, has experienced a promising resurgence in its population over the past five years. Despite enduring threats from climate change and poaching, the species has defied the odds in Hazarganji-Chiltan National Park, situated on the outskirts of Quetta. This park, spanning 70,000 acres and established in 1980, serves as the sole habitat for the Chiltan ibex worldwide. The conservation efforts have been crucial, especially considering the precarious state of the species in 1975 when only 169 individuals remained. Today, the gradual increase in their numbers reflects a commendable success in wildlife preservation, illustrating the resilience of the Chiltan ibex against formidable challenges. The continued commitment to safeguarding this unique species remains vital for its sustained recovery.

In the vast Hazarganji-Chiltan National Park, the Chiltan ibex shares its habitat with various wildlife, including hyenas, jackals, and the elusive Persian leopard. A heartening success story unfolds as the Chiltan goat's population, once perilously

close to extinction, has steadily risen to approximately 2,250 individuals. Arz Mohammad, a conservator from Balochistan's Wildlife Department, reveals the numbers' encouraging progression from 1,600 in 2018 to 2,000 in 2021. This slow but consistent growth, averaging 100 to 150 annually over the past five years, reflects the effectiveness of coordinated wildlife management and community involvement. However, the park's understaffing—currently with only 86 personnel—leaves vulnerabilities to illegal activities like hunting and poaching. Mohammad emphasizes the need for at least 200 staff members to adequately protect the expansive park, underscoring the ongoing challenges in preserving this rare species and its diverse ecosystem.

Climate change and increasing human intrusion

The Chiltan goat, once classified as "critically endangered," has achieved a significant milestone with its status upgraded to "near-threatened" by the

International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), as revealed by Naseebullah from the IUCN Quetta chapter. The Hazarganji-Chiltan National Park, nestled among imposing mountains, has witnessed a slow but steady increase in the Chiltan goat population, currently standing at around 2,250. However, the park's pristine allure is under threat from encroaching human developments. Concrete structures lining the roads near the park raise concerns about potential habitat disruption and land-grabbing.

Despite successful conservation efforts, challenges persist. Climate change poses a substantial threat, with environmental variability leading to unpredictable rains and droughts, significantly impacting the crucial vegetation sustaining the park's diverse wildlife. Arz Mohammad, a conservator from Balochistan's Wildlife Department, acknowledges this challenge, stating, "Environmental variability is another challenge that we have been facing." While the threat of illegal hunting and poaching exists due to understaffing, Mohammad emphasizes its scale is currently manageable.

However, the encroachment of human structures raises alarms. Mohammad clarifies that construction is permitted only in the "buffer zone," with strict regulations to protect the park's core area. As the Chiltan goat population rebounds, the delicate balance between conservation and human development remains a critical concern, demanding continued vigilance and effective management to ensure the sustained recovery of this rare species and the preservation of its unique habitat.

Classification controversy

In a distinctive approach, Chiltan park stands apart by strictly prohibiting trophy hunting of the Chiltan wild goat, distinguishing it from other conservation strategies. Tahir Rasheed, a wildlife expert involved in the park's inaugural management plan in 1996, expressed satisfaction with the significant population growth. He remarked, "They (goats) were less than 300 when we launched the management plan in 1996, and now they are over 2,200." This success underscores the effectiveness of the conservation plan, contributing to the remarkable resurgence of the Chiltan goat population within the protected confines of Hazarganji-Chiltan National Park.

Tahir Rasheed, a Quetta-based wildlife



expert integral to Chiltan park's management plan, emphasizes the unique significance of the Chiltan wild goat within Pakistan's wildlife heritage. He asserts, "Chiltan wild goat is a rare wildlife treasure for Pakistan compared to other species as it is found only in Pakistan, and only in Chiltan park." Contrary to some categorizations suggesting it is a markhor sub-species, Rasheed refutes this, citing morphological and genetic evidence. He clarifies, "It's a sub-species of the Sulaiman markhor, which is found in Balochistan," noting its scientific name as *capra aegagrus chiltanensis*, a cross-breed of the Sulaiman markhor and ibex (Turkman wild goat).

While another theory posits a hybrid of Sulaiman markhor and domestic goats, Rasheed dismisses this notion. Conservator Arz Mohammad, partially supporting Rasheed's stance, acknowledges the morphological distinctions between the Chiltan goat and markhor but emphasizes the need for genetic research for precise classification. This discussion underscores the complex biodiversity within the region, requiring ongoing scientific inquiry to unravel the genetic intricacies of the Chiltan goat and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of its evolutionary lineage within Pakistan's rich wildlife panorama.



Unveiling the World of Deepfakes: Navigating the Ethical Labyrinth of Artificial Reality



By Daniyal Wali

In an era dominated by technological advancements, the rise of deepfakes has emerged as a formidable challenge, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Deepfakes, fueled by the power of artificial intelligence (AI) and deep learning algorithms, have infiltrated various aspects of our lives, from entertainment to politics, raising concerns about misinformation, privacy breaches, and ethical implications.

Deepfakes, a portmanteau of "deep learning" and "fake," harnesses AI to generate hyper-realistic videos or audio clips portraying events that never occurred. The technology relies on deep neural networks, employing face-swapping techniques to seamlessly integrate a person's likeness into existing content. Cristina López, a senior analyst at Graphika, describes deepfakes as footage generated by a computer trained on countless images, emphasizing the role of deep learning algorithms in their creation.

Distinguishing deepfakes from other manipulated media, experts highlight the element of minimal human input in

the generation process. Unlike conventional CGI or Photoshop, where human control remains prevalent, deepfakes grant users influence only at the final stage, offering a unique challenge in discerning reality from fabrication.

Creating deep fakes involves a multi-step process that combines face-swapping with Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs). Users start with a target video and a collection of clips featuring the person they want to insert. The algorithm then extrapolates the person's appearance from various angles, mapping them onto the target video by identifying common features. GANs are subsequently employed to refine and enhance the deepfake, making it resistant to detection by deep fake detectors.

While the creation process is intricate, the availability of user-friendly apps like Zao, DeepFace Lab, FakeApp, and Face Swap, as well as open-source repositories on platforms like GitHub, makes deepfake generation accessible even for beginners.

Dark Sides of Deepfakes

Historically, deepfake technology has been exploited for illicit purposes, with explicit content creation, sextortion, and harassment at the forefront. The FBI has issued warnings about the dangers of generative AI, emphasizing the need for public awareness.

Political landscapes have not been spared, as demonstrated by instances like the Belgian political party's deepfake video featuring Donald Trump. The potential for misleading political narratives, combined with the accessibility of deepfake creation tools, raises concerns among experts and technologists.

Positive Uses and Ethical Dilemmas

Despite the dark sides, there are instances where deepfake technology has been harnessed for positive purposes. The HBO documentary "Welcome to Chechnya" used deepfakes to protect the identities of LGBTQ refugees facing threats. Organizations like

WITNESS highlight the potential for positive applications, emphasizing the need to view deepfake technology as a tool rather than an inherent threat.

Shirin Anlen, a media technologist for WITNESS, advocates for a balanced approach, acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of deepfakes. As society navigates this technological landscape, education and awareness are crucial elements in mitigating the risks associated with deepfake proliferation.

Detecting the Deception

As deepfake technology evolves, detecting these fabrications becomes increasingly challenging. Several indicators can aid in identifying deepfakes, including blurry details, unnatural lighting, mismatches between audio and visuals, and reliability checks on the image source. However, the responsibility for detection should not solely rest on individuals; developers and tech companies must play a role in implementing invisible watermarks and advanced detection methods.

Startups like Sensity and Operation Minerva are at the forefront of developing deepfake detection platforms. Sensity's approach mirrors an antivirus system for deepfakes, alerting users to AI-generated media. Operation Minerva utilizes a digital fingerprinting algorithm to compare potential deepfakes with known cataloged videos, offering a more straightforward approach to detection.

While technological solutions are essential, experts emphasize the need for a holistic

approach involving education, awareness, and legal frameworks. Several states have passed or attempted to pass legislation outlawing the use of deepfakes in specific cases, reflecting a growing recognition of the need for regulatory measures.

The Future Challenge: Live Deepfakes

The threat of deepfakes extends beyond pre-recorded content, infiltrating live settings like phone calls and Zoom meetings. Nasir Memon, a professor of computer science and engineering at NYU, highlights the potential risks in various scenarios, from job interviews to college exams. The burden of detection in real-time scenarios places a significant challenge on defenders, necessitating the development of technologies capable of identifying live deepfakes.

As society grapples with the implications of deepfake technology, ethical considerations come to the forefront. The manipulation of audio-visual content raises questions about consent, privacy, and the potential for harm. Deepfakes have been weaponized for malicious intent, leading to reputational damage, emotional distress, and even political destabilization.

Shirin Anlen of WITNESS underscores the importance of viewing deepfake technology as a tool, urging responsible usage and ethical considerations. The onus lies not only on technology developers but also on individuals, educators, and policymakers to establish ethical guidelines and frameworks for the responsible deployment of deepfake

technology.

As technology advances, education and public awareness become paramount in mitigating the risks associated with deepfakes. Experts like Anlen and López believe that a well-informed public is better equipped to discern between authentic and manipulated content. Educational initiatives should encompass digital literacy, media literacy, and critical thinking skills to empower individuals to navigate the evolving landscape of AI-generated content.

In the quest for a balanced future, collaboration between technology developers, regulatory bodies, educators, and the public is imperative. Startups pioneering deepfake detection, such as Sensity and Operation Minerva, represent promising steps toward mitigating the impact of malicious deepfakes. However, Nasir Memon of NYU cautions that technology alone cannot be the panacea; a comprehensive approach involving societal awareness, legal frameworks, and ethical considerations is essential.

As society grapples with the profound implications of deepfake technology, a nuanced perspective is essential. While deepfakes pose significant challenges, they also offer opportunities for positive applications. The evolving landscape requires a collaborative effort involving individuals, developers, and policymakers to strike a balance between technological innovation and ethical considerations. Education, awareness, and proactive measures will be critical in navigating the intricate web of deepfakes in the years to come.



Pakistan's Uphill Battle Down Under: A Grueling Test Series Awaits

By Ali Abdullah

In the imminent three-match Test series set to commence in Perth next week, Pakistan finds itself in the formidable crucible of facing Australia—a team with whom they've historically grappled, especially on Australian soil. The shadows of past humiliations during their five Test tours down under loom ominously over the Pakistani squad, casting a pall of doubt and leaving scant room for optimism. Steering this beleaguered ship is Shan Masood, the recently appointed captain, who faces an uphill battle compounded by the significant injuries afflicting their bowling corps.

Contending with the reigning world Test champions, led by the formidable Pat Cummins, Pakistan enters the series burdened by the haunting memory of their last Test victory in Australia, a distant echo from late 1995 when a substantial portion of the current team was yet to make their debut on the world stage.

While Pakistan is renowned for its unpredictable nature on the cricket field, their Australian counterparts grapple with the tumultuous lead-up to the series. The resignation of Babar Azam, the all-formats captain, following Pakistan's inability to progress beyond the 50-overs World Cup semifinals in India, adds another layer of complexity to the team's challenges. This pivotal decision thrusts Masood into the captaincy role for the Test team, a mantle he must bear while ensuring that Babar remains the linchpin of the batting lineup.

The once impervious bowling unit of Pakistan, traditionally their forte, now raises red flags and significant concerns. Naseem Shah's recuperation from a shoulder injury and the altered dynamics of Shaheen Afridi's pace post a knee injury have left the team scrambling for stability and cohesiveness. Despite the availability of quick bowler Haris Rauf, his preference for the Big Bash League in Australia over joining



the Test team adds an additional layer of complexity.

Masood, undeterred by the challenges at hand, has set an ambitious target for his batsmen—reach 400 or more. However, the task of achieving this against the likes of Mitchell Starc and Cummins on the swift, Australian pitches is a formidable one. The skipper, leading by example, has already laid the groundwork with an undefeated double hundred in the current tour match in Canberra, aiming to establish a resilient and positive tone for the arduous series ahead.

Anticipating the unique challenges posed by the Australian pace and bounce, Masood underscores the imperative of putting their formidable attack, spearheaded by Cummins, and complemented by spinner Nathan Lyon, under pressure right from the onset. He is acutely aware of Australia's longstanding dominance in world cricket and is determined to disrupt their rhythm, fostering an environment where the unpredictable nature of Pakistan's cricketing prowess can potentially turn the tide.

Reflecting on the last encounter between these two cricketing powerhouses during Australia's tour of Pakistan in 2021-2022, it was a hard-fought series that culminated in a draw. The first Test saw both teams shaking hands before the planned completion on day five. Despite Pakistan's commendable overall score of 728 for 4, Australia's Steve Smith voiced concerns about the wicket, deeming it "dead" and "benign," sentiments echoed by match referee Ranjan Madugalle. The series concluded with Australia securing a 1-0 victory, marking their first Test series win in Asia since 2011 and their inaugural Test victory in the region since 2017.

As the cricketing stage is reset for a renewed battle, Pakistan is resolute in its quest to rewrite the narrative of their Test encounters Down Under, seeking redemption in the unforgiving terrain of Australian cricket. The journey ahead is challenging, but it is this very challenge that presents an opportunity for Pakistan to carve a new chapter in their Australian Test history.

The Resurgence of Women's Football in Pakistan

In the intricate tapestry of Pakistani sports, women's football has weathered a forced sabbatical from 2014 to 2021, a period marred by the unpredictability of the political landscape. Yet, over the past year, a phoenix has risen from the ashes as the women's football team has grown stronger, culminating in a commendable second-place finish in a friendly four-nation competition held in Saudi Arabia in January.

Historically overshadowed, the recent achievements of the women's football team demand a recalibration of perspectives, urging observers to consider their performance in the broader context of their challenging journey. Despite a mere 14 games played and years of inactivity, the team has showcased promise, holding its ground and even scoring against World Cup-caliber opponents.

The road to resurgence has been fraught with obstacles. Earlier this year, the squad faced a potential setback when they nearly missed their trip to Singapore due to a new regulation requiring a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from sports boards. Unlike European football, where fixtures are set well in advance, the Asian league's fixture was confirmed just days before the team's departure. This regulatory hurdle poses a potential threat to the landscape of Pakistani sports.

In the face of numerous challenges, women's football in Pakistan struggles for recognition, with media coverage often neglecting their successes. Despite this, passionate supporters persist, recognizing that women's football has transcended its role as a mere sport, gaining significance both due to its turbulent past and its emergence from a niche interest to a formidable presence beyond traditional sporting circles.

Sahiba Sherdil, a participant in the 4 Nations tournament, encapsulates the pride and inspiration felt while representing Pakistan on the football field. Her experience reflects a transformative shift in societal attitudes towards women in sports. Sherdil's return home was met with admiration from young girls aspiring to follow in her footsteps—a poignant testament to the



impact of women's football on the next generation.

A similar sentiment is echoed by Shaikh, who underscores the importance of positive reinforcement for young children witnessing women excel in football. She emphasizes the inclusive nature of the sport, a stark departure from a time when women in sports were not taken seriously and were often discouraged from pursuing athletic careers in favor of more "feminine" pursuits.

The tide is turning, and a significant catalyst in this paradigm shift is the proactive role played by establishments like Karachi United. Sherdil and Zoya Zeshan, both participants in the Saudi competition, are members of this groundbreaking football club that challenges gender stereotypes. Sherdil emphasizes the club's inclusive and supportive nature, offering year-round opportunities for women to play, professional coaching, financial support, and even transportation—a level of investment unparalleled in other Pakistani football clubs.

However, the transformative potential of football extends beyond individual success stories and the confines of established clubs. To genuinely serve as a platform for women to overcome societal constraints, the triumphs of the national team must be a springboard for broader discussions on expanding football's reach beyond borders.

A few generations ago, the notion of women participating in such public sports arenas was unimaginable. Yet, initiatives like the Gilgit Baltistan Girls Football League, known for its high-altitude football squad, are actively challenging entrenched attitudes in remote areas. These initiatives offer women and young girls a platform that extends beyond the confines of societal expectations, yet their endeavors receive minimal continuous attention from the media.

The significance of these initiatives lies not only in promoting women's participation in sports but in providing a space where young girls can aspire to goals beyond the conventional expectations imposed upon them. Football becomes a vehicle for empowerment, a means to shatter societal norms, and a testament to the potential residing within each player, irrespective of gender.

As women's football in Pakistan continues its defiance of odds, it is crucial to spotlight these initiatives and successes. The narrative is evolving, and the media's role in consistently amplifying these voices and accomplishments is paramount. By doing so, we not only celebrate the triumphs of the present but sow the seeds for a more inclusive and progressive future where women's football in Pakistan transcends mere recognition and becomes a catalyst for societal change.

By Ali Abdullah

The magic of music in 2023



By Maheen Sabeeh

You can never be sure about how a year in music will end. You can never be sure if artists will complete what they set out to achieve at the start of the year. In the growing age of technological advancement and rise of digital streaming websites, where digital audio content including music is available without subscription (such as Spotify), you can't be sure of what qualifies as quality music or pulse of the nation. Can it be both or is it mutually exclusive?

Numbers don't dictate validation in terms of talent, much like award shows. They do, however, dictate a certain level of popularity. Numbers can only tell you who has been the most popular artist but that also comes with a Catch-22 situation. For instance, your daily mix during morning exercise hours or when you're hitting the gym, might contain a playlist of upbeat, motivational, high-tempo songs. That, however, doesn't mean they're the best songs to emerge from the year.

But as a listener, that's not what you're thinking. As a result, at the end of a year, some songs will be your most heard songs but not ones you go to for while on the mission of pure discovery. It might overlap, sure, but it might not

mean this list of songs qualifies as your favorite songs that released in a given year.

When you're procrastinating and listening to some form of music as well as cleaning your overloaded computer, and keeping an eye on a muted news channel because many of us have become addicted to news, it also doesn't mean these songs are your favorites. It is, simply put, about context.

Where you were when you heard a song and decided if it is worthy enough for a playlist or qualifies as a song that you sit down and listen to without any distraction.

Age also plays a role. Some of us don't have the time, not anymore, like the way we used to during listening to songs.

In my case, a Walkman, a compact CD player, an MP3 player and finally an iPod, which came out as Apple's greatest innovations, in the days when technological savant, Steve Jobs was still alive, is how music was consumed from beginning to the present.

Since the iPod, it has become the only way to carry music in mobile manner or its follow-up, the iPhone, which

allows phone calls and music (among its various other uses).

Other brands also offer music space in your phone or an app like Spotify or YouTube Music. Whatever your choice of device, understanding a musical year also comes down to population growth.

As per the last census, Pakistan has a population of 241.49 million people with an annual growth rate of 2.55 percent, which is worrisome in itself. But in that figure, the median age leans towards a younger side. Depending on the websites you drudge through to find the answer, it is anywhere between 21-years-old and 36-years-old. This crowd, largely wants to groove. This investigation is personally an ongoing learning and experience.

Many artists have told me in confidence that sometimes they have made a record [or] planned to do make one that is for a concert circuit where the average attendee wants to be entertained by music. That idea may or may not manifest for every individual who is attending a concert but the expectation is there. And you can't judge people because they want to dance.

That dancing is more curious with the



existence of DJs or festivals but can also be restrictive due to the ticket price. The cost of living, affordability and a show where the artist also makes money, does come into play. In other cases, such club-centric events featuring local and international artists, can be a private affair. What to be done with the restlessness.

The outliers, the disenfranchised, however, do find their way to some of these events, but as we go back to the question of numbers in music, they may be useful to mathematicians but in an effort to understand the process of listenership, it is not exactly accurate. The songs not most streamed can be the ones that carry strange and beautiful moments. Shunned as they maybe by the fight that is put up by numbers and algorithms, it would be a shame to not look at as much music as we can and how it feels as the year is closing.

LPs, EPs and more

With or without music videos (since they require an added expense that not every artist can afford), LPs and EPs is where it starts.

In 2023, artists decided to drop either EPs and, in some cases, LPs (a full-length record). What prompted them to release a body of work is individual to each of them but their release filled a void, and gave people a significant pocket of music without which there would most certainly

be a perplexing chasm created by its absence.

Whom should we begin with?

Talal Qureshi? Okay, then he must take a bow for his LP, *Turbo*. The LP is among a handful of records that shows how trends can be avoided and an artist can still make a record that is individualistic, enchanting and explosive – minus the violence connotation.

Qureshi also co-produced the excellent LP by Natasha Noorani called *Ronaq*. While composing is one thing, writing songs that carry your thoughts, internal world and how you see the external, is not an easy thing to do. You always learn more about the artist through their sound, melodies, compositions and lyrics as opposed to the tropes such as 'vocalist'. Natasha, forgive this metaphor given the current climate, came out swinging with a boisterous and an intimate record, after the longing that enveloped her last EP.

She wasn't the only one.

Slowspin (Zeera Ahmad), who talks about her work as sound sculptures, released a marvelous LP called *Talisman* (which swims in the dream-folk land and is truly genre-defying). In doing so, she collaborated with the esteemed Vijay Iyer among others.

Iyer collaborated with the dynamic Arooj Aftab and multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaili, and together the trio conjured the outstanding and timeless LP, *Love in Exile*, which has fetched them two Grammy nods: one in the category of Best Alternative Jazz Album and another for 'Shadow Forces' in the category of Best Global Music Performance.

Including Arooj Aftab, all of these women used their unique vocals and allowed the music to float to a place that neither they, nor their listeners envisioned. Don't be lost in terminology and words such as frequencies. Intuition and improvisation in music is not a bad thing and these records prove it.

Similarly, Natasha Humera Ejaz dropped her debut LP called *Ordinary Miracle*. But it was anything but ordinary. Collectively, these records addressed a whirlwind of emotions from grief and longing to identity to the aesthetic of each artist. It also showed us their artistic growth and timelessness that was embedded in every song. None of them veered away from exploration and intuition, which is why the records sound so well.

Many other artists showcased what they could, would and should do best. Azaan Sami Khan, the lesser known Salor and Kashmir also released new LPs.

The algorithm can be beaten. You just have to understand the basic idea upon which it is built.

Young Stunners (who release so much music that you wish they stopped and emerged with a mood that is not written out of memory muscle but an introspection after their success and collective and solo paths) dropped more music. Talha Anjum dropped an LP while the group also played shows and appeared on music series such as Velo Sound Station and just released a lot of music – in one form or another.

Other artists include Jokhay (Therapy), Hasan Raheem (Maybe, It's Love), Abdul Hannan x Shahmeer Raza Khan (Diya), Tarbooze (Taraqiati Kaam), Jimmy Khan (Ghar) who delivered work that celebrates collaboration and inched closer to being music's new royalty.

Ali Sethi dropped an EP with Nicolas Jaar, which is a big deal if we step away from the giant that is 'Pasoori'.

A refined effort, it is Sethi experimenting and showcasing how songs can take shape as you create beyond what is expected from you.

However, for the first time perhaps in years, music's biggest property, Coke Studio, didn't come out with a season. What the reason is remains a mystery. And unless it releases post-article, there is a strong chance that it will come next year – if at all.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing, is something that can be gauged by what music did release. Its absence was, in some ways, filled by Velo Sound Station (VSS). Making a comeback after two years, with

Rohail Hyatt "designing the framework" and Kamal Khan as producer/co-director and Zeeshan Parwez, roped in as co-director, apart from a strong team, the series did produce some interesting moments and good songs, particularly by Natasha Noorani, Atif Aslam, Maanu, Rozeo, and Meesha Shafi. But it didn't beat the global success that Coke Studio 14 found in 2022 and the disappearance act it has pulled in 2023.

Beyond dozens and dozens of singles, and some rap battles, record labels have made a comeback. Sony Music Middle East now has a stake, with at least two more record labels that are promising to invest in a variety of artists.

The likes of Shamooin Ismail, the very popular Taha G, Pindi Boyz, Abdul Hannan, Shae Gill, Abdullah Siddiqui made a lot of heads turn with their respective music.

Perhaps the biggest news in music is the return of Faisal Kapadia post-Coke Studio 14. With original songs like 'Jaadu' and 'Hum Na Rahay' ft. Zoha Zuberi, Kapadia also launched his own record label.

Woman made such a strong splash in music that it is difficult to cherry-pick some names.

Here, the EQUAL Pakistan playlist by Spotify, is a great place to find names that you have heard and those whom you are completely unaware of but will most certainly be surprised by upon listening.

This is maybe the first year in years past that we are running out of space to shine a brighter light on so many other artists.

Head to different platforms from internet labels to record labels (there is a difference) to find the song that speaks to your heart, makes you run, makes uncomfortable moments pass quickly and the ones that will stay in your permanent music collection.

Yes, at the end of another year, Atif Aslam is still the most streamed artist and we don't have a hard time believing that given his popularity across demographics. As for the rest of it, fret not and watch out for the special 2023 music centerspread coming up next week. Until then, please don't stop the music.

Numbers can only tell you who has been most popular artist but that also comes with a Catch-22 situation. For instance, your daily mix during

morning while exercising or when you're hitting the gym, might contain certain upbeat songs. That, however, doesn't mean they're the best songs to emerge from the year. But as a listener, that's not what you're thinking. As a result, at the end of a year, some songs will be your most heard songs but not ones you go to for pure discovery. It might overlap, sure, but it might not mean this list of songs qualifies as your favorite songs that released in a given year.

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