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ZAHID HUSSAIN

HYBRID RULE IN PAKISTAN



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By
Zahid Hussain



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Chapter 1

THE TWO-YEAR RECORD

19 Aug 2020

IT has been the country's first experiment with what many have described as hybrid rule. The past two years have been unique for many reasons. Imran Khan finally got the job he had coveted for so long. His journey from the container to the corridors of power was seen as predetermined. The project was to deliver a 'naya' Pakistan, an efficient administration and a corruption-free society.

Imran Khan was projected as the last best hope. After all, he had won for the country the Cricket World Cup and so could also lead us to the Promised Land, or so the logic went. A coalition of disparate groups was built to provide his party enough support in parliament to form the government.

Next came the real test for him to prove his mettle as a leader. He floundered. It was not only about his inexperience but also the team of novices that he fielded. A limited understanding of statecraft was obvious. So, it appeared, that some propping up was needed. The project could not be abandoned. It's not surprising that the government has survived despite a very thin majority that hinges on the support of a few disparate political parties.

This situation was seen to reinforce hybrid rule. Many saw the imprint of the establishment all over. That may have given the government some semblance of stability. Yet the duality of power has its perils too. There is no one fully in charge. It causes more confusion and affects governance. That is what has happened over the past two years of PTI rule.

The balance sheet of the Imran Khan government on the completion of its second year in power has certainly not been encouraging. Governance remains the major problem area. The prime minister had promised to bring new talent to build a 'naya' Pakistan, but a bloated cabinet is completely opposite to the promise of delivering a smart

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government. Many in the prime minister's collection of 'talents' only provide comic relief in times of crisis. The much-touted reform agenda is lost somewhere in the chaos.

Two years on, there is no sign yet of the PTI government having developed the capability to take rational decisions on critical domestic and foreign policy issues. The government's increasing dependence on the security establishment for survival has further undermined its ability to improve and course correct. Consequently, the establishment's extending shadow can be discerned in all dimensions of the state. It seems that the perpetual state of confrontation among political forces has allowed the establishment to play arbiter of political power in the country.

With the prime minister reluctant to meet opposition leaders in order to create unity on key national security and foreign policy issues, the responsibility in this regard is often seen to be taken by the security agencies. One latest example is to get the opposition support for FATF-related legislation. In a similar context, it was not the political leadership that brought together the political forces during the Indian intrusion in February last year.

It is an open secret that for many years the security establishment has been considered the determiner of national security and foreign policy in Pakistan but that role appears to have become more pronounced under the PTI government. It was apparently for the first time in the country's history that the army chief accompanied the prime minister to a meeting with the American president at the White House last year.

On various occasions, the military leadership has been involved in sorting out problems with other countries arising from some impulsive decisions taken by the prime minister or statements made by his cabinet ministers. Gen Bajwa flew to China to control the damage caused by a federal minister's media statement only months into the PTI government. The most recent example is his rushing to Saudi Arabia after the foreign minister's statement on the role of the OIC.

Curiously, now there seem to be closer relations between the establishment and the opposition parties too. It's not surprising that the PML-N leaders have restricted their attacks to the PTI government and the prime minister, sparing the agencies. The PTI leadership may have delusions about the prime minister's indispensability to the establishment, but it is all a game of thrones in the end.

The failure of the leadership was badly exposed during Pakistan's battle against the Covid-19 pandemic. The prime minister had initially downplayed the seriousness of the infection declaring it a form of flu. The mixed messaging and rejection of complete lockdown in the critical initial period of the infection harmed efforts to contain the virus. Unfortunately, the government failed to unite the country in such challenging times. Instead, there were divisions and polarisation.

It was only after the military leadership intervened to form the National Command and Operation Centre that a more coherent national policy to deal with the pandemic was

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evolved. The organisation comprises representatives of the federal and provincial governments and the military. That helped develop a coordinated approach.

But the irony is that the PTI and its supporters genuinely believe that the government's handling of the pandemic was an example for the world to emulate. With such self-praise, there is no room for introspection that could help rectify mistakes.

The selective application of anti-corruption laws has exposed the government to the allegation of a political witch-hunt. The government's so-called drive against graft is, in fact, seen as a cover for its incompetence. There is as yet little evidence of corruption. The claim of a clean government is also questionable.

There is not much for the PTI government to show as it completes its second year in power. Six months on, it will be midway through its term, but yet there is no sign of the 'naya' Pakistan beyond the official rhetoric. It remains to be seen whether the PTI delivers on the promise of change. The stakes are also high for the establishment to see this project does not fail. Pakistan's experiment with hybrid rule doesn't seem to be succeeding. The PTI government may survive in power, but the real issue is what kind of political legacy it is creating.

Published in Dawn, August 19th, 2020

Chapter 2

A FARCE GONE TOO FAR

22 Jul 2020

THE latest Supreme Court ruling is a damning indictment of the National Accountability Bureau's (NAB) conduct and the ongoing political witch-hunt. The country's top anti-graft watchdog is accused not only of trampling on human rights, freedom and human dignity but also of becoming an instrument of political engineering.

It is a devastating blow to the image of the organisation whose credibility was already in question. The allegations of its high-handedness and partisan approach are not new but the latest ruling by a two-member bench of the apex court raises broader questions about a system that props up such corrupted institutions.

There has never been any illusion regarding the claim of NAB being an autonomous body but even the veneer of impartiality has now been blown off. Since its formation by Gen Musharraf's military government, it has been used as a tool for political blackmailing and manipulation.

Remember how graft charges were used to buy the loyalties of politicians? Charges of corruption were dropped when loyalties shifted and those previously accused were overnight inducted into the cabinet. Musharraf had declared that NAB had been established to put the fear of God in the hearts of the corrupt. But it was never to be.

Such practices may have continued under successive governments, but NAB's partisanship and what Justice Maqbool Baqar in his ruling has described as the "capricious exercise of the power to arrest" is unprecedented. It's not a coincidence that almost every opposition leader who matters is being investigated by NAB; many of them have already spent several months in detention without being formally charged.

Yet there has hardly been any instance of anyone from the ruling coalition being meted out the same treatment despite the fact that many of them have held public office under successive dispensations and have been accused of not having a clean record. They are declared kosher once they join the ruling clique. As Justice Baqar pointed out, "The

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bureau seems reluctant in proceeding against people on one side of the political divide even in respect of financial scams of massive proportion".

Such arbitrary use of sweeping powers of arrest is now being effectively used not only against opposition political leaders but also against bureaucrats, businessmen, and even mediapersons. It is apparent, and as the court in its ruling noted, the bureau has been operating beyond its mandate of investigating only those holders of public office who have been accused of graft thus allowing the body to operate above the law. It is rare for an anti-graft body to have such wide-ranging powers.

Perhaps the biggest nightmare of every civil servant is a call by NAB. It is not exclusively about graft; any decision taken by them can put them in trouble. There are many senior civil servants who have been in NAB's detention for months without any charge. There have been many instances of officials being hounded even after having been retired for more than a decade.

Vice chancellors of state universities have actually been detained for decisions pertaining to the hiring of lower staff. Surely, there have been some cases of wrongdoing and corruption involving bureaucrats, but questioning every civil servant for decisions they take in their official capacity makes everyone nervous.

But the real question is what makes NAB such a dreaded organisation and where does it derive its power from. In recent years, it has extended its area of operation; that could not have been possible without the encouragement of some other powerful institutions.

Surely NAB has turned into an effective weapon in the PTI government's armoury in its battle against the opposition. But the allegation that it is being deployed as an instrument of political engineering has much deeper connotations. Such an inference is generally directed at the all-powerful security agencies that have often been blamed for political manipulation.

It is quite significant what Justice Baqar stated in his ruling: "We have come to this unfortunate pass, in most part, because of the repeated direct unconstitutional interventions, and manipulations by undemocratic forces." That raises questions about the alleged nexus between the anti-graft body and "undemocratic" forces. The recent actions taken by NAB reinforce the perception of its being used for political engineering. It is an extremely damaging image for an organisation responsible for fighting corruption.

Intriguingly, the bureau is still functioning under an ordinance after two decades of its formation; there has not been any effort by successive elected governments to legislate a framework under which NAB should function. The sweeping powers of arrest and detention, without any formal charge, are a travesty of justice that needs to be struck down.

In fact, there is a need to revisit all NAB provisos that violate the basic norms of justice, making the body controversial. Although NAB is supposed to be an

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autonomous body, in effect it has never been so. The Supreme Court ruling rightly pointed out that the "principle of trichotomy of power and the concept of devolution have been trampled with contempt".

Therefore, it is imperative to overhaul the bureau, make it independent of political pressure, and remove its inhuman face. One of the most crucial aspects where NAB fails modern legal standards rests in the structure of the organisation. The NAB chair has been vested with unprecedented powers that can easily be misused. It is equally important to ensure that the head of the organisation is a person of integrity with high ethical standards.

However, the main question is whether the government is interested in reforming the bureau, which, as a consequence of extremely short-sighted thinking, the rulers seek to use as a political weapon against their opponents. This weapon can be used against those in government now, once they are out of power, or even to oust the government through political engineering. The opposition parties have learnt their lessons the hard way.

There is no denial that corruption is a major problem affecting the political and democratic process in the country, and therefore there is a greater need for a strong accountability process. But NAB with its dubious practices cannot play that role. It is a farce that has gone too far.

Published in Dawn, July 22nd, 2020

Chapter 3

DANGEROUS DELUSIONS

01 Jul 2020

SPEAKING at a dinner for coalition lawmakers recently, the prime minister had boasted: "we are the only choice". Maybe his words were meant to calm down disgruntled allies and were also a way of letting an increasingly aggressive opposition, baying for his blood, know that he was not going anywhere. But whose 'choice' was he alluding to?

It was not a speech given at the hustings. For some, it amounted to a habitual arrogance and a feeling of illusory superiority. But there was more to the assertion that came in the midst of the widening cracks within a fragile coalition and growing discontent within party ranks.

Some observers took the prime minister's remarks as meant for the security establishment, ie 'we are still your best bet'. It is evident that the establishment's continued support is critical to keeping intact a fractious ruling coalition that has been further shaken by the exit of Akhtar Mengal's BNP-M and the threats of some other parties to abandon ship.

Moreover, the public remarks of cabinet ministers have further added to the government's woes. Surely the passing of the budget has come as a relief for the ruling elite, but the crisis of confidence is far from over. A major challenge for the prime minister is how to save the coalition from falling apart.

Meanwhile, a seemingly more united opposition has stepped up its attack targeting the prime minister in particular. The government's mishandling of the ongoing pandemic, the worsening economic situation, and the various scandals highlighting the crisis of governance have provided the opposition ammunition with which to target a beleaguered administration.

That has at least forced the prime minister to come down from his pedestal and try and placate disgruntled allies and appease party dissidents. It has certainly not been Imran

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Khan's approach to get directly involved in such political manoeuvring. The responsibility had earlier been left to Jahangir Tareen and some other party leaders.

The dinner that was followed with a series of meetings with allied party leaders is seen by many as a desperate attempt on Prime Minister Imran Khan's part to salvage the situation. But there are still questions regarding how he can emerge from what can only be described as a subjective reality.

One tangible change in the prime minister, perhaps prompted by internal criticism, is his more frequent appearances in the National Assembly in the past week. That is certainly a good omen. But some of his remarks during the budget session have certainly exposed a lack of understanding of some critical national security issues.

For instance, the comment in which Osama bin Laden was described as a 'martyr' did not appear to be a slip of the tongue but something that he really believed. He has never been clear about the threat that militancy and terrorism pose to this country. One wonders what was the need for raising the OBL issue that has caused embarrassment to the country. But it is not the first time that such comments have been made by the prime minister, that risk misrepresenting Pakistan's position on critical foreign and security policy issues.

The real issue, however, is whether or not the prime minister can improve governance and deliver on his promise of change. Almost two years in power, the government is still struggling to find a direction and is lacking in several areas. Policy bungling, whether it involves sugar or petroleum, is conveniently blamed on some unidentified mafias.

'Accountability' is the new mantra for the government that uses it in order to distract attention from its own disastrous performance in practically all fields and public institutions. Unfortunately, the government is not showing itself to be capable of rational judgement. Many believe that the government's increasing dependence on the security establishment for survival has further undermined its ability to improve and correct course. Is there a feeling in the top leadership that it is indispensable to those who are perceived as having brought them to power? If so, some lessons should be drawn from Pakistan's political history that shows how the game of thrones changes in this country.

There have been many others in the past, who have suffered from a similar sense of being indispensable, but it took no time at all for them to fall from grace. They have learnt this history lesson hard. By weakening parliament and other institutions of the state, a government digs its own grave.

The establishment's extending shadow can be discerned in all dimensions of the state, and the perpetual state of confrontation among political forces gives it further space. The power balance has long been perceived as residing in Pindi and, given the worsening political confrontation, the establishment is once again emerging as an arbiter of political power in the country.

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Despite being under constant pressure because of their leaders being jailed or summoned by NAB for investigation, the opposition seems to have become more coherent and forceful in challenging the government. Its strategy now seems to encourage an in-house change through an internal party revolt.

The old minus-one formula is once again being talked about. That has not worked in the past and it's not likely to deliver this time either. It presumes extra-parliamentary intervention that would have its own political consequences. It seems that the opposition realises that mid-term elections will not provide any solution to the multiple challenges the country is facing at the moment. In fact, it will further intensify political polarisation, which this country cannot afford.

There is an urgent need for a broader political consensus on dealing with the serious health, economic and governance crises. That is only possible if the prime minister accepts the gravity of the situation. For that, he needs to cast aside dangerous delusions such as 'we are the only choice' and 'après moi, le déluge'.

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Chapter 4

JUSTICE ON TRIAL

24 Jun 2020

THE Supreme Court may have pushed back an attempt to undermine the independence of the judiciary by quashing a malicious presidential reference against a fellow judge, but the threat is still looming. Although the court has cleared Justice Qazi Faez Isa of charges of misconduct, the battle is still on. A vengeful government is not willing to take the humiliation lying down.

Justice Isa's case has exposed the fascistic methods used to intimidate an upright judge. There have been many instances in the country in the past when judges were sent home by military governments. But there is no example of a judge being falsely implicated for wrongdoing and subjected to a media trial. For sure, the presidential complaint was an attempt to tarnish Justice Isa's reputation and intimidate the judiciary.

The presidential reference had become a test for the judiciary. The case had turned into a battle between the executive and the bar. For the first time in the country's history all four high court bar associations as well as the Supreme Court Bar Council became a party in the petition against the reference.

The charge against Justice Isa that his family owned undeclared foreign properties had fallen flat after his wife's testimony. The court's short order may not have fully satisfied the bar, but the quashing of the presidential reference is indeed a triumph of the struggle for the independence of the judiciary as it is for Justice Isa.

It was hardly a coincidence that a reference was filed against Justice Isa just months after his landmark ruling in the Faizabad dharna case in February 2019. The ruling was a damning indictment of the dubious role of the security establishment's involvement in the 2017 siege. The illegal action by a radical religious group that had paralysed the capital for more than two weeks had led to the virtual collapse of civilian law enforcement.

The verdict blamed the intelligence agencies for not stopping the illegal protests. Instead, when "participants received cash handouts from men in uniform, the perception

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of their involvement gained traction". The ruling, citing the Asghar Khan case, particularly pointed to the apparent involvement of the top intelligence agency and of members of the armed forces in politics, media and illegal activities.

Predictably, the indictment evoked a strong reaction from the security establishment. The role of the intelligence agencies in political manipulation and their alleged involvement in the Islamabad siege had widely been criticised by civil society and political parties. But such a strong warning by the Supreme Court against the security establishment meddling in politics was rare.

It is not for the first time that Justice Isa had ruffled the feathers of those in power. As a member of the Supreme Court commission on the 2016 terrorist bombing in Quetta that killed dozens of lawyers, he had castigated the security agencies and the then federal home minister Chaudhry Nisar for soft-peddling on outlawed terrorist groups.

Not only the defence ministry but also the PTI and the MQM asked for a review of the court's ruling in the Faizabad case. Meanwhile, a campaign against the verdict and Justice Isa was unleashed on social media and some TV channels. It was unprecedented for a Supreme Court judge to be subjected to a vicious media trial for his ruling.

Soon, a presidential reference against the judge was filed over 'undisclosed assets'. The government's mala fide intent was obvious. President Arif Alvi's letter to the Supreme Judicial Council was intentionally leaked to the press, an action perceived as causing irreparable damage to the institution. For many observers, making the charges public was an attempt to influence public opinion against the judge.

Interestingly, the entire case against Justice Isa for his family owning properties in Britain was based on the investigation by the newly formed Asset Recovery Unit, headed by Shahzad Akbar, special assistant to the prime minister on accountability.

Shahzad Akbar, the government's hatchet man, is said to have received initial information about the foreign assets through some obscure journalist. That makes the inquiry more dubious. Moreover, it is strongly argued that the ARU is not legally authorised to conduct this kind of investigation against a Supreme Court judge. That has also led to allegation of surveillance of judges by intelligence agencies. The spying, it seems, has never been so brazen.

The move against a judge of the country's top court cannot be seen in isolation. It is true that Justice Isa has been targeted because of his uprightness; it also seems to be part of a move to bring the whole judiciary under pressure, although some observers see the judiciary as not being totally independent. It appears that the government and the establishment cannot tolerate any assertion of judicial oversight.

An orchestrated media campaign against Justice Isa has continued despite the Supreme Court verdict. Many have concluded that a major goal could be to prevent him from becoming chief justice in 2023. Such an objective could prove disastrous for the rule of law.

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The independence of the judiciary is as significant for the smooth running of the state as is the independence of the legislature and executive. The protection of rights and adherence to the rule of law in a society are only possible through the independence of the judiciary. An independent judiciary that underpins the rule of law is essential to the functioning of democracy.

Unfortunately, we now seem to be seeing increasing and worrying attempts by the government and the establishment to use their leverage to influence and instruct the judiciary and undermine judicial independence. No institution, however powerful it may be, is above the law. The warning that Justice Isa had delivered in his ruling last year regarding the interference of the security establishment in political manipulation must be heeded for the sake of political stability and for strengthening the democratic process in the country.

This country has paid a huge cost for extra-constitutional interventions. History's lessons must never be forgotten. All state institutions must strictly follow the Constitution. An independent judiciary is indeed the bedrock of democracy.

Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2020

Chapter 5

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

17 Jun 2020

SO we are back to a 'smart lockdown' after a month of mayhem that has seen a relentless rise in the number of confirmed corona virus cases in the country. There may be some signs of panic in the corridors of power with the latest projection crossing one million cases in the next few weeks, and yet there is no coherent strategy to deal with the crisis.

While the pandemic stares us in the face, the leadership continues to sow confusion with its flip-flops. There is still no sense of seriousness though the daily death toll is now over 100. Pakistan is now among the top 10 countries reporting the highest number of new daily cases of Covid-19. At this rate, the death toll could be in the thousands by the time the disease reaches its peak in mid-August.

With large numbers of medical staff down with the virus, the country's health system has already collapsed with hospitals turning away an ever-increasing number of patients. The federal government's reckless decision to reopen during the month of Ramazan, ignoring the warning by local and international health experts, has created a catastrophic situation.

While no section of society is safe from the rampaging virus, it is the poor and working classes that have been most affected by the infection. In a rare move, the World Health Organisation has urged Pakistan to return to lockdown. But the federal government has dismissed the warning saying the country could not afford a total shutdown. The prime minister continues to harp on his old anti-lockdown mantra.

Intriguingly, two days after he had rejected any move to reimpose the lockdown the National Coordination and Operation Centre (NCOC) ordered what it describes as a 'smart lockdown', sealing areas in 20 major cities and towns across the country. One wonders who made the decision.

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It seems to be a repeat of the unilateral decisions taken by the provincial governments to shut down all business, ignoring the prime minister's advice against it in March. He has repeatedly denounced the move and even tried to undermine the efforts of the Sindh government to restrict movement and congregations. He was finally able to prevail and ordered the removal of all restrictions and reopened the economy prematurely. That wiped out success in mitigating the spread of the disease during the brief lockdown.

We are now in a much worse situation than we were a month ago as provincial administrations now move to impose restrictions in major hotspots. It may not be as effective as a complete lockdown for some period of time that health experts and the WHO has been asking for. But it's still better than the free-for-all approach witnessed for the past one month.

Given Imran Khan's scepticism regarding the issue of lockdown, one is not sure how effective even the few restrictions will be. The problem is that he and his followers genuinely believe that his government's handling of the pandemic was an example for the world to emulate. Sadly, the government's chaotic policy could neither save lives nor the economy.

Such a Trumpian style of self-glorification gives little hope for rectifying mistakes. The prime minister has his own ingenious idea of fighting the disease with his 'Tiger Force'. The elusive million-strong volunteer force is yet to be seen in action though there has been a claim of its being very effective in parts of the country. Such gimmickry cannot be a substitute for a comprehensive policy to deal with a serious public health and economic crisis.

Dealing with the global pandemic has produced stories of international success as well failures. Leaders who have taken timely and tough decisions have been able to mitigate the damage and have pulled out their countries from the crisis much faster. It is nothing to do with the size, population, and wealth of a nation; it is leadership and one's capability to think clearly in times of crisis that matter.

Surely decisions are not easy to make but that is what leadership is all about. Women have proved to be tougher and more decisive leaders. Most of the success stories are of countries ruled by leaders who have been able to unite the country and mobilise the masses.

Unfortunately, our leadership has failed on all counts. Mixed messaging and downplaying the problem have confused the public. As a result, people have never taken the infection seriously. The government was completely absent when it came to the enforcement of restrictions. It is unfair now to put all the blame for the spread of the infection on the people for not observing SOPs, which have never been properly defined. No state can leave the enforcement of the law to the discretion of the general public.

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Instead of uniting the country in such challenging times, the PTI government has done everything to divide and polarise it. The selective application of anti-corruption laws has exposed the government to the allegation of a political witch-hunt. The government's so-called drive against graft is, in fact, a cover for its incompetence.

The pandemic is also being used by the PTI to cover up its failure to improve governance. The economy is in a shambles, and for the first time in 68 years, it has shown negative growth. It's convenient for the government to entirely blame the pandemic and the less than two-month-long partial lockdown for the contraction, but it is not based on facts.

There is still time for the government to salvage the situation and take the battle against the pandemic more seriously. The prime minister has to change his flawed approach and show some leadership and clarity in policy. The government has to impose a strict lockdown for at least several weeks in order to reduce the number of infected people to a small fraction of the current numbers.

Saving lives is more important; that would also help a faster revival of the economy. The prime minister must not make it a matter of ego. He needs to follow the examples of leaders with success stories to tell rather than live in a state of self-deception.

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Chapter 6

BLUNDERING INTO DISASTER

03 Jun 2020

IT was a surreal moment listening to the prime minister as he warned the nation of more corona virus deaths while removing restrictions that could contain the spread of the deadly infection. His latest words highlight the recklessness that defines the federal government's approach while dealing with an existential crisis.

With almost all restrictions on movement gone, it has now been left to the people to save themselves from the fast-spreading disease. The state has virtually abdicated its responsibility of protecting the people. The prime minister's latest remarks that he never favoured a lockdown are consistent with his original view that Covid-19 is just another form of the flu.

Not so much in a state of denial, the current leadership seems to be pursuing 'voodoo' methods. It's hard to believe that it would not have seen the alarming report on the large-scale prevalence of the disease presented by Punjab's health department almost two weeks ago, before going for an almost complete reopening.

The report had estimated that 670,800 people in Lahore alone might have been infected by the infection. "No workplace and residential area of any town is disease-free," the report based on both random and targeted testing had warned. In most communities, the infection rate is 5.18 per cent. The Lahore situation is just the tip of the iceberg. The situation may be even worse in Karachi with its much larger population.

In order to contain the further spread of the infection, the report presented to the provincial government on May 15 had asked for the imposition of a stricter lockdown for at least four weeks before Eid. Doctors and epidemiologists too have long been warning about the impending public health disaster and had desperately been calling for tougher measures.

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Instead, the government further loosened restrictions on businesses, sweeping aside all precautions. Shoppers thronging markets and traffic clogging the roads in all the big cities presented a lawless sight. The clusters thus formed created a favourable environment for the virus to spread. The Supreme Court ruling days before Eid, ordering even malls to open appeared to give further impunity to the disorder. In the absence of law enforcement, the so-called SOPs were never taken seriously.

It was not just the shopping centres; even congregational prayers in mosques were allowed and shrines were opened for visitors. One wonders what that had to do with the economy and well-being of the 'poor people' that has become a common refrain in government circles as they remove restrictions.

Given this lax behaviour, it is not surprising that there has been an astronomical rise in the number of registered coronavirus cases and the death toll since the government set aside even a pretence of lockdown. The number is likely to multiply further as the effects of a complete reopening takes time to crystallise. Going by the Punjab health department's report, the situation appears extremely alarming.

Two days before the prime minister announced a virtual lifting of the lockdown, Pakistan experienced its deadliest day (92 deaths, doctors' among them) and the highest single-day rise in Covid-19 cases at 3,039. There was no mention of that in the prime minister's speech as he once again blasted his own government's decision to impose the lockdown.

Indeed, the chaos is more pronounced with a policy based on the leadership's whims rather than prudence. Now the prime minister wants to restart tourism despite the reservations by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan governments. It seems that our leaders are making it clear that human lives and public health matter little.

Pakistan is perhaps the only country that has prematurely reopened most spheres of life when the disease is far from reaching its peak. The latest data on Covid-19 prevalence in South Asian countries released by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention belies the prime minister's claim that lockdowns have not worked in containing the pandemic.

India and Bangladesh having imposed stricter lockdowns have now a lesser percentage of cases in terms of population than in Pakistan where it has seen a rapid increase in the past two weeks. The prevalence rate in Pakistan is almost double that in India. Sri Lanka with its timely actions has flattened the curve thanks to measures taken earlier.

These countries may be in a much better position to gradually start reopening. They have more or less the same proportion of younger population as Pakistan making them relatively less vulnerable to the disease. But that has not stopped them from taking preventive measures unlike us.

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Because of the confusion in policy, we could neither contain the disease nor create conditions for the quick revival of the economy. Most amusing is the claims of some federal ministers that the entire world is now following the 'vision' of their great leader. What they don't want to understand is that the spread of the disease will not only have serious consequences for public health but also for quicker economic recovery.

The top leadership's constant refrain is that it is the poorest section of the population that gets affected by the restrictions and the closure of economy. One cannot deny that fact, but what is not being realised by our leaders is that the uncontrollable spread of the disease would have far more serious consequences for the working classes. The Punjab health department's report clearly shows that the infection is much more rampant among the lower-class neighborhoods and congested localities.

This situation could have easily been contained with timely action. Had the government been more serious about the lockdown in the first two months, things would have been much better now for people to go back to work sooner. This unregulated and premature reopening has created far more problems for the country. There is still time to review this controversial approach to the crisis before the situation gets completely out of control.

Published in Dawn, June 3rd, 2020

Chapter 7

STATE OF ANARCHY

20 May 2020

NO more lockdown or smart lockdown. It's now a free-for-all. What had already started some time ago now seems to have the sanction of the country's highest judicial authority. Even the pretence of restrictions on movement has been swept aside.

What pandemic? We are a blessed people anyway. No big deal if a few thousand people are killed by the virus; business must not be stopped.

It's unconstitutional to close down markets and commercial activities even on weekends, says the Supreme Court order. The ruling has set aside the executive orders aimed at streamlining the reopening of the economy.

It's now more than business as usual, with all constraints almost gone. With the floodgates fully opened we are witnessing a virtual breakdown of order. Encouraged by the apex court ruling, the federal government has gone further by opening all kinds of transport services including railways.

For a government that had long rejected the idea of lockdown, the order is seen as a vindication of its position. Even the mantra of 'smart lockdown' has now disappeared from the government's lexicon. No wonder, the PTI has been celebrating the court order despite the fact that many see it as infringing on the executive domain.

Ironically, the same court in March had ordered the streamlining of a national policy in order to deal with the coronavirus infection. The court instructions had resulted in the formation of the National Command and Operations Centre and the National Coordination Committee led by the prime minister with all the provincial chief ministers a part of it.

Despite differences over the approach among the stakeholders, these forums had really worked well in coordinating efforts and containing the spread of the infection. But the latest court ruling has struck down several decisions taken by the NCC.

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The court also questioned whether the coronavirus is really a pandemic in Pakistan. "There are other serious ailments prevailing in the country from which people are dying daily, and those ailments are not being catered for, and the coronavirus, which apparently is not a pandemic in Pakistan, is swallowing huge money," the court said.

The court's observation appears contrary to the WHO's declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of people have died and millions of others have been infected across the globe by this deadly disease. Countries may have adopted different approaches to dealing with a problem of biblical proportions but there has not been any denial of the contagion threatening human lives. It cannot be compared with non-infectious diseases or deaths in car accidents. Denial that the country is facing a serious public health crisis will have disastrous consequences.

Pakistan would perhaps be the only country in denial about the pandemic. That raises questions about the measures that are required to deal with this unprecedented public health challenge. How can the citizens be expected to follow the rules if they are made to believe that there is no contagion threatening their lives?

Most worrisome is that all precautions are being set aside while the registered number of coronavirus cases across the country has reached 45,000 with almost 1,000 officially recorded deaths. Pakistan is among the 20 worst Covid-19-affected nations, even if comparatively the death toll is low here.

In fact, doctors and other experts maintain that these figures don't provide an accurate picture of the seriousness of the situation. According to them, Pakistan is in phase one of the blind spot of the epidemic curve, where there is a huge discrepancy between diagnosed cases/reported fatalities and the reality.

"This is due to a combination of the fast-spreading, silent nature of the virus [through carriers] and defective diagnostic tools, leading to massive underestimation of active cases as well as misdiagnosed fatalities," they maintain. "This is because the authorities have lost the ability to trace cases, which is a sign of transition to phase two."

There are several examples of countries that have seen an explosion in their coronavirus death toll; they had not taken the pandemic seriously in the initial stages. With hundreds of doctors and paramedics affected by the infection, the country's fragile health system is already under pressure. The number of cases is bound to climb exponentially with unregulated reopening of daily life.

It is indeed an alarming situation compounded by the doubts being raised about the fast-spreading nature of the infection. One shudders to think what could happen over the next few weeks with crowded and congested marketplaces and social-distancing measures being flaunted without a care.

Seemingly encouraged by the Supreme Court order, the clerics are also set to defy the rules and are saying they will open mosques for prayers. Although the federal and

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some provincial governments had already relaxed restrictions during Ramazan, the Sindh government had continued the ban on congregational prayers under lockdown.

A statement signed by a group of leading clerics said that since nothing was sure about the coronavirus pandemic, Muslims couldn't leave religious rituals out of fear. Last week, thousands of people joined religious processions taken out in various parts of the country in defiance of the ban.

Interestingly, the federal government has not only been actively backing the clerics threatening to defy the ban on congregational prayers, but also inciting traders to violate the restrictions imposed by the Sindh government. Now some are calling for imposition of governor's rule in the province. When the country needs unity more than at any other time, the ruling party is doing everything to intensify political polarisation in the country.

It is apparent that the federal leadership lacks seriousness and is not able to effectively deal with the existential crisis. It has unnecessarily created a controversy by putting the economy before public health. The issue is of balancing the two. The latest court order and the federal government's misplaced views have pushed the country into a state of anarchy in times of pandemic.

Published in Dawn, May 20th, 2020

Chapter 8

A DANGEROUS GAMBLE

13 May 2020

THE sight of the multitudes thronging marketplaces and the stream of traffic choking the roads while the curve of Covid-10 cases continues to rise is frightening. Yet this was predictable. With the relaxation of restrictions, there is not even a pretence of social-distancing. The administration seems to have abdicated its responsibility as the situation spirals out of control.

Pakistan is rapidly climbing up the ladder of the countries most affected by the virus. It is now 19th on the list, jumping five places in a matter of days. The death toll has also been mounting and is far from reaching its peak. But a federal minister has callously dismissed the virus fatalities claiming that more "people are killed in road accidents in the country every day".

This reasoning echoes President Trump's argument for lifting the lockdown, ie traffic wouldn't stop because of road accidents. He is not the only one among the leaders who sounds like the US president in dismissing the effects of the deadly virus. Pakistan is perhaps among the very few countries that have reopened business while the Covid-19 graph is still on the rise. While the prime minister is never tired of giving examples of other countries reopening, he has failed to understand that these states began to do so only after the number of patients declined substantially. These countries have also enforced strict rules under which businesses have to operate. In contrast, we are in a hurry to relax the restrictions despite the surge in cases.

We haven't heard of anyone dying of hunger as yet, but hundreds have already been killed by the pandemic in this country. With people gathering in bazaars and congregations at mosques sweeping aside all rules of social-distancing and precautions, there is complete chaos. Law and order has broken down in parts of the country, with the leadership in complete denial about the seriousness of the situation.

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Many experts have warned that a public health disaster is waiting to happen. So what is going to happen to the economy in such a situation? Has the leadership thought about the consequences while abruptly reopening business? It is evident that the federal leadership has never been convinced about the need to shut down in order to contain the spread of the virus.

The prime minister has been at the forefront of the campaign against the lockdown, undermining the entire effort. The half-hearted action has not only failed to deliver the desired result but also harmed prospects of an early revival of the economy. What the federal leadership has not understood is that bringing the coronavirus under control would also help the economy recover more rapidly.

Had the lockdown been strictly enforced over the past two months, the situation would have been much better by now. We may not have flattened the curve but the spread of the virus could have been contained enough for a weak public health system not to be overwhelmed. The rising number of doctors and health workers being affected by the virus is also worrisome.

Bringing the infection rate down would have been easier had timely action been taken while the rate was still low, rather than remaining in a state of denial. It's evident that even places with severe outbreaks can bring their numbers down if they take measures in time.

Before getting to the second stage of relaxing the lockdown, it was imperative to first maintain a rigorous regime of social-distancing for however long it took to reduce new infections. It is equally important to significantly raise the number of tests and quickly spot new cases.

Sure our testing capacity has improved significantly over the period, but it is not enough. Reports suggest that the number of tests in some provinces has deliberately been kept low in an attempt to suppress the actual figure. Transparency is extremely important if we want to successfully combat the disease. Indeed, it's hard to predict things in a pandemic as one is still not sure of the exact nature of the disease.

Most worrisome are reports that the leadership's policy on the coronavirus is influenced by the concept of 'herd immunity'. This epidemiological notion that describes the state where a population is sufficiently immune to an infection is extremely dangerous. Some countries that had earlier shaped policies based on the idea have now changed their approach after a disastrous outcome. But our leadership is still sticking to the theory at the cost of human lives. Why is a rejected strategy that carries the risk of high mortality numbers being touted as the solution for poor countries with a young population like Pakistan?

For a while it seemed as if the federal government was willing to take Covid-19 seriously. Notwithstanding the top leadership's sending confused and mixed messages, there had been some coordination among all stakeholders lately that had helped the

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country deal with the challenges arising from one of the worst crisis Pakistan has ever faced. But the attitude of the federal leadership is extremely divisive and has seriously affected all efforts to fight the deadly pandemic.

The worsening tension between the centre and the Sindh government is extremely worrisome. It has now gone beyond a war of words between the two sides. The fracas has become extremely ugly with both sides engaged in a blame game. The situation can almost be compared to a civil war in the midst of an invasion. The spectacle at the latest session of the National Assembly where politicians hurled abuse at each other rather than focusing on a policy to fight the pandemic is the last thing the nation expected from its elected leaders in these testing times.

What we are witnessing today is political anarchy and policy disarray threatening the country. How can people be expected to follow the rules when the leadership itself encourages lawlessness?

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Chapter 9

WHOSE POLICY IS IT ANYWAY?

06 May 2020

LAST week, the spectacle of the prime minister blaming an unidentified 'elite' for imposing a lockdown was bewildering. By doing so, not only was he disowning the actions taken by his own government but also contradicting his earlier statements. That leaves us wondering if there is anyone in charge in these times of an existential crisis. The confusion is alarming.

The remarks amplify the disarray in the federal government's policy on fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. Clearly, the country's top leadership sees the lockdown in the light of a 'cowardly' action that has only brought misery to the common people. Such scepticism over the shutdown may not be new, but irresponsible public statements make it harder for the administration to contain the spread of the disease.

Nothing could be more bizarre than the sight of federal ministers encouraging people to break the restrictions imposed by the Sindh government and that were among the decisions taken by the National Coordination Committee on Covid-19. Interestingly, the committee, which is chaired by the prime minister, had extended the nationwide lockdown until May 9.

Then there is also the National Command and Operations Centre comprising senior civil and military officials coordinating the strategy. So do these government bodies represent the 'elite' that has been blamed for its 'anti-people action'? Ironically, the leadership is acting more like the opposition.

By blaming some imaginary force for a policy that has the approval of all stakeholders, the prime minister can only undermine his own authority, for many people will see it as an admission of things slipping out of his control. It's true that the prime

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minister has never been convinced about the necessity for a lockdown. But his recent remarks were disturbing.

In fact, the federal leadership was caught by surprise when Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhawa followed Sindh in enforcing a lockdown in the provinces in mid-March. The provinces have also called in the army in aid of civil authority. The announcement had come despite the prime minister's public disapproval of a shutdown.

He had said that the Constitution allowed the provinces to take their own decisions regarding the lockdown, but later also appeared to take credit for containing the spread of infection. This contradictory stance from the nation's top executive authority had added to the confusion in policy. Consequently, the lockdown was never fully enforced. Arguably, the half-hearted action has caused greater damage.

While business was closed down, the restriction on movement remained tentative. So the main objective of the lockdown to contain the disease was not fully served. Even before putting a mechanism in place, the federal government has started relaxing the restrictions on business and certain industries.

There is no smartness in the government's oft-repeated claim of moving towards a 'smart lockdown'. It is as chaotic as was the earlier so-called lockdown. Markets are open and some industries are back at work with precautions having been swept aside. With the ongoing battle between the federal government and Sindh, there is not even a semblance of a national strategy in fighting one of the worst crises this country has faced.

The leadership's whimsical approach is the biggest impediment in the way of formulating a more rational and holistic strategy that is required to deal with public health and economic challenges simultaneously. In fact, those in charge have never seriously considered the crisis primarily as a public health issue.

What has not been understood is that the economy cannot be restored without containing the infection. That is the reason why almost all countries facing the pandemic have given priority to public health rather than the economy. Many of them have started opening their economies incrementally after the infection reached its peak and the curve began to decline.

While the lockdown is often blamed for causing economic hardship, there is seldom any talk at the federal level about the adverse impact of the disease. It is true that the shutdown has caused massive losses to the economy and has worsened the plight of the masses. But the unchecked spread of the deadly virus could wreak much greater havoc, as has been witnessed in many parts of the world. It is evident that countries which took timely action and enforced strict restrictions on movement have been able to contain the effects of the pandemic and have come out of the crisis faster.

Our muddled policy may cause greater damage. The failure to enforce strict restrictions on social distancing and congregations may lead to a greater public health and economic disaster. The government has also warned of reimposing the lockdown if the

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spread of infection worsens, but it would have been more prudent to take strict measures in the first place rather than risk a resurgence.

What we are witnessing now is the abrupt and unplanned opening of all kinds of businesses. The spectacle of people thronging the markets is alarming. It's all happening as the number of coronavirus cases in the country has crossed the 20,000 mark. The death toll has shot up. According to the government's own estimates, the pandemic will hit its peak in the next two weeks.

Most worrisome is the fact that a large number of Pakistani expatriates brought back especially from the Gulf countries have been diagnosed with Covid-19. The situation could worsen with the unravelling of the restrictions in many parts of the country. The theory that Pakistan with its large youth population and warmer climate may not be as badly hit as other countries has yet to be substantiated. Trivialising the danger could be disastrous. In the absence of credible data, all projections are questionable.

In the midst of the pandemic, the leadership's remarks do not help boost public confidence in its ability to lead the nation out of the crisis. Instead of uniting the country to deal with the challenge, the federal government's policy has widened divisions. It's for the prime minister to show statesmanship and refrain from any move that could cause confusion.

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Chapter 10

POLITICS OF FAITH

29 Apr 2020

MOST Muslim countries have stopped congregations at mosques, and even Islam's holiest places are shut in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Not so in Pakistan. It is not just about the power of the pulpit; it's more to do with the culpability of an inadequate leadership unable to take charge.

For the leadership, matters of faith appear to take priority over the lives of the believers. Last week, doctors called on the government and clerics to reverse a decision to allow prayers at the mosques during Ramazan out of concern that large gatherings would lead to an explosion of coronavirus cases. But the pleading of the doctors on the front line of the battle against the pandemic has gone unheeded.

Rationalising the decision, the prime minister said that people could not be stopped from going to mosques in a free country. Many would argue that this argument has little to do with religious freedom. The restrictions on congregations in other countries have been imposed in order to save human lives that are more important than anything else. The government has simply given in to the demands of some vested clerical interests.

The so-called 20-point accord with a group of clerics laying out conditions for mosques to observe during prayers is nonsensical. Most of the rules such as maintaining a gap of six feet between worshippers and barring those over 50 years of age from joining in the prayers at the mosque are very difficult to implement.

A survey conducted by an NGO has shown that more than 80 per cent of mosques in Punjab and the federal capital flouted the rules for the first taraweeh prayers. Mosques continue to be crowded and many worshippers are not even seen to be using the mand-atory facemasks. As per the agreement those mos-ques failing to fulfil the specified conditions would be closed. One knows well that it could never happen.

Unsurprisingly, there has been complete silence from the administration over the report on this defiance. A TV report showed the president visiting Faisal Mosque in

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Islamabad; he was reportedly happy to see that rules were being observed. But he seems to have ignored reports about other mosques defying the agreement.

It is evident that congregations have been one of the biggest sources of the spread of the coronavirus in the country. A large number of initial cases were among the pilgrims returning from Iran and participants of the annual gathering of the Tableeghi Jam-aat in March this year. Tens of thousands attended the congregation in Raiwind despite the outbreak.

Instead of showing responsible behaviour, Maulana Tariq Jameel, who is associated with the missionary group, blamed the media and women for the pandemic. His misogynistic comments at a fund-raising event with the prime minister in attendance have provoked a strong backlash. His influence over the political leadership in power and other power centres is well known.

Indeed, most clerics acknowledge the hazards of cramped mosques in Ramazan. That may also be the reason why many clerics who have been at the forefront of the campaign themselves are not going to mosques and prefer to pray at home with their close family members. While keeping themselves away from the crowd, they are least bothered for the safety of others.

They conveniently reject the example of Saudi Arabia and Iran closing mosques for communal prayers when it clashes with their vested interests, and say that this does not apply to Pakistan's situation. It's hard to find any logic in this argument. Some reports suggest that besides a show of power, there are possibly financial interests that could also have been a reason behind their pressure to keep mosques open during the holy month. This is the month when maximum donations are collected. The flow of funds is critical to keeping their establishments running.

Signs of the approaching catastrophe are palpable with the exponential rise in the numbers of victims in the last one week, following the government's decision to prematurely relax the restrictions. In fact, there is little semblance of even a partial lockdown at the moment and the breakdown of social distancing is apparent. The government's mixed messages have compounded the confusion in policy.

The centre's contradictory statements undermine the efforts being made by the provincial governments and the Command & Control Centre established to coordinate efforts. Consequently, the number of coronavirus cases has risen at an alarming rate, and according to WHO, could go up to more than 200,000 in the next few months.

An extremely fragile healthcare system unable to deal with the load could collapse completely. More worrisome is the fact that given inadequate safety measures, an increasing number of doctors are falling victim to the infection thus exacerbating the crisis. At least three doctors have died so far of the virus and a large number have contracted the infection. Despite their vulnerability, the medical community has not turned its back on its responsibilities.

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Yet some of those who advise the prime minister have dismissed the warning as a false alarm and even accused the doctors of playing politics. That shows their callous attitude towards the threat of the spread of the infection. Notwithstanding the prime minister's muddled approach, most Pakistanis support the demand of the medical community for the strict enforcement of the lockdown at least till the curve of the disease starts declining.

A recent survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan shows that most people acknowledge that the coronavirus is a serious threat to themselves and their families. For that reason, some 68pc support enforcement of a complete lockdown in the country.

Undoubtedly, a shutdown even for a shorter period has serious economic consequences, pushing more people into poverty. But it is always better to take hard decisions for long-term gains. The next few weeks are going to be extremely critical and one can only hope that the worst is over soon.

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Chapter 11

PANDEMIC'S ECONOMIC IMPACT

16 Apr 2020

IT is still too early to fully evaluate the economic, social and political impact of the pandemic that has already exacted thousands of lives across the globe and paralysed the world economy. As one commentator put it, the "coronavirus has turned the global market into the global hospital". It threatens every single human being beyond national boundaries.

Notwithstanding some early warnings even the most developed countries were caught unprepared to deal with an epidemic of biblical proportions. These countries have become the hub of the pandemic and there are already signs of them falling into economic recession thus affecting the existing world order.

Yet it will be the developing countries that will be the most affected by the catastrophe. Constituting one-fourth of the total world population, South Asia is most vulnerable to the outcome of the pandemic. Although the number of cases in the region is still relatively low compared to other parts of the world, the spread of the deadly virus could be much more devastating given the extremely poor health infrastructure and fragile economy.

A new World Bank report presents an alarming economic outlook for the region in the midst of a crisis that could result in the worst economic performance of the last 40 years. According to the report, regional growth could fall to anywhere between 1.8pc and 2.8pc in 2020, down from 6.3pc projected six months ago. In the worst-case scenario, the whole region can experience a contraction in its GDP.

With large numbers of the population living in poverty, the crisis will have serious social and political consequences for South Asia. What makes the situation more dangerous is that the region remains at risk for increasing violence and there seems to be

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no sign of tensions easing despite the spread of the epidemic. The escalation in clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces along the LoC and the continuing killings in Afghanistan despite a peace agreement between the US and the Afghan Taliban are not likely to subside soon.

With its economy already struggling, Pakistan is likely to be hardest hit as it struggles to simultaneously save lives and livelihoods. Along with Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, Pakistan is in danger of experiencing a negative economic growth rate. With the population growing at 1.8pc a year, the prospects are dismal. The population explosion that has never been on the radars of our policymakers has also been a major reason for our deteriorating health situation. The current crisis has exposed all these fault lines.

Another serious problem adding to the country's woes are the shrinking job opportunities in the oil-producing Arab and Gulf countries that are the biggest source of employment for Pakistani expatriate workers. This will not only add to the rising unemployment problem but will also affect remittances. The development will have serious social and economic implications.

For a country facing a massive debt burden — both domestic and external — it is an extremely serious situation as the Pakistani government is now compelled to divert its resources to fighting the pandemic. It is certainly the right approach to provide monetary help to the poorest sections of the population worst hit by the economic shutdown. But given Pakistan's limited financial resources the effort will not be enough to meet the enormous challenges.

As the World Bank report has pointed out, sharp economic recession along with skyrocketing fiscal deficit will have serious implications. Pakistan's total debt and liabilities stand at about Rs41 trillion, which is almost 94pc of the country's GDP. The external debt situation is particularly problematic.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has called upon the world's richer countries to write off the debts of Pakistan and other poor countries, which are most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. Surely, debt write-offs or even debt rescheduling would help the underdeveloped countries cope with the crisis.

The prime minister is not the only leader urging the richer countries to share the burden of the economically most vulnerable nations, particularly those burdened by heavy debt. The UN secretary general in a statement has called for creating the conditions and mobilising the resources necessary to ensuring that developing countries have equal opportunities in their response to this crisis. António Guterres has said that trillions of dollars would be necessary to not only strengthen economies but also ensure basic food supplies for developing countries. But there is no indication as yet of the richer countries — themselves struggling to cope with the spreading pandemic and its fallout on their economies — responding to the appeal.

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One has to wait to see whether we get the debt relief, but at the moment, the country needs to focus fully on its efforts to contain the spread of the deadly infection that also has disastrous implications for the people's livelihoods. It requires a strong national narrative and a clear strategy to meet the multiple challenges the country is facing. The mixed messages from the leadership often fail the efforts that have so far been made to fight the virus.

The government has now decided to relax the lockdown by allowing some industries and businesses to reopen. The prime minister says the decision has been taken in view of the lower number of cases than had been projected earlier. It may be true, but there is still no sign of the crisis having been contained.

The decision taken to save the economy and livelihoods is indeed a risky one. There may be some differences in the approach, but there seems to be an agreement on the phased lifting of the restrictions. Pakistan is probably the first country in the region to do so. One can only hope that the revival of the economy will not undermine the efforts to save lives.

More importantly, the battle against the coronavirus pandemic needs a global response. As the UN secretary general said: "We are only as strong as the weakest health system in our interconnected world."

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Chapter 12

A DIVISIVE MOVE

08 Apr 2020

SAVE lives or save livelihoods? The debate rages on as the world fights the deadly Covid-19 infection. Countries are struggling to strike the right balance as they confront the coronavirus outbreak. While the rising number of cases has increased pressure on public health systems across the world, the economic costs of shutdowns have also been colossal.

Indeed, the worsening unemployment situation presents the biggest challenge for governments everywhere. The problem is much more serious in poorer nations such as Pakistan. But still the choice between the economy and public health should be clear: saving lives takes precedence over anything else. Shutdowns and other restrictions on movement may have had serious economic implications, but that is the only way to end the pandemic.

Allowing the infection to spread in order to save the economy would wreak a far greater disaster that would be hard to deal with. The government's decision to relax restrictions and allow some industries, including construction projects, to operate raises questions about the implications for public health.

While it may help reduce unemployment and revive the economy, there is also a huge danger of workers being exposed to the infection. It is much more risky as there is no sign of the curve flattening anytime soon. The number of confirmed coronavirus cases has risen exponentially over the past few days. And according to the government's own estimate, the count could go up to 50,000 in the next two weeks — more than a tenfold increase in the number of infected persons.

In this situation, the decision to relax the restrictions and reopen some industries could defeat the efforts made so far to contain the disease. One can understand the massive pressure on the government to address the growing problem of unemployment. But the premature move could also exacerbate the crisis and increase the pressure on

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healthcare resources. The cost of the uncontrollable spread of the deadly virus would be much higher. Is the government prepared to deal with a catastrophe on this scale?

After its initial state of denial, the federal government seems to have shown greater resolve in fighting the infection in recent days. There has certainly been better coordination between the centre and the provincial administrations. The setting up of a command and control centre to tackle the coronavirus has given some coherence to the campaign. The country now seems much better prepared to meet the coronavirus challenge. Yet, there are still some shortcomings, given our capacity and resources.

For example, there has been some serious problems regarding the full implementation of lockdown orders. One of the main reasons for the lapses in this area has been attributed to the confused statements from Prime Minister Imran Khan himself. He had initially dismissed the threat by equating the infection with the 'ordinary flu' saying that only the elderly and those with prior medical complications were at risk from its effects.

Although his tenor now seems to have changed, apparently after being briefed by experts about the gravity of the situation, his views are still not clear. It seems that it is very hard for the top leadership to accept the seriousness of the situation, as it is not fully convinced about the tough measures required to deal with one of the most serious crises the country has ever faced. The prime minister still sees it as more of an economic issue than one of public health. The government's latest decision to reopen some industries is a case in point.

However, one must appreciate the federal government's financial aid plan for the poorest sections of society through the Ehsaas programme. That will benefit some 12 million people who desperately need support to survive in these hard times. Some other measures announced by the government may also help lessen the hardship faced by the poor. Given the limited resources available, the subsidies given by the government are quite significant.

A major challenge for the government, as has been repeatedly pointed by the prime minister, is to supply ration to the people, particularly daily-wage workers, who have been worst affected by the lockdown. Most of them, now unemployed, would not even be able to receive money through the Ehsaas programme. There is certainly a need to develop some kind of mechanism to reach them.

But the prime minister's move to organise a 'Corona Relief Tiger Force' has raised questions. The 'force' comprising young volunteers is supposed to help identify those needing help and supply them with ration. The volunteers are also supposed to develop awareness among the people about the infection and safety measures.

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Some half a million youth have reportedly applied for registration — a massive response indeed. It all sounds earnest. But it is not as simple as it appears to be. Surely volunteers are needed to help the administration and other government organisations involved in the campaign. It happens all over the world. In the past, we have seen how men and women came out to help in times of calamity whether it was the 2005 Kashmir earthquake or the devastating floods in the following years.

Yet there had not been any effort from past governments to formally organise them as a 'force'. The whole purpose of volunteer work is defeated when an attempt is made to turn such an effort into a political tool. The very fact that a 'Tiger Force' is said to be working under the Prime Minister's Office belies the claim of it being a politically nonpartisan welfare movement.

Such an officially controlled 'volunteer force' is likely to add to the confusion. There is fear of it becoming a parallel setup creating problems for local administrations. So what will happen if, emulating the prime minister's initiative, the Sindh government decided to organise its own 'People's Force'?

Imran Khan's idea to turn volunteers into a government-sponsored force is quite alarming. It is a politically divisive move that the nation does not need in these testing times. Let the volunteers do their work independently of the government as we have seen in the past.

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Chapter 13

A CHANGED WORLD

01 Apr 2020

A GLOBAL war is being waged against a pandemic that may change the world. Thousands of people have already perished across the continents and the numbers are multiplying by the hour. There is hardly any country — from the most developed to the poorest — that has been spared.

It's the biggest catastrophe in recent times and its full impact is yet to be felt. The coronavirus has devastated, among others, the world's mightiest economic and military powers that have now become the epicentre of the contagion. According to official estimates, the death toll in the US alone could reach anywhere between 100,000 and 200,000. The situation in the eurozone is not very different.

A leaked British government report, published by the Financial Times, had even outlined an extreme scenario which sees up to 80 per cent of the UK public being infected, leading to 500,000 deaths. The exponential rise in the death toll in Italy, Spain and France demonstrate the fierceness of the calamity. The same report has quoted a Harvard professor predicting that between 40pc and 70pc of people worldwide would likely be infected in the coming year.

For poorer countries like Pakistan, the statistic has become irrelevant given the abysmal public health services and lack of capacity to deal with the enormity of the challenge. The economic and social cost of the pandemic for less developed countries is incalculable. Many of them may fall further into poverty. Merely containing the virus may not be the end of the problem.

While the present wave of infection has still not peaked, another wave remains a real possibility that reinforces the view that it is going to be a long battle. The only known approach to effectively addressing the disease is social distancing and there is always a very short window where the measure could help contain the virus. Many countries have paid a huge price for missing that short window.

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While the number of reported cases in Pakistan may still be comparatively low, a greater disaster is waiting to happen. Many experts believe that we have already missed that short window because of our delayed actions and the prime minister's voodoo approach. Imran Khan's recent address to the nation amplified the crisis of leadership in the country in times of one of the most serious crises the country has ever confronted.

He has continued with his anti-lockdown narrative, aggravating the policy confusion. That is the last thing the country needs at this moment. What is not being understood is that it is primarily a public health crisis and must be addressed on a priority basis. It cannot be dealt with unless social distancing is strictly implemented, however high the economic cost may be.

Nothing could be a greater disaster for the economy and the poorest segments of society than the uncontrollable spread of the disease. The signs are already there with the rising number of locally transmitted cases. It is not surprising that a major source of the local spread of infection can be traced to a group that had recently gathered at Raiwind for the tableeghi ijtima. What is more worrisome is that no one talks about it. It has contributed to the spread of infection beyond our boundaries, with two cases of the disease in the Gaza Strip being traced to the same congregation.

It may take years or even a generation for the world to recover from its aftermath. The crisis has amplified existing challenges and vulnerabilities that require a global response. A major lesson is that the threat to human security caused by such epidemics is beyond geographical and national boundaries.

It must change the whole concept of national security. It is not military power that saves nations from catastrophes that take a far greater toll in terms of human life than do the world's battlefields. In its severity, the crisis caused by the coronavirus could be compared with the effects of the Second World War.

Further along the disease trajectory, the economic costs are much higher. According to some estimates, the global GDP could shrink by almost 2pc as a result of the pandemic. The situation looks much bleaker as it is nearly impossible to have a clear idea of the shape of things to come given the multiple dimensions of the crisis.

It remains to be seen how a public health emergency, combined with global recession, can change politics around the world. While world leaders grapple with ways to deal with the coronavirus pandemic and its fallout, the crisis certainly seems to have slowed down international and regional conflicts for now at least. Epidemics of such huge dimensions have in the past often changed the course of history, as have other catastrophes like the two world wars.

The devastating effect of the coronavirus should serve as a wake-up call for the world, which must now concentrate on human development rather than building its military might. While ignoring public health, climate, environmental and other social

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issues, countries have been spending most of their money on weapons and boosting defence capabilities.

According to a report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the total world military expenditure had risen to $1,822 billion in 2018, representing an increase of 2.6pc from the previous year. While the US is obviously the biggest spender, there are other countries too that have spiked their defence budgets, fuelling regional tensions. For them, public health has remained a low priority.

But the corona virus has exposed the vulnerability of even militarily powerful countries. For example, with all its resources, the US is finding it hard to contain the infection. The world's mightiest military power appears helpless in the face of the virus attack. This battle, which may take a much larger human toll, can only be fought successfully through greater international cooperation.

It is also the time for Pakistan to reset its priorities. To be truly secure, it needs not only to strengthen its economic, food and environmental security but also to invest more in public health. Being a nuclear country and congratulating itself on being the sixth largest military force cannot help it fight this public health battle.

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Chapter 14

HARD TIMES AHEAD

25 Mar 2020

THE country is now effectively in a state of lockdown as the battle against the coronavirus outbreak enters a critical phase. A curfew appears imminent in parts of the country, given the exponential rise in the number of cases. The military has been deployed in aid of the civilian administration to maintain law and order. But flattening the curve of the infection requires a much greater effort and more resources.

Containing the global pandemic at home is undoubtedly one of the most serious challenges this country has ever confronted. It is not just about winning this battle, but also what lies in the aftermath. The economic and social impact of the outbreak is huge for a country that has been lurching from one crisis to another.

The fight against the pandemic has also exposed the various fault lines. A broken healthcare system is now being tested for a crisis beyond its capacity. Despite the warning, we have been caught unprepared. It was either a state of deniability or false hope that the virus would die in the hot weather that prevented timely action.

Initially brought from outside, the virus has now spread to communities largely because of our failure to take timely measures to contain its spread. Then there is the lack of awareness and certain social practices that have led to a spike in the number of cases. Religious congregations continued, despite the warnings. Such gatherings are the biggest source of spread of the infection.

Given our limited resources, not every infected individual can be tested and thus unknowingly transmits the virus to members of his or her family and community. The number of cases being reported is just the tip of the iceberg. Not surprisingly, the number of cases is multiplying each day.

Surely one must not get panicky, but it is always good to have a clear picture in order to handle the situation better. It is going to be a long battle and one expects the government to be prepared for that and not remain in a state of denial.

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There is some degree of coherence in the federal government's strategy to deal with the problem now, but it is still not enough, given the enormity of the crisis. The lack of coordination between the federal and provincial government is pronounced and can worsen the situation. The reasons for this are political and are also linked to the existing confusion over the distribution of power. But the issue could have easily been resolved had there been a show of greater political maturity on the part of Prime Minister Imran Khan. So far, a failure of leadership has been evident in this crisis.

When a crisis arises, the first thing that people do is look towards their leader — but the response in this case has been lacking. This situation is not very reassuring in such testing times. An impromptu address to the nation on Sunday left a large section of the people confused as the idea of a lockdown to stop the spread of the virus was criticised. It appeared that this criticism was directed at the Sindh government that had already announced closing down the province.

The provincial administration took this measure after a spike in the number of victims of the virus. Sindh has the highest number of confirmed cases and there were clear danger signs that the situation would spiral out of control if restrictions on the movement of people were not enforced. But it seems that the prime minister did not recognise the emergency situation prevailing in the country's second most populated province, leading observers to note that this was because Sindh was being ruled by his opponents.

The prime minister declared that he would not impose restrictions that carried huge economic costs, particularly for the poor. But many refused to buy his argument that if Pakistan had the kind of resources which Italy, France, the US or UK had, he would fully lock down the country.

Interestingly, hours later the Punjab government, led by the prime minister's party, announced its decision to enforce a partial lockdown. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan have done the same and now much of the country has practically shut down. Who then took the lockdown decision?

That makes one wonder what the prime minister's ire was all about. Would it not have been better had a meeting of the Council of Common Interests been called to evolve a common strategy and a national narrative to fight a battle that represents the biggest threat to national security?

No battle can be won without uniting the nation and taking all stakeholders on board. One must say that both the PPP and PML-N have shown political maturity by offering the government their full cooperation. An acknowledgement from the prime minister is still awaited.

It is generally the ruling party that takes the initiative in seeking the opposition's support on national issues, but not in the PTI's case. The prime minister should have learnt some lessons from the Sindh chief minister who took all opposition parties on

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board while announcing the decision to impose the lockdown. Interestingly, the PTI, which is the main opposition party in Sindh, was also included in the deliberations. That helped in the implementation of the restriction more effectively.

This is, perhaps, the worst crisis that the country has faced. While measures like lockdowns are indeed essential to contain the infection, they come at a huge economic cost. The suspension of almost all economic activities and the transport system will have serious economic consequence.

It will affect not only the poorer sections of the population, but also the middle classes, putting greater strain on an already troubled financial situation. The resultant unemployment and displacement could have serious social implications.

Indeed, the federal government has announced a financial support package to minimise the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown, but we must be prepared for more hardship. That makes it imperative for the prime minister to create a national consensus. It is the handling of a crisis that makes or breaks a leader.

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Chapter 15

CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

18 Mar 2020

THE crisis of leadership in the country has once again been exposed — this time on account of the coronavirus pandemic. More needs to be done to reassure the nation in times of crises than just tweeting messages of comfort and calling for prayers. The decision to hold cabinet meetings through video link only serves to trivialise an extremely serious situation that requires a far more prudent approach.

The captain has yet again failed the leadership-in-a-crisis test. Instead of leading from the front, the prime minister has so far taken a back seat as the country faces one of its worst crises in recent years. One is not sure whether it is incompetence or apathy or a combination of both.

Most countries facing a similar situation have their leaders directly dealing with the problem, but this has not been the case here. Now we are told that he is personally monitoring the situation and getting daily briefings on it. Last night, he finally addressed the nation. In a recent interview to the Associated Press the prime minister said that he spends most of his time consulting experts on how to deal with the coronavirus. But is it enough? Has even a meeting of all provincial chief ministers, who are left to deal with the situation on their own, been called?

Primarily, it is the responsibility of the federal government to take the lead and formulate a national response to the crisis. Despite the sharp increase in the number of cases, there is still no effective coordination between the federal and provincial governments. Surely, this has contributed to the failure to contain the problem. Nothing could be more pitiable at this stage than the lack of consensus between the federal and provincial governments over the severity of the crisis. Even the figures are disputed.

Despite the fact that the warning signs were there for a long time, the federal government responded very slowly. It was only last week that the National Security Council finally met to discuss the crisis. And still there is no coherent policy to deal with

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the enormous challenges that lie ahead. It is not just about stopping the spread of the virus, but also the long-term economic and social impact of the crisis, one that has global dimensions.

In an interview with AP, the prime minister said the country did not have the capacity and resources to deal with the situation if the coronavirus becomes uncontrollable. He may be right; but then there is an even greater need to stop the spread of the virus before it is too late. Dealing with the coronavirus must be the main priority of the state at this point and resources must be diverted to deal with the pandemic.

The first coronavirus case in Pakistan was detected a month ago and now the number of cases is in the hundreds. But the federal government lived in a state of denial. There was no sense of urgency until some days ago when WHO declared a pandemic. It took time to close our borders and flights coming from areas most affected by the virus.

Most of the cases so far are among pilgrims and other travellers returning from Iran and other countries. Initially, the pilgrims from Iran were kept under observation at the Taftan border crossing in Balochistan. Their number was in the thousands but there were not enough resources available for the provincial government to test all.

A large number of those who were allowed to leave the Taftan border camps later tested positive for the coronavirus. One must give credit to the Sindh government for setting up facilities where the returnees were isolated and tested for the virus. Testing is perhaps the reason why Sindh has confirmed the highest number of cases so far. The spread of the virus could have been contained had there been better coordination between the federal and provincial governments. The federal government failed to provide any help despite calls from the provincial government.

There were no proper facilities provided by the federal agencies at major airports to screen passengers flying back home from affected areas until recently. It is commendable that the Sindh provincial health department made more effective arrangements at the airport in Karachi.

It took a while for Punjab and KP, both led by the PTI, to wake up to the crisis. Punjab declared a health emergency only last week. It is quite surprising that the number of cases in the province has remained low, though that is changing as the results of the tests carried out on pilgrims returning from Iran show that several may have the infection. The situation in KP is not very different.

Understating the numbers and downplaying the severity of the pandemic is not going to help. It is true that there is no need to push the panic button, but apathy is more dangerous. Transparency and reporting the facts helps in dealing with the challenge more effectively.

It is understandable that with limited facilities for screening available in the country it is not easy to get a clear picture, but there is no point in understating the facts before us.

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This is a global problem and needs a holistic approach. Despite the severity of the crisis, the government has not taken all the measures required to contain the spread of the virus.

A large number of Muslim countries have banned religious congregations and collective prayers in order to save the population from the virus, but we are still hesitant to enforce the restrictions. Giving in to pressure, the Punjab government has assured the clerics that mosques will not be closed.

In order to deal with the enormous challenges, the government needs to take all stakeholders on board and make some tough decisions. The government must declare a state of emergency and also mobilise the armed forces. More importantly, the prime minister needs to show statesmanship in this time of national crisis and take all political forces along with him. A national crisis requires a collective response. Will the prime minister transcend political differences and provide leadership at this critical time?

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Chapter 16

HOSTAGE TO BIGOTS

04 Mar 2020

PEOPLE want to live in a society where they enjoy freedom of thought and action and can exercise their right to speak out. Unfortunately, there is now an attempt to roll back these fundamental rights. We are witnessing an alarming rise of bigotry in society that is undermining democratic values. The strengthening of religious extremism not only weakens democratic institutions but also divides the country. One such example is the recent suspension of the release of an international award-winning Pakistani film under the pressure of a radical cleric.

The government's retraction of the permission to screen Zindagi Tamasha gave certain religious elements a greater sense of empowerment. The move was yet another blow to the already shrinking freedom of expression. The assertion of authority by religious extremist groups is also manifested in the attempt by a radical cleric to seize control of Islamabad's Lal Masjid. It brings back memories of the 2007 incident that led to the bloody military operation. The policy of appeasement shows that the government has not learnt any lesson from the past. It is yet another reminder that the state is being held hostage by bigots.

Meanwhile, the demand by some religious groups to ban the Aurat March that has become a symbol of struggle for women rights in this country is also an attempt to undermine fundamental rights. Accusing women activists of spreading 'obscenity' and 'vulgarity', the self-appointed guardians of so-called morality have threatened to stop women's rights rallies on International Women's Day to be observed on March 8.

Leading the pack is Maulana Fazlur Rehman, head of the JUI-F, who has called upon his followers to use whatever means at their disposal against the participants. Ironically, the crafty maulana had recently led a march on Islamabad for the 'restoration of democracy'. Sadly, many liberals had jumped onto his bandwagon declaring him a 'champion of democracy'.

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Going back to the film produced by Sarmad Khoosat, one of Pakistan's most acclaimed filmmakers, Zindagi Tamasha premiered internationally last year and had been cleared by the federal and provincial censor boards for release in the country. The film was awarded the top fiction prize at the Busan International Film Festival. But days before it was to hit Pakistani cinema screens, the government gave in to the threat issued by the head of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the notorious cleric who had recently faced terrorism charges. Its expected release was stopped and the film was sent to the Council of Islamic Ideology for review. It is the first time in the country's history that a film already passed by the official censors now has to be cleared by a body that has no such authority.

A spokesman for the TLP described the film as being 'blasphemous' and threatened to launch a countrywide protest to stop it from being screened. Interestingly, the censor boards that reviewed it twice didn't find any objectionable content in the film.

Blasphemy allegations are handy tools for bigots who want to silence rational voices. The film has simply depicted hypocrisy in the name of religion. It carries a strong message against the growing intolerance that is now so deeply entrenched in our society. The protest against an internationally acclaimed film is also a manifestation of a regressive mindset that the film itself has effectively portrayed.

These religious bigots are afraid of being exposed. It is alarming that violent extremist elements have gained strength largely because of the weakness of the state. It seems that we have learnt no lessons from the past. Growing religious extremism presents the biggest threat to freedom of expression and the democratic process. Most dangerous, however, is the impunity that some of the violent extremist groups enjoy.

The state's policy of appeasement has further emboldened radical clerics like Rizvi who was released from detention. He had been arrested for provoking violent protests against the Supreme Court's decision to free Aasia Bibi who suffered years in jail because of a concocted case of blasphemy against her.

It is intriguing how terrorism cases against him have been dropped. He has now returned to his vitriolic sermons. But the law does not swing into action against him — maybe because of the patronage of some strong elements within the establishment.

Sarmad Khoosat, his family and team have reportedly been subjected to threats and bullying by TLP goons. In an open letter to the prime minister, the renowned filmmaker who has been associated with the Pakistani film industry for over two decades described the torment he was going through.

Khoosat rightly pointed out that "like any other film, made in any other part of the world, Zindagi Tamasha is a reflection of its setting". But there has been a deafening silence from the government over the ordeal of the brilliant artist who has won laurels for the country through his work.

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The tacit ban on the screening of Zindagi Tamasha is hardly an isolated instance. It is a manifestation of a larger problem of shrinking space for rational and progressive voices. There is strong resistance from right-wing groups to any move that is intended to shake up the existing order. While there is unannounced censorship on progressive literature, the religious extremists have been given a free hand.

It's such a pity that a film that has earned international acclaim cannot be watched at home. Banning films is a manifestation of a culture that is afraid to face the truth. We have a long history of suppressing dissenting views perceived as posing a threat to the prevailing order. The space for reason and freedom of expression is further shrinking thanks to growing authoritarianism and rising bigotry in society.

Democracy cannot exist without freedom of expression and equal rights for all segments of society. There is a need for a joint effort to deal with this rising menace that threatens the national fabric.

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Chapter 17

WARNING SIGNS

12 Feb 2020

IT is a deadly mix of incompetence and superciliousness that defines the crisis of the PTI government. The disarray is ominous. It is not just about bad governance; the rot is all over. It is like a rudderless ship about to hit a rock. But the captain's faith in the occult is unshakeable. Frightening, indeed.

There had never been much hope that 'Project Imran Khan' would succeed, yet few had expected the collapse to come so quickly. It has left the patrons reeling. They seem to be stuck in a situation from where they find it hard to extricate themselves. An inept protégé is fast becoming a liability. What next?

It is evident that the PTI government has neither the vision nor the capacity to deal with the multiple challenges faced by the country. The limitation of a former cricketing hero with no prior work experience is scary. Imran Khan's biggest problem perhaps is his very narrow perspective of statecraft.

He lives more in the past and seems to have little understanding of present-day challenges. His sense of self-righteousness has further blurred his worldview. It is disastrous when mediocrity combines with stubbornness. The messiah complex makes it more difficult to accept reality.

No wonder the PTI government has lurched from crisis to crisis since coming to power some 18 months ago. It is now struggling to keep itself afloat with coalition partners hedging their bets, and discontent brewing within party ranks. It is true that the PTI has never been a well-organised political party; it consists more of an amorphous crowd of Khan's fans and political turncoats.

But the power tussle between various interest groups within the party has intensified with the worsening crisis of governance. The revolts in the KP and Punjab governments are a manifestation of the growing disarray. More alarming is the open polemics among

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federal ministers and party leaders. It is apparent that the prime minister is unable to resolve the internal power battle. The situation is fast becoming untenable.

Indeed, the economy has remained the Achilles heel of the PTI government since it came to power. But the situation seems to have worsened with the rising cost of living affecting the common people and the spectre of growing unemployment adding to public discontent.

Undoubtedly, Imran Khan has inherited many of the existing economic problems, but his policies too have added to the crisis. The twin problem of inflation and declining economic growth is generating an explosive social and political situation, which the government seems unable to deal with.

Opening shelter homes and giving free meals to a few thousand people is not going to solve the problem. The real issue is economic growth and generating employment that the government is not focused on. It is not just about managing the current account deficit, but also improving economic governance. Over the last 18 months, the FBR has seen three chiefs. Rumours are rife about yet another change in the economic team. One is not sure how frequent changes without a clear policy direction can make any difference.

What is most disturbing is the virtual collapse of the administrations in Punjab and KP. But the prime minister is not willing to change his handpicked chief ministers despite widespread criticism of their performance within the party and outside. The recent rebellion within the party in Punjab exposes the vulnerability of the provincial government.

There are some strong indications of the opposition PML-N, which is the single largest party in the provincial assembly, gearing up to unseat the Buzdar administration. With the easing of pressure, the PML-N now feels much more confident in moving against a fragile government with possible support from some alienated factions of the ruling coalition.

The suggestion that the security establishment may not come in the way has surely emboldened the opposition. The release on bail of many top PML-N leaders facing NAB investigation is seen as a sign of the shifting political sands. The PML-N vote for the extension of service for the army chief has reinforced the widespread perception of its possible rapprochement with the security establishment.

Given how power politics is played out in this country nothing can be ruled out. Any political change in Punjab could have a domino effect. For the PTI government that relies completely on the establishment's support the development should come as a warning if the prime minister can read it. Time is slipping away for the PTI government.

With the extension issue resolved, the army chief is likely to be more assertive. The failing governance and inability of the government to address critical economic problems

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have already given much greater space to the military. The generals may still not want to let their 'project' fail completely.

Yet no one would like to get stuck in a blind alley. The failure of the Imran Khan government would also be a failure of the establishment's own political experiment. Any new experiment will have its own perils. The security establishment is also largely responsible for the current political instability. Political manipulation has distorted the democratic process and it cannot be corrected through the military getting more deeply involved in political matters.

The gravity of political and economic challenges faced by the country needs a consensus on key issues by all mainstream political parties. The major responsibility for reconciliation lies with the PTI government. The politics of confrontation has weakened the political forces and allowed the security establishment a greater political role to play arbiter.

Unfortunately, there is no indication of Imran Khan changing his hard stance and reaching out to the opposition parties. His tenor is getting harsher, and he doesn't realise that things are slipping out of his hands. His government stands on very fragile ground and the coalition partners are raising the stakes — this is a sign of things to come. The PTI government cannot deal with serious economic problems on its own in an atmosphere of political instability. Greater reliance on the security establishment doesn't provide a solution.

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Chapter 18

QUESTIONING PATRIOTISM

05 Feb 2020

"It is lamentable, that to be a good patriot one must become the enemy of the rest of mankind." — Voltaire

"HOW could you question someone's patriotism?" the chief justice of Islamabad High Court inquired while hearing the bail application of political activists arrested by the capital administration and charged with sedition. The young detainees were protesting against the arrest of Manzoor Pashteen, the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement leader who has also been charged with sedition.

They were peaceful and had not violated any law of the land; they had just exercised their democratic right to protest. Still, their patriotism was questioned. Some of the detainees in Islamabad are out on bail but scores of others across the country, mostly PTM activists, are still languishing in prison facing sedition and terrorism charges in other parts of the country. There are also cases of forced disappearances. The old colonial law of sedition comes in handy when the administration wants to deal with political dissent.

Justice Athar Minallah's remark is very pertinent. How does one define patriotism and who decides the patriotic credentials of any citizen? According to its definition, "patriotism is the feeling of love, devotion and sense of attachment to a homeland and alliance with other citizens who share the same sentiment". Patriotism includes a sense of pride, but does not require that proof be given for it.

So how does the demand for justice and the struggle for basic democratic rights enshrined in the Constitution make one unpatriotic? In fact, it's an act of patriotism when people rise up against the wrongdoings of those in power and struggle for their rights. For the powers that be, such an act is considered sedition. It depends on which side of history one is standing.

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Among those who face sedition charges are the young and brightest minds of the country. They are not willing to accept the injustice perpetuated by the ruling elite. It's a sign of growing discontent among the young generation against the prevailing state of affairs. Protests are a sign of life that the ruling classes are afraid of. The latest crackdown against peaceful protesters is indicative of the increasing intolerance of the establishment towards any kind of dissent. The space for reason and freedom of expression is shrinking.

What is more worrisome is the increasing use of sedition charges against those who believe in non-violence. It is not that such draconian laws have not been used in the past; a number of political leaders in this country have been accused of sedition and questions raised about their love for the country. But such impunity had not been witnessed in recent years. Dozens of PTM supporters are languishing in prison on sedition charges. Even lawmakers have not been spared.

It is most disturbing that all this should happen under a civilian dispensation that claims there are no political prisoners in the country. Those lately arrested were more peaceful than the participants of Imran Khan's 2014 siege of Islamabad and months-long dharna for an unconstitutional demand. He had even called on the 'umpire' to intervene. But political activists, who have not thrown even a single stone, are charged under anti-terrorism laws.

While the state power instantly swings into action against peaceful protesters it bows to extremist elements who have no qualms about promoting violence and are even capable of bringing life in the capital to a grinding halt as amply demonstrated a few years ago. The administration looked on one side as vitriolic speeches were made from the pulpit. The Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan chief Maulana Khadim Hussain Rizvi had the freedom to spread religious hatred and justify murder in the name of faith. But he was still considered a 'patriot' as he eulogised the security establishment. Should this be a criterion to convince people of one's patriotic credentials?

Criticising the security establishment for its wrong policies and excesses doesn't make anyone unpatriotic. It should not be the right of a particular institution to decide who is a patriot and who is not. In mature societies, patriotism is not something that is embellished all the time. Condemning the politicisation of the armed forces is not an unpatriotic deed. In the words of Samuel Johnson, "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel".

And there is no dearth of such examples in our country. Many of those who are not tired of displaying their 'patriotism' may not consider it wrong to usurp the rights of other people. It is also wrong to mix ultra nationalism with patriotism. As somebody said: "Public policing of individuals' patriotic credentials is not a good advertisement for any democracy".

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Protest is a democratic right and protesters cannot be accused of being unpatriotic or of having foreign agents within their ranks. Unannounced bans on media coverage of such protests can deal a blow to the freedom of expression and damage our democratic credentials. In any case, restrictions on the media and the freedom of expression are often counterproductive in the age of social media. Surely, there have been some cases of extreme manifestations of protests that cannot be condoned, but declaring any protest as anti-state will not help address the real issue.

In his remarks Justice Minallah declared that constitutional courts would not shut their eyes to a matter like this. One hopes that the superior courts take some action to stop the government and the law-enforcement agencies from using sedition laws to suppress saner voices in society. It is the responsibility of the courts to uphold the rule of law and protect those who are fighting to uphold fundamental democratic rights that are enshrined in the Constitution. Failure to provide justice could have serious ramifications for the country.

The root cause of protest movements lies in the challenges and problems that populations face at home and that are not engineered from outside. But external forces can easily exploit the situation if the state fails to address the genuine grievances being faced by the people.

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Chapter 19

PERILS OF POPULISM

22 Jan 2020

FAISAL Vawda is a 'phenomenon' that defines Imran Khan's populist regime. His theatrics on a TV talk show last week may have appeared excessively crude, but were not surprising. The federal minister for water resources has been known for his absurd acts.

Remember his dramatic entry dressed like a cowboy at the Chinese consulate in Karachi while it was under a terrorist attack in 2018? His presence at the spot may have been a nuisance for the security agencies trying to break the siege, but why would he care? It was his way of getting media attention.

Imran Khan, who had promised to bring in new talent to build a 'naya Pakistan', chose Vawda to head one of the most critical ministries. Soon after taking charge, Vawda promised to open the 'floodgates to jobs' that would even require Pakistan to import labour from other countries. We are still waiting for that miracle to happen. Meanwhile, his expensive sports car and motorbikes remain the centre of media attention.

But Vawda is not the only jewel in the crown of Imran Khan's collection of talents. He is part of a careless crew piloting a rudderless ship of state. Many of the crew members are quite entertaining and end up providing considerable comic relief in times of crisis. Whether it is the special assistant to the PM on information and her daily pearls of wisdom or the railway minister's habit of shooting from the hip, it's all a manifestation of an administration that thrives on absurdity.

If this were not enough, the PTI government also has ministers like Shehryar Afridi and Ali Amin Gandapur in its ranks. The minister of state for narcotics control, Afridi is known for his outrageous utterances, including his claim that 75 per cent of female students and 45pc male students in the capital city use drugs including crystal meth and ice. It is such statements, not backed by evidence, which render his remarks pointless. Similarly, his constant reminder that he "owes his life to God" has made him a star in PTI ranks.

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For Gandapur, the minister of Kashmir affairs, inflation 'benefits' a large section of the population. "If someone is benefiting from rising prices then it is our farmers, they are the ones growing the tomatoes," he remarked. Going by such profound logic, people should be hailing the hike in prices rather than protesting against it. The list of such knights in shining armour in the PTI cabinet is quite long.

For sure, one cannot forget the great discovery of 'Wasim Akram-plus'. The star is yet to shine but Imran Khan has not lost faith in his protégé. It is believed that the reason for backing Usman Buzdar, the chief minister of Punjab, has to do more with occultism than political rationality.

Although most of his powers seem to have been taken away, Buzdar's stay in office, even as a figurehead chief minister, is seen as essential to the survival of Khan's government. One really feels sorry for the man from Taunsa Sharif who appears helpless, despite occupying the second-most powerful political office in the country. The affairs of the country's biggest province are now run by the Prime Minister's Secretariat through the provincial chief secretary and the inspector general of police.

This unique arrangement has thrown the province into complete disarray, raising questions about who is really in charge. The growing rebellion within the ruling party's ranks and threats by allies to part ways has left the survival of the Buzdar government hanging by a thread. Yet there is no sign of the prime minister changing his original decision thought to be influenced by 'hidden powers'. Such is the predicament of the leader who rose to power on the promise of changing the country and strengthening institutional democracy.

We seem to be witnessing a new phenomenon in Pakistani politics — a dangerous confluence of populism and occultism. While the government claims to act for the people, it has deviated significantly from even basic democratic norms. The Vawda phenomenon is a manifestation of a culture that negates pluralism and democratic tolerance. It is not surprising that the party leadership has never taken any action against the ministers who routinely display such uncivilised behaviour. In fact, it seems that the top leadership encourages their practices.

While in the opposition, Imran Khan had blamed corrupt politicians, mafias, and oligarchies for having appropriated power from the legitimate owners ie the people. He is using the same mantra to cover up his government's ineptitude. He has used populism as a political tool to mobilise mass support. But like other populist leaders, he has failed to deliver on his promises. The PTI government's policy on critical issues is vague and often contradictory.

Imran Khan's populist slogans had worked because of our chronically infirm democratic process and weak institutions. But that may also go against a populist government failing to reverse the situation. Growing public discontent and increasing dissent in the ranks are a clear manifestation of the perils of populism.

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Unlike in other countries where populist parties returned to power with an absolute majority, the PTI government has been in a disadvantageous position, and is dependent on disparate allies and the powerful security establishment. One of the PTI government's biggest failures has been its inflexible approach, despite being a coalition government. Because of its stubbornness, the PTI has allowed the opposition greater space.

Given the current crisis of governance and ineptitude, the emerging cracks in the coalition are not surprising. Sensing that the government is now on a weak wicket, the allies have raised the stakes and are demanding a larger share in the pie. The situation in Punjab is particularly precarious with the coalition government surviving on a razor-thin majority.

There are ominous signs of the opposition parties, particularly the PML-N, bridging differences with the security establishment. Given the shifting sands of Pakistani politics, nothing can be ruled out. These are the perils of populism. But things become more complicated when this is mixed with occultist tendencies.

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Chapter 20

BANNING BOOKS

15 Jan 2020

BANNING and burning books is a manifestation of a culture that is afraid to face the truth. It is ignorance of the book's message or the fear of the latter that is often the reason for someone trying to ban a book. We have a long history of suppressing dissenting views perceived as posing a threat to the prevailing order. Not only have books been banned, writers too have been persecuted. The space for reason and freedom of expression is further shrinking thanks to growing authoritarianism and rising bigotry in society.

The reported confiscation of copies of the Urdu translation of Mohammed Hanif's book A Case of Exploding Mangoes and the recommendation by a Punjab Assembly panel to ban three seminal books on Islam are the latest examples of the growing intolerance towards critical thinking. The books include Lesley Hazleton's The First Muslim and After the Prophet.

Where Exploding Mangoes is concerned, some personnel allegedly belonging to an intelligence agency were said to have raided the office of the publisher in Karachi and taken away copies of the translated book that came out last year. Interestingly, the original English edition of the book — a satirical take on Gen Ziaul Haq's plane crash — was published in 2008, and the work has been internationally acclaimed.

It seems that certain elements have suddenly discovered something in the Urdu version that they feel threatens our 'national security'. It says a lot about their lack of understanding of a literary work. The raid itself could, perhaps, be a plot for a new bestseller satire by the author. Apparently, the government has not banned the book, so who ordered the raid on the publisher?

More insidious is the suggestion to ban the books authored by Lesley Hazleton, an American journalist and scholar. Both books have been impeccably researched. "The First Muslim illuminates not only an immensely significant figure but his lastingly relevant legacy."

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I have read the two books by Hazleton and found them to be extremely instructive, more than any other work on the subject. The books have been a bestseller in this country for more than a decade, and suddenly some unscrupulous lawmakers want these books to be banned just because of their own narrow-mindedness and prejudices.

Rising bigotry has been the main reason for the decline of sound scholarship regarding religious matters in this country. Some genuine scholars like Javed Ghamdi have had to leave the country because of the threat to their lives. Many enlightened clerics have been killed by extremists, with the result that the interpretation of religion is left to semi-educated mullahs. It will be a tragedy if these books are banned in this country. One hopes that the government has the sense to ignore such mindless recommendations.

How paranoid certain sections of our establishment have become with any critical narration of this country's history is apparent in their reaction to a recently published book, The Battle for Pakistan: The Bitter US Friendship and a Tough Neighbourhood. It is a remarkable work by Shuja Nawaz, an acclaimed writer on Pakistan's military. Although the book is not banned, its launch in Pakistan was blocked allegedly by certain quarters said to be unhappy with the objective study of the rocky relationship between the Pakistani military and the US in the past decade.

But the reality is that this is a well-researched book and the arguments are substantiated by facts and based on interviews with senior Pakistani and US military officials directly involved in policymaking during that period. Nawaz previously wrote an authoritative history of the Pakistani military: Crossed Swords: Pakistan, its Army and the Wars Within.

Despite the attempt to block the launch, the book has already drawn a large number of readers. Instead of learning from their mistakes and accepting the reality, the powers that be are attempting to restrict the freedom of views. It is such a narrow-minded approach that turns a country into an intellectual desert.

Lies and deception have often been used to cover up blunders, conspiracies, and military misadventures spanning Pakistan's seven-decade history. Over the years, great pains have been taken to hide facts from the nation, even if these are generally known. Failure is celebrated as victory. This situation has led to a widening trust deficit between the public and the authorities.

Unsurprisingly, the people tend to believe foreign publications on the issue, however unrealistic they may be. So sensitive have the concerned authorities become that even a public debate on such issues is seen as breaching national security. As a result, we can never learn from our mistakes and wrongdoings. It's all in the name of 'national security' — a handy term when it comes to suppressing saner voices. Such strong-arm actions are actually a sign of weakness. Confident societies face criticism rather than silence the messenger.

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People want to live in a society where they enjoy freedom of thought and action and can freely exercise their right to speak. Liberal democracies thrive on the freedom of expression. Unfortunately, the past few years have seen an attempt to roll back democratic values.

Freedom of expression is the principal target of authoritarianism. In fact, one of its symptoms is the creeping expansion of 'deep state' power. The raid on the office of a publication house in Karachi and the attempt to stop the launch of an important book on Pakistan-US relations is a grim reminder of a country adrift.

Equally alarming is the rise of bigotry in society and the growing confluence of religious extremism and politics. The call by some lawmakers for banning seminal works on Islam is troubling. The strengthening of right-wing religious extremism threatens not only to weaken democratic institutions but also to divide the country.

Repression, achieved either through direct censorship or other forms of pressure, will turn the country away from the path of progress and enlightenment. The weakening of democratic institutions gives non-government forces greater opportunity to get involved in manipulating politics as they attempt to thwart fundamental rights. More worrisome is that all this is happening under a democratically elected government.

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Chapter 21

A DECADE TO NOWHERE

01 Jan 2020

IT has been a decade that we would rather forget. It has not been the best of times for Pakistan as the country lurched from one crisis to another. The death of hope has made future prospects more uncertain. The overall crisis of leadership has never been so pronounced.

Despite two elections the democratic political process remains fragile. The country has already moved to becoming a diarchy with an ineffectual civilian government virtually playing second fiddle to the military. The weakening of democratic institutions has provided a greater opportunity to forces outside the government to get more deeply involved in manipulating politics while attempting to thwart basic rights.

More worrisome is that under a democratically elected government there is now a move to stifle freedom of expression and plurality of views through unannounced censorship and other forms of pressure exerted by security agencies. The populism is increasingly manifested in rising authoritarianism, thus undermining democratic political culture. The 2010s have seen further erosion in the rule of law.

The state has seldom been so fractured. The 'accountability process' mainly targeting the opposition has widened the fault lines in the existing power structure. Starting from the Panama Papers scandal in 2016 that led to the judicial removal from office of Nawaz Sharif and his conviction, most opposition leaders are now either in prison or facing indictment on corruption charges.

The selective application of the NAB law reinforces the allegations of a political witch-hunt. Many politicians and bureaucrats are languishing in jail for months without being formally charged. The situation is fast becoming untenable. What happens next is not hard to guess.

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The decade witnessed the deadliest terrorist attack in the country's history when on Dec 16, 2014 the Pakistani Taliban took their campaign to a ruthless new level with an assault on a school in Peshawar that killed 141 people — 132 of them schoolchildren.

The attack on the Army Public School demonstrated how the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan had often targeted the country's most vulnerable citizens. Described as Pakistan's 9/11, the incident should have been a turning point in the country's battle against militancy and violent extremism but unfortunately it didn't happen.

Violent extremism remains a major threat to the country's stability. There are serious questions about the state's capacity and willingness to counter radical sectarian groups. The authority of the state virtually crumbled when in 2017 hundreds of zealots belonging to a radical Islamist group brought the capital to a standstill for several weeks. What is more troubling is that the flames of bigotry are sweeping across the country, creating a dangerous confluence of religion and politics.

Surely Pakistani security forces have been successful in defeating insurgency in the former tribal areas and there has been marked decline in terrorist attacks. But there is a danger of losing these gains in the absence of a coherent national security strategy to deal with the problem.

The integration of former Fata with Khyber Pakhtunkhawa has been a remarkable development. But the challenges of bringing the population into the political and economic mainstream are enormous. Political instability and absence of governance make the task much more difficult.

The economy has remained the biggest challenge for successive governments in the past 10 years. The last two governments went to the IMF for bailouts but they were not able to bring long-term structural reforms needed to put the economy on a sustainable course of progress. Pakistan is in a greater financial mess three years after the completion of the last IMF programme.

Now the PTI government has gone in for an IMF programme under far more adverse conditions. Surely the macroeconomic situation has shown signs of improvement, but it's not enough. There are still questions about whether Imran Khan and his economic team have any long-term vision for economic revival.

A major challenge is how to transform a crumbling institutional structure and address the key constraints to economic growth. Pakistan will have to overcome the barriers to structural transformation that have been stifling its development in the previous decade. Partial and half-hearted reforms cannot take Pakistan out of the current morass. It is not just about economic growth but also the welfare of the people that matters.

The security of the country is threatened by a failing economy, population explosion, poverty and environmental degradation. A massive youth bulge and a rising uneducated and unskilled population with few prospects of finding productive employment presents a

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terrifying scenario. Failure to address these problems could lead to the country sliding further into the abyss of poverty.

Pakistan has one of the highest population growth rates in the world, offsetting efforts to improve social indicators. With a 2.4 per cent growth rate, the population has crossed the 208 million mark, making it the world's fifth most populous country. It is sitting on a potential demographic disaster with more than 60pc of its population under 25 years of age. The inability of the state to productively utilise a large young generation could cause further social dislocation and conflict.

Pakistan's foreign policy challenges have not been less daunting in the last decade. With extremely problematic relations with the US, growing tension with India and worsening conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been in a difficult situation on the external front too. India's action to annex occupied Kashmir and its growing belligerence has created a very dangerous scenario.

Adroit handling of the Indian escalation in February last year by the Pakistani leadership had forced New Delhi to pull back. But the stakes for Pakistan are still high. With artillery guns blazing along the Line of Control, the situation remains volatile and even a minor incident could cause it to spiral out of control.

Undoubtedly, Pakistan has played a very important role in facilitating negotiations between the US and the Afghan Taliban that have shown significant progress. But there is no probability of the Afghan war ending soon. To deal with these enormous internal and external challenges, the country needs political stability and a leadership that is not stuck in the past and has a vision for change.

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Chapter 22

DIPLOMATIC DEBACLE

25 Dec 2019

THE latest foreign policy debacle in the shape of Pakistan's last-minute decision to pull out of the Kuala Lumpur Summit illustrates Imran Khan's Trumpian-style of dealing with highly sensitive policy issues. It is decision-making driven by whims rather than reason.

While it was unwise to take the decision to attend the summit without deliberating the pros and cons, even worse was backing out of the commitment under pressure from another county. The entire episode reflects a new low in our diplomacy. It happens when institutional processes are set aside to accommodate the quirks of an individual. It is a voodoo foreign policy that has caused us loss of credibility among friendly countries. Yet we are blind to this.

Notwithstanding the Foreign Office claiming otherwise, there is a ring of truth to what Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said about Saudi pressure being the reason for Pakistan's abrupt withdrawal. The prime minister's sudden dash to Riyadh, followed by the announcement of the cancellation of his visit leaves nothing to conjecture. What could be more humiliating for a sovereign nation than to accept the dictates of another country? It has been a loss of face from all sides.

No precedent in recent history comes to mind where Pakistan has allowed some other country to take a decision on its foreign policy imperatives and how to conduct its relations with other states. Despite pressure, Pakistan had previously maintained a balance in its relations with countries hostile to one another. We have kept ourselves out of the civil war in the Middle East and declined to send troops to help Saudi forces in Yemen while withstanding intense pressure from Riyadh. So what has happened now?

Saudi Arabia may have its own reasons to oppose the KL Summit but it could not prevent other countries from participating. Surely, the Saudis have strong leverage over Pakistan because of our increasing financial reliance on the kingdom, and yet we have

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weathered similar pressure in the past and managed to pursue an independent policy. In fact, Imran Khan should have thought through all aspects before committing himself to attending the conference in the first place.

Interestingly, the agenda of the conference was discussed in the prime minister's meeting with the Turkish president and the Malaysian prime minister on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September. The main objective was to evolve a joint strategy to counter Islamophobia. The prime minister had sounded very enthusiastic about the project.

It was not the first time the KL Summit was held. It was the fifth, and larger, edition of the forum. Apart from the leaders of Turkey, Iran and Qatar, delegates from some 20 Muslim countries participated, including Islamic scholars. Indian action in India-held Kashmir was also part of the agenda.

While the Saudi objection that the forum was meant to undermine the OIC was not legitimate, the Saudi opposition did expose the rivalries among Muslim countries. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries see the emerging alliance of Turkey, Iran, and Qatar as detrimental to their interests. The presence of the leaders of these three countries was the main reason for the Saudi opposition to the summit. Surely, Pakistan should not be a party to such rivalries, but the conference was not in any way an anti-Saudi forum.

Succumbing to Saudi pressure has called into question Imran Khan's talk of mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It is apparent that Pakistan has no clout over these two countries and it is not in any position to make them talk to each other. In fact, the latest episode raises questions about our independence and neutrality in a regional power struggle.

While Saudi support for Pakistan's cash-strapped economy is important, the latest event underscores the risk of the country being pushed into a regional power game. True, Pakistan had done well by balancing its relations with Iran and Qatar despite its closeness with the kingdom but the latest diplomatic blunder has shaken this balance.

The complex external circumstances surrounding the country demand prudent management of foreign relations. But a major problem with the PTI government is its non-serious approach while dealing with extremely critical foreign policy issues. Imran Khan is in the habit of not engaging in serious discussion with senior officials and other stakeholders before making policy announcements.

Some of his comments during his visit to New York in September this year indicate his limited understanding of complex foreign policy issues. For example, at the Council of Foreign Relations, he reportedly said that the Pakistani intelligence had trained Al Qaeda. He also claimed that it was his idea for the US to negotiate with the Afghan Taliban for ending the Afghan conflict, forgetting that this was Pakistan's consistent position since the beginning of the US-led war.

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Similarly, during one of his visits to Tehran, he reportedly stated that Pakistani soil was used for militant attacks in Iran. It has taken a lot of effort to do damage control. The irresponsible statements of some federal ministers also affected our relations with China at one point. A major problem is the gradual decay in the ability and capacity of institutions to evolve a clear policy direction. The decline is much more rapid under the PTI government.

Pakistan's diplomatic clout has eroded over the years because of political instability and economic insecurity. The government has failed even to build a national narrative on this critical issue. Imran Khan has been warning the world of catastrophe if the Kashmir problem is not resolved. But he has failed to come out with a clear policy direction on the issue.

Meanwhile, internal political strife in Pakistan and its economic dependency on other countries have raised questions about our ability to effectively fight our case in international forums. The latest foreign policy debacle speaks volumes for the government's inability to deal with fast-changing regional geopolitics. Unfortunately, we are miserably lacking in skills that require maturity.

Published in Dawn, December 25th, 2019

Chapter 23

MUSHARRAF'S CONVICTION

18 Dec 2019

WHEN a former military ruler is convicted and handed the death sentence in a country which has been under dictatorships for the better part of its existence, it is no less than history being made. This is the first time in Pakistan's history that a former military chief has been declared guilty of high treason for suspending the country's Constitution.

The verdict of a special court against former president Pervez Musharraf is a landmark development in many ways. It has challenged the military's predominance and demonstrates the growing assertiveness of the judiciary. The death sentence may not be implemented but the court ruling carries far-reaching political implications. The verdict sends a strong message to potential adventurists.

Musharraf's treason trial had become an explosive political issue and had also been a cause of tension between the military and the government of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. The military was surely not happy with its former chief being put in the dock on treason charges, and predictably his conviction has provoked a robust reaction from the military leadership that had rejected the court order. The military leadership has come out strongly in support of its former chief.

Many Pakistani political leaders have faced treason charges, but this is the first time that a former head of state has been convicted under Article 6 of the Constitution. The case had dragged on for more than five years with the bench changing several times. Musharraf was indicted in 2014 for imposing a state of emergency on Nov 3, 2007.

There had been strong apprehension that the trial would never reach its conclusion because of reported resistance from the military. Despite repeated summons, Musharraf failed to appear before the court. He has been out of the country for the past several years and is hospitalised for serious health problems. He left the country in March 2016. The court declared him an absconder.

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It was evident that the PTI government had not been interested in pursuing the treason case. In a dramatic move last month, it pulled out its team of prosecutors and asked the court to halt the trial, saying the case against the former military leader was weak. The court verdict has worsened the government's predicament. It remains to be seen whether it challenges Musharraf's conviction in the Supreme Court. Musharraf is required to be present in the country to file an appeal against his conviction but his return is improbable.

Gen Musharraf took power on Oct 12, 1999, in a coup that ousted Nawaz Sharif's government. He stepped down as president in August 2008 under the threat of impeachment by the elected civilian government installed after the general elections that year. Interestingly, the treason case was filed more than five years after Musharraf's exit that came reportedly after a deal brokered by the US guaranteeing indemnity to the former president.

In a cable sent to Washington and leaked by WikiLeaks, the then American ambassador Anne Patterson reported that Asif Zardari had told her that he was committed to giving indemnity to Musharraf. The ambassador stressed that only the promise of indemnity had persuaded Musharraf to step down as president. The PPP government that came to power after the 2008 elections took oath from Musharraf who was still the president.

But the situation changed after the return to power of Nawaz Sharif as prime minister. For him, it seemed to be an opportunity to settle scores with a man who not only deposed him but also put him on trial for sedition. There's certainly a revenge aspect to the decision to initiate the treason trial, though the government maintained that it only complied with the Supreme Court ruling.

Interestingly, the former military ruler was tried not for his 'original sin' of staging a coup against an elected government, but for imposing emergency and holding the Constitution in abeyance in 2007. The main argument for not charging Musharraf over the coup was that the Supreme Court and parliament indemnified his action. Many legal experts question whether the 2007 action alone provided sufficient grounds for his conviction under Article 6, ignoring the original takeover.

Facing mass protests against his government, Musharraf on Nov 3 suspended the Constitution and declared a state of emergency in what analysts called the second coup. Most superior court judges, including the chief justice, were detained. The action also brought an end to his nine-year rule.

Musharraf has also been implicated in other cases including the Lal Masjid operation. A court has ordered the confiscation of all his properties and frozen his bank accounts.

Apparently, the military leadership had distanced itself from Musharraf's trial, but that's not really the case. Commenting on Musharraf's high treason trial in 2015, the then

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army chief Gen Raheel Sharif declared that the army would "preserve its own dignity and institutional pride". It was evident that Musharraf had been protected by the military and it would not accept his conviction or what it described as "humiliation of the institution".

Significantly, the Musharraf verdict came a day after the Supreme Court released its full judgement in army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa's extension case. The court has allowed the army chief to stay in office for six months pending regularising of his extension through an act of parliament. That keeps the situation uncertain. The ruling has left many questions unanswered.

It has triggered a new debate whether it requires a constitutional amendment or just a change in rules. The decision has deepened the controversy over the extension of the army chief. The two court orders demonstrate an unprecedented assertion of authority by the country's superior judiciary. That has led to a new conflict between the military and the judiciary that in turn could worsen the political crisis. It is not the end of the game yet. What happens next will be a serious test for the government as well as the system.

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Chapter 24

STUDENT AWAKENING

04 Dec 2019

WHEN campuses are devoid of student activism it spells the decline of a nation. This observation, attributed to Nelson Mandela, is so true for Pakistan. The legacy of a military dictator, the curbs on student unions has turned campuses into vast intellectual deserts where the space for rational thinking has shrunk.

Imposed some four decades ago, the 'ban' has mainly targeted progressive forces. Consequently, we have seen a marked rise in violence and the culture of intolerance in educational institutions. The presence of security agencies makes campuses look more like prisons than centres of learning, demonstrating a sharp regression in the academic atmosphere.

Two incidents — the lynching of Mashal Khan by his fellow students at Mardan University campus in 2017 and now the reports of harassment of girl students allegedly by the administration in the University of Balochistan have shaken the student community across the country and have become a catalyst for action.

Thousands of people including members of civil society, teachers and political workers came out last week in a show of solidarity with students who were demanding the restoration of their fundamental right to form unions and for better education facilities. The demands also included the removal of security agencies from campuses. It was the most significant student protest in recent years, with huge political implications.

This awakening of the young generation and the struggle for their rights is indeed a silver lining in an otherwise very depressing political scenario. It has given a huge impetus to progressive democratic voices. Instead of heeding the students' demands, the administration has reportedly filed sedition cases against those who participated in the solidarity march.

Nothing could be more shortsighted for a rudderless administration than taking action against peaceful protesters. Surely, there is nothing new about such a reaction from

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ruling establishments afraid of the voices of reason. It may be a long-drawn struggle but the student solidarity march has already made a strong impact, forcing the main political parties to endorse their demands. That in itself is a victory for the movement.

Students have played a vanguard role in the democratic struggle in this country. In fact, progressive student organisations have been in the forefront in resisting authoritarian rules. And that was perhaps the main reason for Gen Zia to ban student unions. The student solidarity march takes me back to the historic 1968 student movement of which I was one of the leaders. The movement brought down Ayub Khan's rule.

It all started with protests against the celebration of 10 years of military rule declared by the regime as the 'decade of development'. Gen Ayub Khan who later gave himself the title of field marshal had imposed martial law on Oct 7, 1958. The celebrations marking the 10th anniversary of the military takeover were aimed at projecting the 'achievements' of the regime and boosting its faltering political standing.

There was growing unrest among students and industrial workers whose wages had declined in real terms despite impressive economic growth. The National Students Federation, the most powerful leftist student organisation at that time, decided to organise protests against the military regime from Oct 7, 1968, to counter the anniversary celebrations. It started from the institutions where the NSF dominated the unions.

It soon spread to other cities. Many NSF leaders were arrested or forced to go underground. I was then a student at Karachi University and central joint secretary of the NSF. By November 1968, the protests had turned into a popular uprising with trade unions and political parties also joining in.

The year 1968 was also when leftist movements had swept across Western Europe and South America. The anti-Vietnam War campaign and the civil rights movement had gained momentum in the United States and swept across university campuses. The revolutionary movements in several African countries still under the yoke of colonialism had inspired the working-class movements.

The protest of 1968 was a manifestation of the increasing social conflicts across the world. It was an uprising against dictatorships, state repression, and colonisation. Mass socialist movements swept across most European countries. The most spectacular manifestation of this included the May 1968 protests in France, in which students linked up with 10 million workers staging wildcat strikes. Indeed, for a few days the movement seemed capable of overthrowing the government.

In many countries, including Pakistan, these movements turned into popular rebellions against military regimes. It was the most powerful mass movement the country had witnessed. Students and the working class were in the vanguard, but other sections of society also became part of it. From protests for students' rights it turned into a pro-democracy movement.

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The main objective of the NSF movement was to mobilise public opinion against the authoritarian regime and for democratic change. But no one expected it to turn into a nationwide uprising. The country imploded, bringing out various contradictions. Ten years of military-led rule had generated an unprecedented backlash.

Although the protests started from Karachi, a firing incident in which a student was killed ignited widespread agitation in Rawalpindi and other major towns of Punjab. While Karachi has traditionally been in the vanguard of democratic and progressive movements, Punjab for the first time witnessed powerful anti-authoritarian mass protests.

Meanwhile, student protests spread to former East Pakistan where the political situation was already volatile. Trade unions that were under the control of leftist groups also joined the protests. Initially, the movement was entirely led by the left, but soon, Bengali nationalists got into the lead. The military regime had underestimated the intensity of the movement. The situation was soon out of control. In February 1969, more than 25,000 rail workers carrying red flags marched along the main streets in Lahore.

For the first time in Pakistan's history, socialism became the rallying cry for workers and students. Ayub's hold over the military had weakened, with senior commanders seeing him as a liability. What started off as student protests turned into a mass uprising that brought down a powerful military dictator.

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Chapter 25

UNRAVELLING POWER STRUCTURE?

03 Dec 2019

IT was a bolt from the blue that shook the entire system. The suspension of the notification extending the tenure of Gen Qamar Bajwa as army chief by the Supreme Court is likely to have far-reaching implications, altering the power dynamics in the country. The order demonstrates an unprecedented assertion of authority by the country's apex court, though the final outcome of the case is still awaited.

It is the first time in the country's history that the issue of the army chief's extension, that has previously been accepted as the norm (in many cases the army chiefs themselves prolonged their stay) is being challenged in a court of law. This was the second time that such a decision has been made by a civilian government. Gen Qamar Bajwa was appointed chief of army staff by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif in 2016.

It is not only a technical issue — ie whether or not the government followed due process; the very rationale behind the decision to prolong the term of the army chief is in question. Gen Bajwa was appointed chief of army staff for another term of three years from the date of completion of his current tenure that is to end on Nov 29.

With just a couple of days left to the end of his tenure, the crisis has become much more serious. The ruling, though an interim one, has dealt a serious blow to a government already under siege. What happens if the reappointment of Gen Bajwa is struck down? The legal battle over the extension closes options for both the government and army chief, who has also been made a respondent in the case, thus making his position controversial.

Is it the beginning of the unravelling of the current power structure? The government may try to plug the technical flaws in the issuing of the notification, but matters seem to have gone beyond that, as was evident from the court's remarks and the question raised

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about the legality of the government's decision to grant a second term to an officer of the state.

Curiously, the petition filed by a private citizen has been turned into a suo motu notice. It is a rare decision by Chief Justice Asif Khosa who has voiced his disapproval of a practice that was so frequently resorted to by his predecessor. To many, it appeared that the judiciary had been convinced of the public importance of the case.

Recently, the chief justice had publicly criticised the prime minister's remarks that the judiciary has been lenient to politically powerful persons. The court's latest ruling may have ruffled the feathers of both the government and elements within the security agencies. To some observers at least, it appears that the court is seeking to draw a clear line under the extension issue that affects professionalism within Pakistan's security institutions.

The government has cited the regional security situation as the reason for its granting a second term to Gen Bajwa, but would this rationale have satisfied the judges?

The court observed that "If the regional security situation reasoning is accepted, then every army officer would want a reappointment". It was pointed out that the description of the "regional security environment" was "quite vague".

A similar justification was offered when the PPP government granted a second term to Gen Ashfaq Kayani in 2010. Surely, the country is facing a serious external security situation, yet, it is not in a state of war, and a change of command would not have any negative impact on our defence, given the military's institutional strength as rightly pointed out by the honourable judges.

There have certainly been other, perhaps more pressing, political reasons behind Imran Khan's decision to reappoint Gen Bajwa as head of the powerful army for another three-year term. The prime minister has hailed Gen Bajwa as a "democratic-minded general". There has been a concerted campaign to project the latter as a great visionary.

Probably the thinking behind the decision was that Gen Bajwa would be supportive of the PTI government. However, given the inherent complexities it is wrong to think that any army chief would be pliable. Ultimately, it is the institution that prevails, irrespective of who is in command.

Given the PTI government's increasing reliance on the military, it is not surprising to see the security establishment becoming more dominant. Perhaps continuity of the military command gives the government a sense of security. It is quite apparent that the army chief is now a part of the ruling diarchy.

A second term for the army chief is likely tilt the balance of power more towards the establishment. Indeed, the country requires close cooperation between the civilian government and the military leadership. But that should be more institutional than based on personal relationships.

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The latest court ruling on the extension of the army chief could not have come at a worse time for a government that is in the midst of a serious political crisis. Its failure to improve governance and the inability of the administration to prevent an economic slide has made it much more vulnerable. A major concern is that the government is engaging in a confrontation with the judiciary on the issue.

Notwithstanding the final court verdict, the controversy over the extension has dealt a serious political blow to Imran Khan's government — besides possibly affecting the military's morale. As the chief justice has rightly pointed out, it is not the individual but the institution that matters.

When extensions are seen to be part of political power games, then it also affects the military's professionalism. A timely transition of the military command strengthens the institution and enhances its professionalism. With Gen Bajwa now being dragged into a court case and political controversy, it raises the question of whether he should continue in the post.

For an army chief to fulfil his responsibility, it is important to stay out of power games. No one is indispensable. Perhaps, he should not wait for the court's final decision and save his institution from further embarrassment.

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Chapter 26

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

20 Nov 2019

NAWAZ Sharif has finally flown out but it's not curtains yet. It's now the beginning of Act 2 of the ongoing political saga. The ailing former prime minister is not likely to return soon to resume his prison sentence and his departure has not lowered the political temperature.

While the court order removing the travel obstacles gave the government some respite, Sharif's exit has provided PTI supporters with enough material to keep their guns blazing. Imran Khan's increasingly aggressive tenor clearly denotes that there has been no change in his combative stance despite the widening divisions in the ruling coalition. So Act 2 is likely to be more enthralling.

Sharif's departure, following protracted legal and political battles, may have also given the PML-N some relief, but the political party's trials and tribulations are far from over. There are other factors that have helped Sharif's departure, even if rumours of a backroom deal are not true. With a number of its leaders behind bars, or facing NAB investigations, combined with Sharif's deteriorating health condition, the PML-N has a serious leadership crisis on its hands.

Even though the former prime minister was in prison, his presence in the country had given the party something to rally around. The strong probability of his not returning, even on health grounds, is likely to affect his credibility. The immediate issue before the PML-N is how to maintain unity in its ranks in the face of a clampdown, and continue to fight back. It appears that Maryam Nawaz, who is out on bail, will be guiding the party, but her restrictions are obvious.

There is no sign of the PTI government pulling back from the politics of vendetta. Sharif's release on bail, and the court order allowing him to leave the country by removing the indemnity condition, seems to have hardened Imran Khan's rhetoric against the opposition. His speech on Monday betrayed his anger and frustration, and brought out

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his authoritarian streak. He was visibly upset with the judiciary for what was perceived as 'unfavourable' rulings, and there was intensification of his container mould.

True to form, Imran Khan is not willing to see the ominous signs on the political horizon. The ongoing political crisis has exposed the fault lines in a fragile coalition. There was a sharp divide over whether to allow Sharif to fly out for medical treatment. For the first time since coming to power some 15 months ago, the ruling alliance faces the possibility of a split.

Not only did the allied parties come out publicly with their dissent, the divisions within the PTI were also noticeable. The most scathing criticism of the government's approach in dealing with political issues came from the PML-Q leadership. Interestingly, while Imran Khan was on a warpath with Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the Chaudhry brothers were hobnobbing with the JUI-F leader eulogising his 'political acumen'. They also distanced the PML-Q from the government's position on the Nawaz Sharif issue. The position of the MQM, another key ally, has not been very different.

Indeed, the JUI-F dharna ending with a whimper has been met with sighs of relief by the PTI government, but the problem has not gone away completely. The crafty Maulana Fazlur Rehman may have been forced to eat humble pie, but he is not going to give up easily. Even if it doesn't achieve anything, the maulana's so-called Plan B has its own nuisance value. In this situation, the split within doesn't bode well for the fragile coalition.

Imran Khan's unyielding fight on all fronts may cost his government, that is confronted with serious economic challenges, dearly. The cracks in the ranks could widen if the prime minister does not exercise prudence and show political acumen. Nothing could be more damaging for a government with a weak governance record than to open up too many fronts. The problem is that Imran Khan has become a prisoner of his own rhetoric.

In the midst of all this, the latest statement from ISPR emphasising that the civil and military leaderships are on the same page has raised eyebrows. A major question is, what was the need of such a statement at this point? Of course, there have been all kinds of conspiracy theories circulating around regarding a perceived conflict between the government and military leadership. Still, there is no rational reason for issuing a clarification.

There is no need to emphasise that all state institutions are supposed to work under an elected government. Such statements only add to the prevailing confusion and unnecessarily drag institutions into controversy. They also reinforce the widespread perception of the security establishment assuming a greater role in political matters. Irresponsible statements by some federal ministers, too, have contributed towards strengthening this view.

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Nothing weakens the democratic political process more than a perpetual crisis of governance. Undoubtedly, there have been some signs of improvement in the country's macroeconomic situation. But for sustainable improvement, there is a need for political stability. This doesn't mean that the government should compromise on basic principles, but that the politics of confrontation is a sign of weakness and not strength.

The present political crisis is largely of the government's own making. Publicly abusing opposition leaders and making speeches that threaten to put everyone in jail will not end corruption. Imran Khan's arbitrary style of governance has weakened the institutional workings of the state. His threatening declarations have made the whole accountability process questionable.

Sharif's flying out will have some impact on the current political dynamics, but is not likely to bring about any fundamental change. It is obvious that the PML-N leaders on the ground will tread a more cautious path and avoid any confrontation with the security institutions. The party's decision not to participate in maulana's dubious Plan B sends a clear message. The party has remained intact so far, but Nawaz Sharif's being away from the scene of action is likely to force the senior leaders to democratise the party's functioning. Meanwhile, the challenges for Imran Khan are no less in Act 2 of the political saga.

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Chapter 27

BEYOND KARTARPUR

13 Nov 2019

IN the midst of the worsening stand-off between Pakistan and India, the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor has been a remarkable feat. The historical event may not break the ice, but it certainly shows a way forward. The opening of the corridor allowing Indian Sikh pilgrims secure and visa-free access to one of their holiest shrines has broken the barrier that was Partition's legacy.

It was an emotional journey through the four-kilometre passage for hundreds of Sikh devotees on the opening day. The five-minute drive from the border took 72 long years. The Kartarpur shrine is so close to the frontier that its white dome can be seen from across the border. What made the occasion more historical was that the opening came on the eve of the 550th birth anniversary of Sikhism's founder, Guru Nanak.

Millions of Sikhs across the world on Nov 12 marked the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, the founder of their religion, in what is described as one of the biggest birthday celebrations in the world. Devotees from across the globe, including the UK and Canada, are also visiting Kartarpur for the celebrations.

The corridor was inaugurated on either side of the border by the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers despite the freeze in relations between the two countries. The credit, however, goes to Pakistan for making it possible, despite growing Indian belligerence.

It was a year ago that Pakistan indicated its willingness to open the corridor that had been long under discussion between New Delhi and Islamabad. The two sides first discussed the corridor in 1998, and then again in 2004 and 2008, but these talks failed to deliver. There had always been some political, security or other hurdle.

The Pakistani civil and military leadership seemed more committed this time. Talks on the project didn't stall even with a complete breakdown of ties between the two countries. Modi's latest action in India-held Kashmir could have easily derailed the whole process.

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There have indeed been some voices in Pakistan that opposed the opening of the corridor which involved direct talks with India at a time when the Modi government has unleashed a reign of terror on eight million Kashmiris in the occupied region. But the Imran Khan government has taken a bold step by rejecting the objections.

Mixing politics with purely religious issues is never a good idea. Fulfilling a long-standing demand of a religious community to be allowed to visit their holy places shows a level of statesmanship. Such decisions go a long way towards confidence-building and winning hearts and minds. As Partition divided the population of the subcontinent, it also split their holy places.

Under a bilateral protocol signed in 1974, the two countries agreed to facilitate visits to certain cross-border shrines. Fifteen locations in Pakistan and five in India are covered under the protocol, but Kartarpur, one of the holiest Sikh places, just across the border had not been on the list. Over the last few years, it has become much more difficult for Pakistanis to visit the listed shrines on Indian soil due to visa restrictions. Pakistan's decision to open the Kartarpur Corridor has earned it appreciation of not only the international community but also of the Indian people.

Coming at a time when not only all bilateral links between New Delhi and Islamabad have been broken, but also virtually every avenue of people-to-people contact has been closed, the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor is a most positive development. It shows that even in times of extreme tension, certain steps can help melt the ice or at the very least create some goodwill among the public.

Over the past 70 years, the two neighbors have witnessed many ups and down — wars followed by a period of relative peace — but the current situation is probably the worst with rising Indian bellicosity and virulent nationalism slamming the door on any hope of a rational dialogue on issues that continue to undermine regional peace.

In any other situation, an event such as the inauguration of the Kartarpur Corridor could have marked a major breakthrough. But the Kashmir lockdown and the suppression by Indian forces of the Kashmiri struggle of the right of self-determination cast its long shadow over the event. There is no indication as yet of India changing its course, or a show of any kind of flexibility, despite growing international outrage and protest inside the country.

The Indian action to annex the occupied territory and attempt to destroy the Kashmiri identity is also a part of muscular nationalism under a Hindu majoritarian regime. It is not only a matter of territorial occupation but also a move to turn a religious community into a minority. Driven by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ideology, Modi is trying to turn India into a Hindu rashtra and marginalise other religious communities.

Not only is the brute military force an attempt to suppress the Kashmiri struggle for self-determination, it is also tantamount to the cultural subjugation of an entire

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community. We are witnessing in India today the escalation of violent Hindu nationalism that is causing instability in the region.

Such militant nationalism also affects state institutions, even the judiciary. Hence the latest verdict of the Indian Supreme Court on the Babri mosque issue has not come as a surprise. It is unfortunate that the verdict came on the day of the landmark event at Kartarpur which has set an example of respecting religious values. The ruling by the Indian apex court could further intensify the religious divide in India, apart from affecting the region.

A major cause of concern is that events in India and the rising wave of militant nationalism there could strengthen right-wing Islamist groups in Pakistan that espouse the idea of a majoritarian Islamic state and are still active despite the state's claims of having reined in many of them. The opposition of JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman and others of his ilk to the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor is one such example. But, notwithstanding such scepticism, it is evident that the majority in Pakistan appreciates the move.

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Chapter 28

BIGOTRY AND DEMOCRACY

06 Nov 2019

THERE may be no storming of the citadel, but as yet there are few signs of the Islamabad dharna ending with a whimper. While JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman is not able to claim the scalp he came for, he has forced the PTI government to get off its high horse and come to the negotiating table. The terms for pulling back from the brink are not known yet; there will, however, be no clear winner in this game of thrones.

The JUI-F dharna is yet another episode of the seemingly never-ending soap opera being played out on the Pakistani political stage at regular intervals over the last one decade. It is characterised by monotony — we have a mob marching into the capital and threatening to bring down a newly stalled government. The only difference is the actors switching their roles; even the script remains unchanged and the finale predictable.

It has indeed been an impressive show of political strength by a political party which had virtually been written off after its humiliating defeat in the last elections. It was a solo show by the JUI-F, with the PML-N and the PPP trying to piggyback on it. The efforts that have gone into organising the march clearly showed that it was a well-planned move.

Despite its shrinking electoral support base, the JUI-F has the organisational capacity and ability to mobilise crowds drawn mainly from religious seminaries. It was largely hard-core party followers who turned out in big numbers. The participation of both the PML-N and the PPP was marginal. It was certainly not a mass public mobilisation that could have presented a major threat to the system. But it was big enough to bring an ineffectual government under pressure.

Still, there are no clear answers why a wily politician like the maulana would take such a plunge; it was clear from the outset that neither the PML-N nor the PPP would go to the extent of disrupting the political process. There has never been any ambiguity

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about these parties not being willing to burn their boats despite being victimised by the government.

The maulana came with a maximalist demand for the prime minister's resignation. He even threatened to storm the Red Zone. His tone has certainly softened indicating a step back. He knows well that the government can be shaken, but that it is not easy to oust it through mob action.

He should have taken some lessons from the PTI's sit-in in 2014 that failed to remove the Nawaz Sharif government, despite having paralysed the capital for four months and getting the tacit support of a section of the security establishment. Surely, it was parliament that fully stood behind the Sharif government foiling any adventurism. But there were also other factors that caused Imran Khan's move to fail at that time. The maulana is emulating the wrong example.

There is no mass protest movement across the country that could support the JUI-F march. There is certainly growing public disenchantment with the Imran Khan government for its baffling incompetence and the rising cost of living. Yet there is no groundswell of support for any mass movement against the government. Both the major opposition political parties know that and have kept themselves out of dharna politics. The maulana's suggestion that the opposition resign from parliament also has no takers.

It is apparent that the JUI-F whose support base is limited to certain regions does not have the mass appeal needed to bring people out on the streets across the country on its own. The party can create law-and-order problems in some parts of the country, but cannot bring down the government. Surely, both the JUI-F and the government need a way out of the situation. But it's not clear what the maulana would be willing to settle for.

Indeed, the opposition parties have every right to protest and struggle for their rights, but any attempt to overthrow a government through undemocratic means only strengthens the nonelected powers. We have seen it happening many times in the past. The 2014 PTI dharna, though it failed in its objective, hugely weakened the democratic process in the country, allowing the security establishment greater space.

More worrisome is the religion card being used by the JUI-F leaders in order to whip up public sentiments. Democracy is a cover, and the movement has been largely built around religious issues. In his speeches, the JUI-F leader declared that the dharna had foiled the Jewish and Ahmadi 'conspiracies'.

There was the constant refrain about a so-called conspiracy to 'change the blasphemy and other Islamic laws enshrined in the Constitution'. The remarks made by some senior JUI-F leaders in TV talk shows were more vitriolic. How can a movement be called democratic if it preaches religious hatred and intolerance?

It is true that Imran Khan too has used religious bigotry in his politics. How can one forget the PTI's role in the controversy over changes to an oath that was exploited by the

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Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan to whip up religious sentiments? But that must not be a justification for supporting what amounts to the JUI-F's politics of religious hatred. The confluence of religious bigotry and politics has created a very dangerous situation which is spreading intolerance in society.

Indeed, the opposition protest has opened up various fault lines, impeding democratic process in the country. Imran Khan's arrogance, his authoritarian ways, and his government's failure to deliver have also been a major cause for the opposition taking to the streets. The PTI government is mainly responsible for rendering parliament ineffective, forcing the opposition to use undemocratic means.

Such a situation has further strengthened the hold of unelected institutions. Democratic space has shrunk and the PTI's politics of vendetta presents the biggest threat to democracy. There is a need for strengthening the democratic struggle and resisting the trend of rising authoritarianism in the country. But resorting to undemocratic means and using the religion card is extremely harmful.

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Chapter 29

END OF A GLORIOUS JOURNEY

02 Nov 2019

YET another trailblazer of independent journalism in Pakistan has closed down. There was a feeling of inevitability about the news of Newsline stopping its publication after the closure of Herald a few months ago — a sign of the times and the fast-changing media scene in the country. It is the end of a remarkable 30-year journey of objective and professional journalism, a fast-vanishing commodity now.

It was in 1989 when a group of young dedicated journalists, all of them women except for me a token male, under the leadership of the indomitable Razia Bhatti set about taking out the country's first publication run by a journalists' cooperative. The team did not have any financial resources, but the determination was there. Putting together personal savings, they began work from a small hotel room with chairs, desks and even teacups from home.

Armed with little other than human resources and enormous goodwill, the first issue of Newsline appeared in July 1989. With a cooperative ownership it had complete editorial freedom not enjoyed by any other Pakistani publication. The launching of Newsline itself was an act of defiance against status quo.

In her first editorial Razia wrote: "Newsline is the venture of a team of working journalists who want to serve this nation in the way they know best: to seek the truth, to spotlight injustice and to fight for redress. We hope not only to appeal to the reason but also to touch the heart."

The magazine kept the pledge throughout its publication, making it a powerful voice of resistance and hope. Over the years, the Newsline published trailblazing stories including exposés on corruption at the highest political level, plunder of the country's

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financial institutions, the role of intelligence agencies, the drug mafia, state and street terrorism, and extrajudicial killings carried by the security forces.

Newsline ventured to tackle the subjects which powerful media houses would not dare to touch. There were no sacred cows. While exposing the bungling and misuse of political power under various civilian governments, it also raised a voice against the usurpation of power by the generals.

Newsline's outspoken and fiercely independent policies became the writing on the wall for all governments. The scathing editorials in the magazine did not spare those who were guilty of misusing public trust. As a result, it earned the disfavour of every government.

The worst came in August 1995 when police raided Razia's home at 2am and later the Newsline office, and the government filed a criminal case against her for publishing a critical article on the then governor of Sindh. The cases were withdrawn after protests by journalists and civil society. Political parties like the MQM targeted the magazine for exposing their fascistic tendencies. That was the period when the media in Karachi had become hostage to the militant wing of the MQM.

In a landmark editorial in April 1990 Razia wrote: "In what has now become organised terrorism (and very often state terrorism), armed political activists storm newspaper offices to avenge perceived sins of omission and commission in terms of coverage. Today, the Kalashnikov rules the newsrooms as surely as it rules the streets."

It was about a press besieged some three decades ago, but it may also be true for Pakistan today, though the method of intimidation may have changed. Having survived repression under various military and civilian rules, the press in Pakistan faces perhaps the most serious threat to its freedom. Razia's editorials showed she compromised neither on freedom nor on the truth.

One example of objectivity and impartiality that had become the creed of the magazine was its August 1990 issue. Initially, the issue was focused on an investigative report on a financial scandal involving people occupying high government positions. But the government was dismissed before the magazine was out and a supplement was added with a scathing criticism of what it described as a constitutional coup against a democratically elected government.

There were two covers — one titled 'Shadow military state' taking notes of the development; the inside cover was titled 'Take the money and run'. There was a criticism from some people whether it was fair to assail the civilian leadership when it was ousted. Razia's response was that it was not a binary.

"The question overlooked one basic fact. The truth does not change when a government does. Like freedom, the truth is open to misuse, but like freedom it cannot be withheld on that count." It was her response to the criticism. Unfortunately, many journalists today forget this basic lesson in journalistic impartiality.

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Razia's untimely death came as great setback. But the dedication and commitment of Rehana Hakim who succeeded Razia as editor kept the magazine running with meagre resources. She kept up the original pledge on which the magazine was founded. She virtually ran it on a shoestring budget until it became impossible to keep it alive.

While being a journalists' cooperative may have given the Newsline undiluted editorial freedom, fin-a----ncial constraints remained a major problem for the publication. In this situation, there was no op-tion but to sell the magazine just to keep it alive. The Hum media group took control of the magazine in 2012 on the condition it would maintain editorial freedom.

But it also needed to change the magazine in order to make it relevant in the fast-changing media scene. It is a very different scene than what it was even one decade ago. The rise of the electronic and digital media has made access to information much faster. That is the reason why newspapers and magazines around the world have gone through radical change. But closing the magazine is not a solution. There is a need to revive the spirit of journalists' cooperatives.

The closure of Herald and Newsline may not be the consequence of curbs by the state, but it certainly is a great setback to the independent media. Both magazines were great training centres for young journalists and one hopes and expects that their legacy will be carried forward.

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Chapter 30

FROM BLANK PAGES TO BLACKOUT

3 Oct 2019

IN the bad old days of Gen Ziaul Haq, newspapers would often carry blank spaces indicating that certain stories had been pulled out by the authorities. The military ruler had enforced pre-censorship whereby news content had to be cleared before being printed. It was at the sole discretion of the press department what could or could not be published. Obviously, there was no concept of an independent TV channel back then.

We seem to have come full circle with the looming shadow of authoritarianism. Slowly but surely, the Ziaist model is coming back. There may not be pre-censorship where the media is concerned as yet, but we are close to it. There are already restrictions on what can or cannot be printed or telecast. The methods of control are different but not the objective.

There may not be blank spaces in newspapers but it is apparent what has not been published. The list of taboos is getting longer. The curbs on the electronic media, however, are more ominous. The muted voices of listed opposition leaders are reminiscent of the blank spaces in newspapers during the 1980s.

Now the latest on the list of 'baddies' is JUI-F head Maulana Fazlur Rehman. Clearly, his press conferences and rallies are not supposed to be telecast — no one knows under whose orders and under what rules. Pemra denies giving any such instructions, and yet, the 'ban' is fully implemented by all channels. It's amusing to watch the maulana on screen with his voice muted — 'read my lips'.

Earlier, Pemra had banned former president Asif Ali Zardari's interview on the pretext that he is an under-trial prisoner, though he remains a member of the National Assembly. Similarly, TV channels were instructed not to telecast Maryam Nawaz's

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pressers, when she was out on bail, because she was convicted. Again no one knows under what law. It's all done in a creepy manner.

But the maulana is neither convicted nor facing any court trial. So why ban his appearances? His speeches are said to be provocative. Maybe. But what about the threat hurled by the top leadership of the ruling party being telecast directly?

Again the instructions to the media come from 'unspecified' authorities. Unlike the Zia period, when the military had publicly set the rules of the game, matters are more arbitrary now. Perhaps it has something to do with the existing hybrid power structure. A deliberate ambiguity is maintained around the executing authority.

It is obvious that the PTI government is getting panicky with the maulana's call for storming the capital and other main opposition parties extending him support. One may completely disagree with the maulana's crafty political game and his shenanigans. But this is not the way to deal with the problem. It is still his democratic right to protest.

Imran Khan and his party should be the last ones to attack the maulana on that count. Just a few years ago, the PTI had marched into the capital with thousands of its supporters laying siege to the city for almost four months calling for the resignation of the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif. The sit-in was not peaceful either.

Arguably, more than any other politician, it is Khan who has benefited from a free media, though there is a question mark hanging over the 24/7 coverage of the dharna when he sought to bring down the government through street power. The dharna continued for more than four months but failed to achieve the objective. Perhaps, the maulana is trying to emulate Khan's irrationality back then. Khan is now being paid back in the same coin.

Ironically, blacking out his speeches has probably given the maulana more publicity than he could have ever imagined. Almost all TV talk shows and the 24/7 news cycle for the past two weeks have revolved around the maulana's march. Every statement and presser by federal ministers blasting the JUI-F leader has perhaps given him a political boost. It has catapulted him onto the political centre stage.

More disturbing, however, is the shrinking space for a free and independent media that has already reversed the democratic political process. It is not just about the blackout of some opposition political leaders, but the manipulation of the media. The attempt to control the press and encourage a pliant media is extremely dangerous. Recent moves against the independent media demonstrate weakening civilian power. A major question is, who is in charge?

Last week, Pakistani authorities denied entry to Steven Butler, Asia programme coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), citing a blacklist managed by the interior ministry. According to the reports, Butler was sent back from Lahore airport despite the fact that he was travelling on a valid journalist visa.

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He had come to Pakistan to participate in the Asma Jahangir Conference-Roadmap for Human Rights. He was told that his name was "on a stop list of the interior ministry". Even worse, his passport was confiscated and he was forced to take a flight to Doha on the way to Washington.

In a message to the CPJ, Butler said he was in "a kind of restricted custody" as the flight crew was in possession of his passport and boarding pass. The government has failed to provide any explanation for Butler's expulsion. Nevertheless, Butler addressed the conference via Skype to the embarrassment of the Pakistani government. So much for the country's image.

What the civil and military leadership fail to understand is that the world has changed since the Zia period. Blank pages are not workable any more. In this age of digital media, there is a limit to what the authorities can do to control media and stop the flow of information. Such draconian measures can only bring embarrassment to those controlling the levers of power. The suppression of the fundamental right of freedom of expression can only weaken the state. Imran Khan should learn from the past — such actions only strengthen non-elected institutions of the state.

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Chapter 31

THE MAULANA FACTOR

09 Oct 2019

IN November 2007, JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman hosted what was described in a confidential US embassy cable as a "jovial" dinner for the then US ambassador Anne Patterson. He is said to have sought her help to become prime minister and expressed a wish to visit the US.

After the meeting, according to another cable accessed by WikiLeaks, the US ambassador mentioned the JUI-F chief's "famously wily" political skills. "He has made it clear that his, still significant, number of votes are up for sale," she wrote in an official memo to the State Department.

This was the period when Pakistan was in the midst of a popular uprising against Gen Pervez Musharraf's military-led government, and the crafty maulana could well have seen an opportunity for himself as a major player in the emerging power game.

He headed the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal that was in power in KP at the time. He was also the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly. That made him one of the most powerful political figures in the country.

Like many Pakistani political leaders, he perhaps also believed that it required the support of 'Allah, the army and America' to reach the pedestal of power. There is little doubt about the maulana's political ambitions — he could go to any extent to see the fulfilment of these. The support of the Divine and the army he would probably have taken for granted, but it was America's support that he coveted. The JUI-F's staunch anti-American public stance and his pro-Taliban image did not come in the way of his pragmatism.

One of Pakistan's most colourful and devious politicians, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, as well as his party, remained an important part of the country's power structure for more than two decades, irrespective of whichever government was in power. He was initially opposed to women heading the government calling it un-Islamic, yet he jumped onto the

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bandwagon when Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister in 1988. I still remember the maulana's turnaround after just one session with her.

Since then, his party has been ubiquitous in each administration — if not at centre then surely in the provinces. Ideology takes a back seat when it comes to power. His support would, however, not have come without a price. His demand for a share in patronage also earned him the sobriquet of 'Mullah Diesel'. His position as chairman of the Kashmir Committee virtually became a part of his identity for many years.

But the last elections proved to be his Waterloo. Not only did he lose his own seat, he also saw his party being virtually wiped out. He blames the army and America for the worst electoral defeat that his party has ever suffered. Adding to the disgrace was the fact that the elections brought to power his nemesis.

But not being one to take humiliation lying down, he vowed to bring down Imran Khan's government. For that, he needed to pull together the disparate opposition groups. He used the much-tried formula of calling a multiparty conference in order to form an anti-government united front.

Their own grievances and reservations over the elections pulled in the PML-N and the PPP, though both remained wary. The maulana's crusade against the Khan government was politically expedient for these parties under siege. Yet, there has been strong apprehension about the maulana's own objective.

Understandably, both the PML-N and PPP rejected his proposal to quit parliament. It was apparent that with no significant presence in parliament the JUI-F has few stakes in the existing system, unlike the other two major opposition parties. They were happy with the maulana upping the ante, but they were not ready to burn their boats.

The maulana's own games also make them more cautious about his designs. The first breach in the loosely knit united front came during the presidential elections when the maulana, instead of getting the opposition parties to agree on Aitzaz Ahsan as a joint candidate, got himself nominated by the PML-N, to the indignation of the PPP.

Another contentious point is the maulana's attempt to play the religious card in his anti-government campaign. Being the head of the country's largest religious political party, the slogan of 'Islam is in danger' comes in handy to whip up religious sentiments.

But one can ask what's new in using the religious card for political gains. Almost every political party has used religion to undermine its rivals. The PTI government should be the last one to criticise the maulana on that count. Remember Imran Khan's role in whipping up religious fervour against the PML-N government over missing a clause in the Election Act related to the finality of the Prophet (PBUH) just before the elections? The party also tacitly supported Khadim Hussain Rizvi's sit-in on the issue. Such exploitation of religious sentiments for political objectives is a dangerous game whosoever plays it.

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Both the PML-N and the PPP have taken a very ambiguous position, as they are not sure about the outcome. While extending their support, they are not willing to stake all their political capital on the maulana's game. They know well that there are high risks involved in taking on the security establishment that is fully backing the PTI government. What the wily maulana is trying to do is to keep himself politically relevant. He has managed to stay in the news for the past one year despite the electoral setback. His desperation is evident.

Surely, over the years the JUI-F's popular base has shrunk substantially but its capacity to mobilise the madressah students in various parts of the country cannot be underestimated. They may create a serious law-and-order problem though they can neither bring down the government nor force it to hold fresh elections.

The religious card against a government that claims it wants to establish a 'Madina ki riyasat' is not likely to work. The wily maulana does not seem to have any effective card to play, and his political misadventure may end up further dividing the opposition.

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Chapter 32

POLICY ADRIFT

28 Aug 2019

IMRAN Khan has urged Pakistanis to come out of their homes, offices and workplaces every week for half an hour to show solidarity with the Kashmiri people fighting Indian occupation. Declaring himself an ambassador for the Kashmiri cause, the prime minister has vowed to raise the issue of Indian atrocities on every international forum. All that may sound very earnest.

Yet there still lacks a clear policy direction on the situation arising from the latest Indian action in the disputed territory. There was nothing new and substantive in his, yet another, rambling address to the nation. As usual it was an unprepared speech by Mr Khan on an extremely sensitive national policy matter.

One expected him to tell the nation about his government's latest initiatives on the diplomatic and political fronts to mobilise international support for the Kashmiri struggle for the right of self-determination. More importantly, what are the options for Pakistan to deal with the worsening crisis? We cannot move the international community into action by raising the spectre of a possible nuclear conflagration.

One wonders about the relevance of 'Riyasat-e-Madina' in the PM's speech on India-held Kashmir (IHK). Describing a well-calculated and ideologically driven move as a mere "mistake" exposes the confusion in Imran Khan's understanding of Modi's muscular nationalism. Of course we must express solidarity with the Kashmiri freedom struggle, but there are many other and better ways to do so than wasting 30 minutes of the nation's productive time every week.

Undoubtedly there has been unprecedented coverage in the western media of Indian brutalities and human rights violations that exposes Modi's claim of normality returning to the occupied territory. But that is not sufficient to compel other countries to stand with the Kashmiri people. The international community's silence over the lockdown of more than eight million people and the suppression of their fundamental democratic rights may

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be driven by geopolitical and economic considerations, but it also reflects our diplomatic failure.

Even Pakistan's closest allies in the Muslim world are not willing to express any sympathy for the plight of the Kashmiri people, leave aside condemning Modi's annexation of a disputed territory. It is not surprising that the UAE has honoured the Indian prime minister with its highest national award. Interestingly, Iran is one of the few Muslim countries to have spoken out for the Kashmiri people.

Surely India's growing economic power has helped it expand its influence in the Gulf region, but our own diplomatic shortcomings have also been a factor in us losing our clout in what was once considered Pakistan's staunchest support base. The only solace for us is a statement issued by the OIC contact group expressing concern over the situation in Kashmir.

It was indeed a diplomatic success for Pakistan when the UN Security Council held a meeting on the Kashmir issue for the first time in over 50 years. The statement by the UN Secretary General on Kashmir is also significant. But there is still no sign of international pressure on the Indian government to stop human rights violations in the disputed territory. For that there was a need for a more aggressive diplomatic initiative. Telephonic conversations with foreign leaders are not enough.

It is a right decision by the government to raise the issue at the UN's Human Rights Committee in Geneva. The committee has previously released two reports on the human rights situation in Kashmir. The censure of the Indian action by the UN committee would certainly be a moral victory for the Kashmiri people, but for that a lot of lobbying and diplomatic work is needed.

However, the option of taking the Kashmir issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as indicated by the prime minister, should be reconsidered. Firstly, there is the question about the court's jurisdiction over the dispute. Secondly, any such move would need the consent of both parties in the conflict. The public announcement by the Pakistani leadership to go to the ICJ without even examining the ramifications of such a move is typical of the government's impulsiveness on crucial policy decisions.

Foreign policy is too a serious job to be thus handled. The latest crisis has badly exposed the amateurishness of our leadership in dealing with critical issues. The irresistible fondness of our foreign minister to be in the limelight has made a parody of diplomacy. Long harangues at frequent press talks, TV interviews and twitter messages every minute and on everything, turn serious matters into political gimmickry.

The latest statement by Shah Mahmood Qureshi hailing President Trump's comments on his offer of mediation on the Kashmir dispute during joint press talks with the Indian prime minister was completely misplaced. There has not been any fresh offer for mediation from the US president. There is no point in raising the issue as India has made it very clear that it would not agree to any third party intervention in the dispute.

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We must be very careful not to exaggerate the US role in resolving the Kashmir problem. Barring a few official comments expressing concern over recent developments in Kashmir, there has not been any condemnation of the Indian action. It is a similar situation with the other Western countries.

China is one of the few countries that have come out with a categorical statement criticising the Indian action. With limited options Pakistan needs to up its diplomatic efforts. There is also a need to forge a national consensus on our Kashmir policy. Political instability at home would not help to meet serious diplomatic challenges.

While Pakistan's diplomatic and political support is crucial, it will be the struggle of the Kashmiri people that could ultimately push the international community to act. It is evident that even the use of massive force by India has failed to put down the Kashmiri resistance.

It has been three weeks since a lockdown was imposed on the disputed territory. There have been few examples in recent times of such a protracted freedom struggle. Modi's virulent nationalism has widened the political and social fault lines in India. For Pakistan it is important not to see Kashmir as a territorial dispute, but a struggle for the right of self- determination.

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Chapter 33

SECOND INNINGS FOR GEN BAJWA

21 Aug 2019

GETTING more than one tenure is not unusual for army chiefs in Pakistan, and the three-year extension for Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa was not unexpected. In fact, it had been on the cards for some time and the announcement by the government appeared to be just a formality. A statement from the Prime Minister's Office said that the decision had been taken in view of the regional security environment. Interestingly, the announcement came just as the PTI government completed one year in power.

The security situation may surely be a factor, but there appear to have been other, perhaps more pressing, political reasons behind the decision. Army chiefs have often prolonged their stay themselves. But this is the second time that such a decision has been made by a civilian government.

A similar justification was offered when the PPP government granted a second term to Gen Ashfaq Kayani in 2010. The circumstances may have been different, yet political expediency seems to have been a determining factor in both cases. When has the security environment for Pakistan — whether internal or external — been less perilous?

There is no question about the professionalism and ability of Gen Bajwa as a commander. His deft handling of the recent crisis with India has been duly acknowledged. Indeed, individuals do matter, but it is the institution that matters most. Myths are often woven around army chiefs in Pakistan. So it is not surprising to listen to commentators on TV talk shows projecting Gen Bajwa as a great visionary.

The virtues ascribed to him make him appear head and shoulders above his predecessors. There has been a lot of talk about a 'Bajwa doctrine'. If one were to go by this so-called doctrine, it would seem that the army chief had a grand vision about everything — from critical political problems to the economy and foreign policy. What

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these commentators fail to understand is that the so-called Bajwa doctrine is more institutional thinking than one man's views.

Surely we are facing a serious external security situation with the latest escalation by India, yet we are not in a state of war, and a change of command would not have any negative impact on our defence, given the military's institutional strength.

A timely transition of the military command strengthens the institution and enhances its professionalism. No one is indispensible, however capable he may be. This is a lesson Imran Khan should have learnt. Decisions taken on political grounds will have a negative effect both on the institution and the democratic process.

It was also a political decision when the former prime minister picked a dark horse for the coveted post. It is obvious that the choice of Gen Bajwa was based more on political considerations than any order of seniority or merit, though there was no question about his experience.

Probably the thinking behind the decision was to have someone who was amenable to civilian authority. Gen Bajwa has the reputation of an easygoing officer, but a tough professional. However, given the inherent complexities, one could not have expected him to be pliable.

It was quite simplistic on the part of the former prime minister to think that the sources of civil and military tension could simply go away with the transition in army leadership. Ultimately, it is the institution that prevails irrespective of who is in command. It is a lesson perhaps every civilian government tends to ignore.

Undoubtedly, the civil-military imbalance has been a major source of political instability, hampering democratic process in the country. Despite three democratic transitions, the space for the military establishment has increased. Indeed, the PTI government has moved cautiously, trying to maintain good working relations with the generals.

Undoubtedly, there is much goodwill among the top brass for the PTI government that had been missing in the past. Of course, Gen Bajwa has largely been instrumental in building this close relationship. A fledgling administration certainly needed the establishment's support that could provide it some breathing space. That has perhaps, been the major reason for granting an extension to Gen Bajwa.

The paradox of populism is starkly evident in Imran Khan's first year in government. One year on, the country is politically more polarised and unstable. The PTI government has not taken the country to what it promised. The democratic space has shrunk with freedom of expression being curtailed. Imran Khan's personal charisma and popular appeal, too, is diminishing with the worsening crisis of governance.

Given this situation, it is not surprising to see the military becoming more dominant. Perhaps continuity of the military command gives the government a sense of security. But any failure in improving governance, or the inability of the administration to prevent

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an economic slide, could widen the existing imbalance, allowing the military more space. It is a lesson to be learnt from the past.

It is quite apparent that the army chief is now a part of the ruling diarchy. It is true that every army chief maintains a high public profile, yet Gen Bajwa has assumed an even greater presence than his recent predecessors. It was unprecedented for an army chief to be part of the prime minister's delegation at the White House. He is also a member of the important Economic Development Committee.

The hyperactive ISPR has also been instrumental in building Gen Bajwa's public profile. The balance of power is likely to tilt more towards the establishment in Gen Bajwa's second term. It is true that Pakistan is confronted with serious external security challenges, and to deal with the situation, the country requires close cooperation between the civilian government and the military leadership. But that should be more institutional than based on individuals.

Surely, Gen Bajwa is a professional soldier. But when such extensions are seen to be part of political power games, then it also affects the military's professionalism. The creeping authoritarianism in the country has reinforced the perception of the military's role in suppressing democratic rights. This legacy does not bode well for an army chief granted a second term in office.

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Chapter 34

PERILS OF AUTHORITARIANISM

31 Jul 2019

"Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" — George Orwell

ONE year down the road our second democratic transition remains contentious. Last week marked the first anniversary of the 2018 elections. For the PTI, it was a commemoration of a day of deliverance but the opposition parties observed it as a black day; according to them, it was the day the electoral mandate was stolen.

In a show of political strength, the combined opposition held protest rallies across the country, though the blackout by the electronic media minimised the impact of the events. Pushed to the wall, the opposition parties now threaten to storm the capital, vowing to bring down the government thus heightening political confrontation.

Surely, the second consecutive democratic transition has not taken the country to what it promised. One year on, the country is politically more polarised and unstable. The democratic space has shrunk with freedom of expression being curtailed. The media has lost whatever independence and freedom it had enjoyed. The stand-off between the government and the opposition has rendered parliament totally ineffective.

Many top opposition leaders, including a former prime minister, are behind bars; another former prime minister and a former president are in custody; others are being hunted down. Populism has now increasingly turned into authoritarianism. Pakistan under Prime Minister Imran Khan presents some striking similarities to other populist regimes.

Yet his party does not have the same kind of strong popular political support base and control over the civilian bureaucracy and state institutions as other populist leaders may have. Imran Khan leads a fragile coalition government confronted with enormous domestic and external challenges. His weakness also makes him more authoritarian.

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Since the PTI is not a well-organised political party with a strong grass-roots level structure, it cannot on its own provide the kind of base required for an authoritarian order. There is also no clear political ideology except for populist rhetoric that could make it a cadre-based party. PTI support revolves almost entirely around Imran Khan's personal charisma and popular appeal, though that too is diminishing.

For these reasons, Imran Khan has appeared extremely dependent on the security establishment and the intelligence agencies. The security leadership too has a stake in the preservation of the PTI government. Given this situation, it is not surprising to see the military shadow hovering over the political spectrum.

Although the security establishment has historically been the determinant of Pakistan's foreign and national security policy, it is unprecedented for an army chief to be part of the prime minister's delegation for talks at the White House. But the establishment's footprint is visible in certain government departments — the army chief is also a member of the newly established Economic Development Committee. Even a large part of the national media is seen as under the influence of the military's information department.

Pakistan in the past has witnessed direct military rule or the security establishment being part of the power troika under civilian governments; there is now more of a system of diarchy in place. The balance of power is likely to tilt more towards the establishment with the growing problems of governance and deepening financial crisis.

But the weakening of civilian authority has its own perils, particularly in a federal system. It cannot provide the kind of political stability needed to meet the variety of challenges the country faces. Of course, one cannot expect the revival of the economy and structural reforms in an environment of perpetual political confrontation. Authoritarianism will further exacerbate political instability.

Elected civilian leaders like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif (in his first two terms), too, had tried to establish authoritarian rule with the help of the civilian establishment and law-enforcement agencies but with disastrous consequences, allowing the military to get back in power. But with Imran Khan, it is a different situation with the security establishment behind him, though there remains the possibility of things getting out of control.

Imran Khan came to power on the promise of establishing the rule of law, strengthening institutions and providing good governance. One year down the road, there has been deterioration instead of improvement in governance. The civil bureaucracy because of its fear of being hunted by NAB is not willing to implement any government decision. The much-promised institutional reforms have yet to be initiated largely because of the prime minister's one-dimensional so-called anti-corruption agenda.

The entire accountability process being carried out by NAB has become questionable because of its selective targeting of the opposition. One must agree that corruption is a

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major issue hindering progress but the growing perception of a political witch-hunt in the name of accountability only protects the most corrupt.

As in all authoritarian regimes, the media is also the main target of attack by the PTI government. Interestingly, Imran Khan owes his own rise to power to an independent media. No political leader has received such wide media coverage as Imran Khan when he was in the opposition. The 24/7 television coverage of his four-month-long dharna in Islamabad in 2014 got him a political platform that no other political leader could have ever dreamed of.

Now his government cannot even tolerate the coverage of opposition rallies. It's more a sign of weakness than strength. What the Khan government does not understand is that in this age of social media, such restrictions are counterproductive. What can only be described as unannounced media censorship has become the biggest blot on the PTI's democratic credentials. The move to establish so-called media courts is also a part of the government's anti-media campaign.

It appears that for the government, every independent voice is suspect and should be silenced. Now the government wants to investigate whether the media has been receiving funds from the opposition. But the PTI must also explain who had funded the uninterrupted 24/7 coverage of its 2014 dharna. Imran Khan should learn from our own history that authoritarianism has its own perils and comes with a heavy political price.

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Chapter 35

MOVING FORWARD

09 Aug 2019

IT was a meeting between two unpredictable leaders and they seem to have struck a chord. Putting behind the bitterness of the Twitter war that the two had engaged in previously, President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Imran Khan have found some common ground to move forward on.

This week's summit talks in Washington have broken the ice, putting back on track a mainly transactional relationship between the two erstwhile allies. It's once again the lingering Afghan crisis that has brought them together.

Predictably, the talks at the White House revolved around Afghanistan and regional security. It was quite significant that for the first time the military leadership of both sides participated in deliberations, reinforcing the perception that it mainly remains a security-oriented relationship.

It's an interesting development that the Trump administration now sees Pakistan more as part of the solution than the cause of the problem in Afghanistan. And Pakistan is happy to cooperate in return for an assurance that its national security concerns will be addressed. There is, indeed, a convergence of interest, notwithstanding the huge trust deficit between the two countries.

Surely, relations between Washington and Islamabad, as Trump said, are 'much better now than before'. But it still remains tenuous given the existing strategic divergence. One positive point was that there was no 'do more' mantra from the US side this time.

One of the reasons for the change in the environment was Pakistan's crackdown on militant groups, especially the arrest of Hafiz Saeed under terrorism laws on the eve of the visit. The US had placed a $10 million bounty on the head of the founder of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba.

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Trump's remarks at the joint presser mark a welcome change from his earlier vitriolic statements that held Pakistan responsible for the worsening Afghan conflict. He now believes that Pakistan can save "millions of lives in Afghanistan" because "they have a power that other nations don't have with respect to Afghanistan". In other words, the Trump administration needs Pakistan's support to extricate itself from a festering war that the US has never been able to win.

Undoubtedly, Pakistan has played a very important role in facilitating peace negotiations between the US and the Afghan Taliban, that have shown significant progress; the effort has been duly acknowledged by the US president. But a major question is whether Pakistan can meet American expectations.

Although Imran Khan is hopeful that the Taliban can be persuaded to talk to the Kabul government in the coming days, there is still no indication of the insurgents softening their stance. To get the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire would be a major challenge for Pakistan. It will surely be a huge stride forward towards a political settlement in Afghanistan.

Trump's comments about Kashmir too indicate his administration's changing stance over a lingering problem that is causing instability in South Asia. But his offer of mediation in the dispute seemed more of an off-the-cuff remark than a serious proposition. Pakistan has always supported third-party arbitration, but India has never approved any such suggestion.

So the hysterical Indian response to Trump's comments is not surprising. Yet one would like to know what the Indian prime minister really told the US president in their meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka last month. There must have been some discussion there about Pakistan-India tensions that Trump was referring to. According to the US president, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked him, "Would you like to be a mediator?" It will be interesting to know what exactly the Indian prime minister meant.

It was, however, extremely important for Imran Khan to highlight the Kashmir dispute that has made the region a potential nuclear flashpoint. It is imperative to make the US administration realise that Afghan peace is also linked to the lowering of tensions between Pakistan and India. The US may not be able to mediate on Kashmir, but as Imran Khan said, Washington can play "the most important role in bringing peace to the subcontinent".

Improving trade and economic relations was another key subject discussed in Washington. The resumption of US aid may not be a major concern for Pakistan's prime minister; investment and economic cooperation figured more importantly in the meetings. The American president, too, seemed interested in increasing US investment and expanding trade ties with Pakistan. There are certainly many more opportunities to be

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explored. That could help broaden Pakistan-US relations beyond a purely security paradigm.

More importantly, Pakistan needs US help to stave off the looming threat of being blacklisted by the Paris-based terror-financing watchdog FATF. In June 2018, Pakistan was placed on the grey list due to its 'strategic deficiencies' in the anti-money-laundering and terrorism-financing regime pushed by the US.

Pakistan missed its May 2019 deadline, one which required the country to keep terror financing and money laundering in check. Now Pakistan is required to swiftly implement its action plan by October this year. The possibility of being blacklisted could have serious ramifications for Pakistan and increase its isolation in the international community.

Although the watchdog does not have the power to impose sanctions, it can affect international transactions because it exposes states to greater scrutiny. Such restrictions would have disastrous implications for Pakistan's fragile economy. US support is critical to prevent such an action.

Indeed, the prime minister's visit to Washington has helped thaw Pakistan's relations with the US. But there have also been some sore points during the trip that could have been avoided.

Undoubtedly, the huge rally of Pakistani Americans in Washington was a testimony of support for Imran Khan among the expatriates. However, his speech threatening opposition leaders was unbecoming of a leader representing the country. It seems that he cannot overcome his container habits. In the first place, a leader must not talk about domestic political differences outside the country. But unfortunately, Imran Khan has never been able to rise above petty politics. What he does not understand is that no foreign policy can be successful without political stability at home.

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Chapter 36

CRISIS OF THE JUDICIARY

17 Jul 2019

THE Judge Arshad Malik saga is a tragicomedy. His affidavit submitted in the Islamabad High Court is being seen as a testimony of his compromised character. It also exposes the sad state of our lower judiciary and its apparent vulnerability to manipulation. In his statement, the judge confesses to being blackmailed and claims that the Sharif family tried to bribe him.

But in a purported video conversation, he reportedly talks about convicting the former prime minister under duress. While the credibility of the video has yet to be established, Judge Malik did not deny talking to the persons in the video. The whole episode is scandalous. The judge may have been removed from the accountability court but no disciplinary action has been taken against him as yet.

Surely the higher courts will decide his fate and the validity of his ruling in the graft case against the former prime minister. However, it is not just a legal matter; the scandal has become an explosive political issue with both the opposition and the government trying to use the controversy against each other and engaging in a toxic blame game. The incident has brought into question the entire accountability process, given the alleged susceptibility of judges to pressure from state elements and from the rich and powerful.

True, it's not the first such case in our judicial history, but there is greater notoriety attached to it on account of it being a politically high-profile incident. The real issue related to the credibility of the entire judicial system has been lost in the cacophony of political point-scoring. The case of Judge Malik epitomises the ugly face of our judicial system.

While the role of the establishment and executive in influencing judicial process is not unheard of here, power and money are also said to be used to bend the law, thus making a mockery of the idea of justice and a fair trial. There may be some talk of a

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controversial trial; there is also the question of why the Sharif family maintained contact with the accountability judge.

It seems that Judge Malik was unaware he was being videotaped. The video was released by the PML-N. The inquiry into the affair could lead to more troubling information. Politicisation of the scandal has made things more complicated. It seems that all sides will be sullied.

It is often said that the independence of the judiciary and the notion of fair trial are myths. It is not only military regimes and the establishment that purportedly seek to control the judiciary; civilian governments and political parties are also accused of trying to manipulate the system for their own vested interests.

There have been previous instances where the top court has been stormed; there have been allegations that some judges had been bribed and intimidated and judgements dictated. Some judges alleged on record that the intelligence agencies openly influence the courts. It is not just about Judge Malik; it is also a crisis of the country's judicial system. There are past examples of judges compromising the judiciary's independence. Self-serving judicial activism and populism arguably damaged the sanctity of the apex court.

Heralded as the 'black coat revolution', the lawyers movement of 2007 was an epic struggle. Although it started as a protest against the removal of then chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry by Gen Pervez Musharraf, it soon turned into a movement for democracy. The movement drove a historic wedge between the judiciary and executive. It ended the decade-long military-led rule and helped return the country to the path of democracy. It was a historic moment when the chief justice and other judges of the superior judiciary were restored. The resistant judiciary promised to protect its independence and continue its march towards the establishment of the rule of law. But did those lofty ideals cloak another set of interests?

Ironically, it was Iftikhar Chaudhry, catapulted to an iconic status during the struggle, who did the most damage to the apex judiciary after being restored. His populism and arrogance brought the judiciary on a collision course with the executive. He virtually tried to establish judicial despotism in clear negation of the basic principles. Some of his judgements cost his institution and the state dearly. His own integrity became questionable after allegations of financial misdeeds against his son.

Some of his actions also threatened the independence of the judiciary. Nothing was done to reform the system. A number of lawyers and members of the bar who had been in the forefront of the resistance movement were also accused of being responsible for the regression. The so-called revolution turned into a nightmare.

Some of the chief justices who succeeded Chaudhry did try to inject balance and sanity into the system. But their efforts were undermined by the last chief justice Saqib Nisar. His activism went far beyond that witnessed under Chaudhry, with no limits to his

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populism. His crowdfunding for dam construction became an embarrassment. His ambition to establish a legacy also compromised judicial independence. Allegations of intelligence agencies influencing the courts became more common.

Justice Shaukat Siddiqui of the Islamabad High Court went public with his accusations against the ISI. He was known for his retrogressive views and some highly controversial judgements. A case of financial wrongdoing had been pending against him for some time. But there were concerns that he was removed soon after he made those allegations.

Some normality seems to have returned to the superior court after Justice Nisar's retirement but it will take time to reverse course. The judiciary cannot afford judges with populist agendas. Not only does this damage the judiciary, it also limits judges' independence.

The case of Judge Arshad Malik must not be seen in isolation. Judges like him are the product of a system where the judiciary is pulled into a vicious power game that compromises its independence. A tainted judiciary would be in danger of being seen as the biggest threat to the rule of law and democracy.

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Chapter 37

END OF A GLORIOUS CHAPTER

29 Jul 2019

THE closure of Herald marks the end of one of the brightest chapters in independent journalism in Pakistan. Over four decades of its publication, the magazine upheld the finest traditions of professionalism, objectivity and resistance, a fast vanishing legacy.

It is a particularly sad day at a time when the space for free media is shrinking. It's not only the coercive force of the state in play but social media is also being used as a weapon to intimidate journalists. Systematic smear campaigns are launched to silence those who dare to raise their voice.

A hashtag calling for the arrest of journalists recently became the top Twitter trend, indicating the growing intolerance in society. Professional ethics and objectivity are major victims of the deepening polarisation that is also permeating journalism.

Hence there is a greater need to revive the proud legacy of resistance that Herald and other publications embodied. True, the media scene has changed tremendously over the period with the rise of electronic and web-based journalism but professional values must be preserved.

Herald came about when Illustrated Weekly, a largely social magazine, was converted into a monthly political publication in 1977. The indomitable Razia Bhatti was its first editor. It was a period of great political turmoil when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government was in confrontation with the opposition following the controversial 1977 elections. Herald took on both the government and the conservative Pakistan National Alliance.

The magazine's candid and objective commentary on the political situation established its independent credentials. Herald provoked the wrath of General Zia's military government by challenging its harsh rule and oppressive laws. During the days

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of the toughest press censorship the magazine continued to voice its protest and maintained its independence with an unusual weapon — the blank space.

With some pages of Herald remaining blank, the readers got the message. So did the military regime. And soon the blank pages were banned from publication. The ten years of military rule and its oppressive methods saw the noose around the press tightening. But the clampdown could not deter Herald and its team from telling the truth. General Zia once got so infuriated with the magazine that, waving a copy at a press conference, he said that he could not tolerate that kind of journalism.

Herald went through another transformation under Razia Bhatti with the launching of its new format in January 1984. Like many other young journalists, I also learnt the ropes at Herald. I joined the magazine in 1983. I was the lone male on the all-female editorial staff at the time, though others joined the crew later. It was the best of times and the worst of times for journalism. The draconian laws had stifled freedom of expression but that also gave rise to a vibrant resistance media.

The new look Herald with its formidable team of talented journalists gave a new dimension to investigative reporting and analysis. Introducing the new Herald Razia Bhatti aptly conveyed the fresh approach to journalism: "We will be hanging on to our punch but hope to add some clout. We'll be playing by ear, but with an eye to the news and a nose for the trend." That became the guiding line for the magazine throughout its publication.

From 1984 to 1988, Herald published many explosive investigative stories despite restrictions under the military rule on issues ranging from political persecution in Sindh to the involvement of security agencies in drug trafficking. Razia would persistently push reporters like us to dig out more facts and clarify the minutest details. She would spend night after night editing stories to perfection.

I remember her spending an entire night working on the intro of Herald's 1986 cover story 'The poppy war', an investigative story I did on the firing on poppy cultivators in Gadoon district of what is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Interestingly, the point that took the longest to clarify was the exact time of dawn in the area when the firing took place. The story went on to win the prestigious Asia-Pacific Award for best editorial writing.

While fiercely guarding their editorial independence, there were some instances where editors were compelled to make some compromises with the management in order for them not to burn their boats. I remember one occasion when Benazir Bhutto returned home upon ending her two-year-long forced exile in 1986. The massive reception she received made headlines in the international media.

It was indeed the biggest story in the world but the management insisted that she should not be put on the cover, though there was no pressure to change the editorial content. A compromise was finally reached whereby a collage of several political leaders

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with Benazir was put on the cover. The cover story remained unchanged with Benazir's hard-hitting interview.

In August 1988, Razia Bhatti along with several other members of the staff left Herald and founded a new magazine, Newsline, with the same approach. Herald continued to publish under different editors — including Sherry Rehman, Arifa Noor and most recently Badar Alam — over the next two decades, carrying on its legacy and maintaining the highest standards of journalism. There was a healthy competition with Newline of which I was also a founding member.

The two magazines made a huge mark not only at home but also internationally. They became the face of the fiercely independent and vibrant Pakistani media. The two magazines produced a whole crop of brilliant investigative journalists and writers over the last four decades. Many of them have made their name in the international media.

The closure of Herald also illustrates the fast changing face of media at home and globally. The importance of a monthly newsmagazine has diminished in the age of 24/7 TV news channels and news websites covering not only breaking stories but also carrying in-depth analyses.

But the rich legacy of independent media left by Herald must be carried on. It has become more imperative than ever for journalists to seek the truth, spotlight injustice and fight for its redressal. It is indeed a tough time for independent media but freedom can only be preserved through resistance.

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Chapter 38

BACK TO HORSE-TRADING

03 Jul 2019

IMRAN Khan seems to be doing everything that he once claimed he was fighting against, including political horse-trading that he had earlier condemned as anathema to democracy. A new wave of arrests has given rise to allegations that his government is carrying out a political witch-hunt. Most ominous is the shrinking space for freedom of expression.

Few leaders have seen such a steep fall from a high pedestal within months of coming to power. A panic-stricken prime minister seems to have lost all sense of proportion. His most recent harangue in the National Assembly and his midnight address to the nation leave one wondering about his capabilities when it comes to navigating the country through the present financial and political morass. It's a Greek tragedy unfolding.

It was reminiscent of the sordid game that has long plagued Pakistani politics when the prime minister recently met some opposition legislators reportedly willing to cross the floor. A federal minister claims there were many more from Punjab waiting in line to shift their political allegiance.

Khan's 'Wasim Akram-plus' seems to have finally blossomed into a fine craftsman engineering defections within the opposition ranks. Mean-while, a dexterous provincial governor through a 'magic wand' is said to have won enough numbers to change the PPP government in Sindh. "It's a matter of time when the PTI will form the government in the province," boasted a federal minister.

What was unholy in the past has now been declared kosher under the rule of a self-proclaimed crusader against corruption. It's certainly not awakening conscience that compels the opposition members to revolt against their 'corrupt' party leaders.

Those of us who are familiar with our sleazy political culture know well how political engineering is done. There is no difference between the infamous 'Changa

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Manga' episode and the 'Banigala' meeting though the mechanics may vary. It is so pathetic to see PTI ministers hailing the turncoats selling their political loyalty.

It is not opportunism or monetary incentive alone that lures opposition members to the ruling party; security agencies too are often instrumental in securing defections. Their footprint has been too obvious in the latest political manoeuvring. The main objective is to prop up a weak coalition in the face of an increasingly aggressive opposition.

Although last week's gathering of opposition parties has not been able to come up with any concrete plan that could threaten the government, it has pressed the panic button in PTI ranks. The smooth passage of the budget has not helped calm Khan's anxiety.

There was nothing in his concluding speech at the budget session of the National Assembly that could raise public confidence in the government trying to deal with the worst financial crisis the country has faced in recent times. It was the same old talk of going after 'thieves who left the country badly in debt'. In fact, Khan's threats of fixing the opposition has made the credibility of the ongoing accountability more questionable.

He has also been charged for his alleged association with some banned sectarian groups. Shocking indeed. The timing of the arrest also makes the case more dubious. It reminds us of instances when political leaders were booked for 'stealing buffalos'. Of course, drug charges are much more serious and under Pakistani law carry the death penalty. It is the first case of its kind involving a senior political leader.

Although the ANF comes under the federal government, much of its staff comes from the army and is headed by a major general. Notwithstanding whether or not the charges are credible, the arrest of a senior political leader may drag the institution into controversy. It's not good for the image of the security establishment that is already in the eye of the storm for the increasingly high political profile of its leadership and its media wing.

Equally disturbing is the unannounced censorship of the media and growing restrictions on freedom of expression. Taking TV programmes off air without providing a sound reason illustrates the stifling of dissenting voices. Intriguingly, TV channels are not supposed to telecast interviews of detained political leaders facing graft charges while there is no bar on them under the law to speak in parliament.

Such draconian measures do not bode well for the democratic process. It is a sign of the government's weakness and exposes its lack of confidence in handling the opposition. While in opposition, Imran Khan had benefited most from the free media but now he is afraid of it.

More troubling is that the government maintains it has nothing to do with the press curbs. Irrespective of who is doing it, it is ultimately the responsibility of the government to ensure media freedom. It is extremely dangerous to leave it to security agencies to run the affairs of the state.

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One lesson of history that Khan should have learnt is that neither horse-trading nor political witch-hunts can provide stability to the government. It is a siege mentality that he needs to break for his own good. Facing a vociferous opposition is also part of the democratic political process.

It is apparent that the opposition is neither in a position nor is seeking to overthrow the government. But by his confrontational politics, the prime minister has made his government extremely unstable and is making it increasingly dependent on security agencies.

These are indeed extremely difficult times for the country that is facing serious financial crises and internal and external security challenges. Worsening political instability could make it more difficult to meet these challenges. Instead of resorting to political gamesmanship for short-term gains, the government needs to keep in view the country's long-term interests.

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Chapter 39

HOUSE OF FEUD

19 Jun 2019

IT is not unusual for the opposition to create a rumpus in parliament, but the spectacle of the treasury benches disrupting a session is shocking. Almost a week into the budget session, the National Assembly has yet to initiate the debate on the finance bill. Such rowdiness stalling the proceedings has rarely been witnessed, making a mockery of the nation's highest elected body.

What with the opposition protesting over the non-production of their detained leaders and the speaker refusing to bend, there is no sign yet of rationality returning to the house soon. The government may still be able to bulldoze the finance bill through, but it will not end the stand-off.

While the combined opposition has upped the ante inside and outside parliament, the prime minister, too, is in an extremely combative mood. In fact, his tone has become more belligerent. Instead of defusing the situation, Imran Khan wants his lawmakers to take a more aggressive stance and block the opposition speeches in the National Assembly.

For the lawmakers to trade barbs and call each other 'thieves' and 'robbers' is extremely disgraceful. The sanctity of parliament has seldom been so badly violated, with its members displaying banners and often getting into a scuffle. Such ugly scenes have almost become routine, and do little to inspire public confidence in the elected institution.

In the last 10 months, there has hardly been any serious debate on critical policy matters inside the National Assembly, let alone legislative business. Of course, the responsibility lies with both sides, but certainly the treasury benches are more to blame for this state of affairs. Instead of defusing the situation, some ministers are more interested in provoking the opposition.

The spectacle at the budget speech of slogan-chanting opposition politicians trying to obstruct Minister Hammad Azhar's speech and almost coming to blows with PTI

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lawmakers was a shameful one. Surely, such scenes are not new in our parliamentary history, but one expected sobriety from the MNAs after the third democratic transition. It is perhaps true that the performance of the current parliament is worse than that of the last two assemblies.

It is highly irrational for the ruling party to oppose production orders for the members in the custody of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). It's a complete departure from past tradition, and the stance of the speaker, who is supposed to be impartial, has been highly controversial.

One cannot understand the logic behind the decision to not let the detained members who are not even convicted to attend parliament. The problem with Imran Khan is that for him, everyone else in parliament, except for his own party members, is corrupt and should not be there. This sense of self-righteousness and mulishness is partly responsible for the increasing political tensions; it is also undermining elected democratic institutions.

Not satisfied with NAB going after the opposition leaders, Imran Khan now wants to set up a commission to probe the debt problem and what he describes as the 'misuse of borrowed money' by previous governments. Indeed, the massive debt piled up over the past years has contributed to the country's worst financial crisis. But the latter has more to do with flawed economic and fiscal policies pursued by successive governments, and is not necessarily linked to corruption. Economists and financial experts, rather than military and civilian intelligence agencies as suggested by the prime minister, must examine the issue of debt. The purpose should be to find the solution to the problem and not to use it for a political witch-hunt.

Imran Khan has a tendency to see things from a very narrow prism. He has a very simplistic approach to dealing with complex issues. That has also been a major reason for his blundering through since taking the reins of power. More dangerous, however, is his government's growing dependence on intelligence and security agencies and involving them even in areas beyond their mandate and expertise.

His midnight television address last week was a national embarrassment. One fails to understand the rationale behind threatening the opposition, hours after the announcement of the budget. One expected the prime minister to explain to the people why tough financial measures were needed and to mobilise public opinion in favour of the reform programme.

Instead, the entire focus of his rambling and disjointed talk was on the 'misdeeds' of the previous governments. He said after having stabilised the economy he would concentrate his efforts on accelerating the anti-corruption drive. However, the claim of putting the economy back on track is premature; it will be a long while before the financial crisis is over.

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True, it is a daunting challenge for the PTI government to clear the financial mess that it has inherited, and it needs to take tough and unpopular reform measures. But Imran Khan's confrontationist approach makes the task for the government that much harder.

For these tough but necessary budgetary actions, the government needs to lower the political temperature instead of raising it. Indeed, the economy may be showing a few signs of recovery, but continuing political instability could affect its revival. By rendering parliament irrelevant, the government is attempting to rely on unelected institutions. Technocrats are useful for providing expertise in certain fields but they should not be allowed to dominate decisions and run the government.

Some unconfirmed reports suggest the government is planning to set up an 'economic security council' that would include the top security leadership. Such a move could only weaken the civilian authority and formally expand the role of the military although the latter's shadow has already lengthened under the PTI government. The latest change in the leadership of the country's premier intelligence agency has also raised eyebrows. The development has become more significant given the emerging opposition alliance. The concerns may be exaggerated, but perceptions are important.

Economic and political stability are interlinked. Strengthening the civilian democratic process is a prerequisite for economic recovery. It is in the interest of the government to lower tensions inside and outside parliament. A combative approach will harm the government more. It is imperative to restore the sanctity of parliament and its role as a representative body.

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Chapter 40

BACK IN THE DOCK

12 Jun 2019

ASIF Ali Zardari is back in prison that he has called his 'second home'. The noose had been tightening around him for long and it was just a matter of time before he would be nabbed. He has been there before but the circumstances of his latest ordeal are markedly different. The spectacle of an old man walking with support was in sharp contrast to the bravado he had exhibited during detention in the past.

For a man who spent 11 years of his political life in prison it would not be like 'home' this time around; both politics and age are against him. It is not that the charges Zardari faced in the past were less serious, but the time and situation appear less favourable for the crafty politician.

Although Zardari had never been convicted in the past, it seems harder for him to come out unscathed from the multiple graft cases against him this time. He is in hot water yet again with a damning charge against him in a money-laundering case. There are several other cases of corruption under investigation against him and his family.

He has been accused of running dubious financial and business networks worth billions of rupees through front men. Zardari's alleged corruption has been under discussion for years, but now, given the incriminating evidence produced against him by investigators, it will not be easy to fight conviction, especially with the axe falling on other political leaders too.

Perhaps most troubling for the PPP is the fact that it is not only the fate of its co-chairman that hangs in the balance but of its other leaders as well, including one of Zardari's sisters who faces similar charges. Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, who is preparing to take over command of the party, has also been under investigation.

Indeed, some allegations against Zardari for accumulating wealth through dubious means seem hard to defend. But the credibility of the ongoing accountability process itself is questionable and exposes the National Accountability Bureau to criticism that it

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is carrying out a witch-hunt as well as an exercise in selective accountability. The prime minister's threat to put the opposition leaders behind bars has reinforced this perception.

Zardari epitomises the perpetual ironies of Pakistani politics. For the past three decades, he alternated between prison and power. Arguably the most maligned politician in Pakistan, he even managed to reach the highest pedestal of power.

He spent three years in prison facing trial on a litany of corruption charges after the overthrow of Benazir Bhutto's first government in what is described as a 'military-backed constitutional coup' in 1990. He was elected as a member of the National Assembly from prison.

It was an unforgettable moment in Pakistan's political history when Zardari was released from prison and sworn in as a federal minister in the interim government formed after the ouster of Nawaz Sharif's government in 1993 by the then president Ghulam Ishaq Khan who was also responsible for his imprisonment.

Zardari was a prominent member of his wife's second government. But, after the fall of the PPP government, he was back in prison in 1996 on similar corruption charges. This time he spent almost eight years in prison before being released in 2004 as the Musharraf government sought reconciliation with the PPP. Interestingly, all the graft cases against Zardari were filed under Nawaz Sharif's two governments in the 1990s.

Senior military officials remained in contact with him in prison trying to make a deal that could have paved the way for the PPP to join the government. But the negotiations went nowhere. The cases against him dragged on without him getting convicted. All the cases against Zardari were later withdrawn under an agreement, also known as the NRO, between the Musharraf government and the PPP in 2007. The Supreme Court, however, later annulled the ordinance and restored all cases.

In the years following his release in 2004, he got himself elected as the country's president. An accidental leader as a result of Benazir Bhutto's assassination, not only did Zardari become the first democratically elected president in the country to have completed his full term, he also left office with a guard of honour. He is also rightly credited for the enactment of the 18th Constitutional Amendment that granted greater autonomy to the provinces.

But that may not be the reason alone for which Zardari will be remembered. There is indeed a ring of truth to the widespread perception of his government being one of the most incompetent and corrupt in Pakistan's recent history. As a result, the PPP was dealt a humiliating defeat in the 2013 elections, limiting to Sindh the writ of the once most powerful political force in the country.

Will history repeat itself yet again for the country's most controversial leader? The charges against Zardari are indeed serious; yet, given the unpredictability of Pakistani politics nothing is impossible. But whether or not Zardari is convicted, the possibility of

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his return to the political centre stage remains limited. He had already taken a back seat in the party leadership, allowing Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari to take charge.

Slowly but surely, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari is making his presence felt on the national political scene. He has infused new life into the PPP that many thought was on the ventilator. He has certainly inherited the charisma and the mass appeal of the Bhuttos that had been missing from the party since the assassination of his mother.

But there is still a long way to go before he can take the party out of his father's shadow and away from past baggage. He remains trapped between two conflicting legacies — one inherited from his grandfather and mother, the other from his wily father. It will require much more than mere rhetoric for the party to reclaim its lost position. The current crisis that the party is going through also provides an opportunity for the leadership to clear some unpleasant baggage.

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Chapter 41

THE GATHERING STORM

05 Jun 2019

"History is a symptom of our disease" — Mao Zedong

NOT even a year after the PTI came to power, the summer of discontent is upon us. A beleaguered administration is confronting several fronts. The emerging political alignment that has brought bitter rivals the PML-N and the PPP together is ominous, although it may be sheer political expediency that has forced the two to join hands. Indeed, it signifies the shifting sands of Pakistani politics

These disparate opposition groups may not be able to bring down the government through street power. Yet jointly, they have already made things more difficult for Imran Khan, who is struggling to come to grips with a dire economic situation. The main opposition parties have announced they will launch nationwide anti-government protests after Eid.

Even more worrisome, however, is the looming confrontation between the government and the legal fraternity that is now up in arms on the issue of the presidential references against superior court judges. The Supreme Judicial Council is due to take up the reference against Justice Qazi Faez Isa on June 14.

It is perhaps the second time such a reference has been filed against a sitting Supreme Court judge, though there have been several instances in the past where the top judges have been removed forcibly. Accusing the government of having mala fide intentions, the bar associations have threatened to "lockdown the courts" if the reference is upheld.

The stand-off is turning serious with the government refusing to withdraw the reference. The cabinet has warned against agitation over the issue, insisting that the references have been filed according to the law. According to the government, there is no sacred cow and no one is above the law.

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That seems to have further infuriated the lawyers. In a hard-hitting statement, the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association threatened to go beyond street agitation and protest inside the courts. The lawyer community has rallied behind the SCBA call. Such unity of lawyer bodies is rare — and extremely alarming given the rising political temperature.

Now the matter is with the Supreme Judicial Council and one has to wait for its ruling. But the controversy around the references has serious political implications. Either way, whether the references are upheld or not, it will not be a happy situation for the government. The issue has already galvanised the opposition parties, rights groups and civil society.

It is reminiscent of the 2007 situation, following the removal of the then chief justice Chaudhry Iftikhar by Gen Musharraf. With the opposition parties upping the ante, the situation could turn dangerous for the government. It is as if history is repeating itself. The issue has become a potent rallying cry for all anti-government forces.

Questions have also been raised about the timing of the move against the judges, notwithstanding its legality. Meanwhile, the government is under attack for allegedly putting curbs on media freedom. A generally depressing economic outlook — high inflation, rising utility bills, etc — has fuelled the public's discontent. A government under distress has given the opposition a huge political boost.

Can the government end this siege that it is responsible for? There is a huge question mark over its capacity to deal with these multiple challenges. It is hard for any government to fight on so many fronts and, indeed, much more so for a coalition riven by serious internal differences. The government seems to be on auto pilot and completely oblivious to the gathering storm that could bring it down.

Sensing the gravity of the situation, some of the coalition partners have started reviewing their options, further adding to the government's woes. Akhtar Mengal, whose party support is critical for the survival of the coalition administration, now regularly appears with the opposition. Some other allied parties, too, have publicly expressed their reservations over policy issues.

It has been the establishment's backing that provided a semblance of stability to Imran Khan's government so far. In fact, the establishment has gained far more space now as the government loses control. Its role is much more expansive than under any civilian administration in the past. But with the worsening crisis of governance, things could change dramatically. Too many fronts are hard to defend.

Meanwhile, some recent developments on the political front are quite ominous. Most significant is the resurfacing of Maryam Nawaz on the political stage after a period of hibernation. She had gone silent after being convicted by an anti-corruption court last year.

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Despite her release on bail, her political activities remained restricted to comments on social media. One of the reasons for her taking a back seat was believed to be the decision by the PML-N to tamp down a confrontation with the military establishment and judiciary.

But the party's strategy seems to have changed after the Supreme Court rejected a petition to extend Nawaz Sharif's release on bail. With little possibility of Shahbaz Sharif returning to the country soon, the way has been cleared for Maryam Nawaz's reactivation.

After the recent restructuring of the PML-N's top hierarchy, Maryam Nawaz's position has been strengthened. For the first time, she has formally been given a leadership role after her appointment as the party's vice president. It seems the party has decided to up the ante in order to make its political presence felt, but remains careful to avoid any clash with the powerful military establishment.

Her meeting with Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari last month also seems to be a part of the PML-N's new strategy to step up the pressure on the PTI government. The PPP leader has already made his mark in the National Assembly with scathing attacks on the prime minister and on the dismal performance of the PTI government.

The two joining hands at this stage is certainly not a good omen for a besieged government. Few governments have succeeded in fighting on multiple fronts. It's a lesson of history that Imran Khan should heed.

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Chapter 42

MORALITY AND PUBLIC OFFICE

29 May 2019

EXCEPTIONAL personal moral standards ought to be a prerequisite for holding high public office, particularly in the case of those whose task it is to judge the morality of others. But unfortunately, such high standards are in short supply in this land of the pure. That has led to diminishing public trust in our state institutions.

In the wake of recent allegations of turpitude involving the head of the country's top accountability bureau, the question of morality and ethics in public office has assumed greater relevance. As played out on social media, in mainstream media and in the public discourse, the allegations of immoral behaviour on the part of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) chief are too serious to be dismissed as a 'conspiracy to malign him'.

Justice Javed Iqbal has been in the eye of the storm for some time now, because of the controversy surrounding the draconian accountability process.His public stance has not helped ensure impartial implementation of the law. His latest remarks to the local media have brought into question the entire anti-corruption drive.

His comments about opposition leaders seeking some kind of a deal to extricate themselves from the graft cases against them, and pressure from different quarters on him not to act against certain elements, has prompted questions about his own impartiality. Being a former judge of the Supreme Court, one expected from him a greater degree of caution.

A major question is whether he should be speaking to the media at all and giving his personal views. The reaction of the opposition parties and the storm his remarks have stirred were predictable, and have reinforced perceptions of the accountability process in the country being politically motivated. The clarification issued by NAB did not satisfy the critics.

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More damaging, however, have been the video and audio recordings that purportedly showed the NAB chief engaging in overly familiar conduct with the wife of a man under investigation by the bureau. A mainstream private TV channel was the first to air the videos. Although they were immediately taken off air on Pemra's orders and the channel tendered an apology, the recordings went viral on social media.

While the authenticity of the recordings is yet to be proved, the damage has been done. Again, the official NAB statement left many questions unanswered. It was not enough to dismiss the recordings as fake.

A major question is whether Justice Iqbal had any contact with the person in the recording. The opposition's demand for a parliamentary investigation into the matter is valid. There is also a need for a forensic examination to ascertain whether the recordings are real or fake. It is a serious allegation against the holder of a high and important public office and must not be set aside.

What has made the matter more complex is the ongoing blame game between the government and the opposition parties. The two major opposition parties — the PML-N and the PPP — that have long been questioning the impartiality of NAB and its chief now seem to be more interested in blaming the government for leaking the videos in order to bring the bureau under pressure. According to them, the government wanted NAB to stop investigations against PTI leaders.

It is an absurd conspiracy theory that diverts focus on the real issue. On the other hand, the government wants to put aside allegations of misconduct against the NAB chief fearing that it could obstruct the ongoing corruption probes against opposition leaders. It is irrelevant how the recordings were leaked; the real issue is to verify the authenticity of the allegations.

More importantly, it is the reputation of NAB as an impartial investigative body that is at stake. The latest allegations against its head have brought this premier anti-corruption body under intense public scrutiny. It is crucial to reach a conclusion on the scandal.

Surely, corruption is a major problem that saps the economic and social progress of the country. But the flaws in the bureau's own operations are certainly not going to help the so-called anti-corruption campaign. Its sweeping authority has rendered the anti-graft body unaccountable.

Under NAB laws, anyone can be detained on mere allegations. In some cases, the accused have been detained for months without charge to enable the authorities to extract a confession from them and make them agree to a plea bargain. Such draconian measures have made the so-called accountability process questionable.

In fact, there is a need to revisit all NAB laws that violate the basic norms of justice, making the body controversial. Although NAB is supposed to be an autonomous body, in

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effect it has never been so. The NAB chief's remarks in the interview bolster the perception of selective accountability and political victimisation.

It is true that many of the politicians may have been involved in wrongdoing, but the way in which cases have been pursued against a selected few has made NAB's actions open to criticism. Therefore, it is imperative to overhaul the bureau, make it independent of political pressure, and remove its inhuman face.

It is equally important to ensure that the head of the organisation is a person of integrity with high ethical standards. Personal moral values, therefore, have to be impeccable. Ethics in public service must meet the highest principles. Anyone holding high public office is morally bound to abide by the latter.

The NAB chief must emerge clean from the allegations if public trust in the accountability process is to be restored. It would be appropriate if he stepped down to allow an impartial investigation. The other option is for the government to send a reference to the Supreme Court. Any expediency on the part of the government would be extremely damaging for its promise to establish the rule of law.

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Chapter 43

AN ECONOMIC CHARTER

15 May 2019

IT is not for the first time that we have gone to the IMF for a bailout. Even those who are shouting 'sellout!' from the rooftops know full well that it was unavoidable. Whether one likes it or not, the conditionalities are tied to the Fund's facility and the process of stabilisation is bound to be painful. But do we have any choice in the matter? An economy in a shambles has to be fixed, and for that, tough actions are needed.

A staff-level agreement has been reached between Pakistan and the IMF, though the final nod is still awaited from the stakeholders and the details have not been revealed thus far. But even so, one can say that it is probably going to be the harshest IMF programme that Pakistan has ever embarked upon.

The conditionalities this time are not just economic; there are also strong political overtones. The final approval is conditional on some upfront measures that the government is required to take. There is a suggestion that the programme be linked to clearance by the Financial Action Task Force.

Pakistan has the dubious distinction of going to the Fund more than a dozen times but of completing only a few programmes — and that too partially. Every government over the last three decades entered the IMF's structural adjustment programme but the state of the economy has gone from bad to worse.

While some of the IMF prescriptions would, indeed, hit us hard, many of the adjustments and reforms that we have agreed to should have been undertaken already. It is worth pondering why we are in a greater financial mess three years after the completion of the last IMF programme. It is obvious that we never stick to our commitments.

Now we are supposed to start all over again and under far more adverse conditions. We didn't need the IMF to tell us to widen our tax base, increase revenues, cut the losses incurred by public-sector enterprises, and reduce public expenditure. The government

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says it is serious in fulfilling its commitment to carry out structural reforms. Haven't we heard all this before? The PTI government's several flip-flops in its rule of nine months so far do not inspire much hope. The new economic team may appear more experienced and professional but it is not enough to deal with hard realities on the ground.

It is more about politics than the economy. It is the extractive institutions of the state and the ruling elite that are the biggest impediment in the way of any meaningful reform. These vested interests are too powerful for any government to take on. As a result, it is mostly the middle class and poorer sections of the population that bear the brunt of economic adjustments.

Making the rich and powerful pay their taxes will be the biggest challenge for the government. The major resistance to any reform is likely to come from the ruling elite that is not willing to give up its privileges. The government that came to power on the promise of widening the tax net has not been able to meet even the revenue target set in the last annual budget let alone increase the size of the kitty. The shortfall is over Rs300 billion.

With the IMF programme, the government is now required to raise Rs700bn more through new taxation and better recovery. Frequent changes at the top are not likely to improve the performance of the Federal Board of Revenue. Even if some steps are taken to reform the department it may not produce immediate results.

After castigating the tax amnesty launched by the previous government as 'legitimising corruption', the PTI has now introduced one of its own with more sweeping concessions. This is yet another of many schemes being marketed in the hope to bring the massive black economy into the mainstream. The previous schemes under different governments have not been very successful in getting people to declare their hidden wealth and bring them into the tax net. Let's see whether or not people respond to the incentive.

Perhaps the most daunting challenge for the government is to cut non-development expenditure. Imran Khan's austerity drive has not been able to make any significant impact on the fiscal situation. While it is important to stop the haemorrhaging of government-controlled enterprises, there is also a need to cut expenditures across the board.

Although defence expenditure, that constitutes almost a fourth of the budget, is a taboo subject, it does need to be discussed and reviewed. Surely security is important — but so is the overall economy. An economy in perpetual crisis presents the biggest security threat. Our sovereignty is already compromised with our increasing external financial dependence. There is always room to cut out the fat without jeopardising the security. Austerity drives must also be extended to the armed forces.

It is apparent that the federal government alone cannot deal with the current financial crisis. The situation has become much more complex after the 18th Amendment gave

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greater financial and administrative autonomy to the provinces. There is a need to build a political consensus to take the country out of the bog.

Political instability has been a major factor contributing to our economic and financial plight. For a coalition government to take tough and unpopular decisions and implement a reform agenda is extremely difficult. The IMF agreement will give us some financial breathing space to manage the situation, but much more is needed if we are to sail through the crisis and move towards growth.

It is imperative for the PTI government to take the opposition on board not only with regard to the IMF programme but also for starting a consultative process with the provincial governments. The government may not be able to achieve economic stability without political stability. The present atmosphere of confrontation has aggravated political uncertainty that has a direct bearing on the economy.

More importantly, Prime Minister Imran Khan needs to show statesmanship to lower the political temperature. He should take up the offer put forward by former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi to initiate an inter-party dialogue on a 'charter of economy'.

Published in Dawn, May 15th, 2019

Chapter 44

REVITALISING DEVOLUTION

08 May 2019

THE question of devolution of power to the grass roots is often missing in the discourse on democratic transformation. It, however, goes to the credit of the PTI that it has focused on this extremely critical issue. Notwithstanding some concerns about its viability, the passage of the Punjab Local Government Act, 2019, marks the most serious attempt to bring governance closer to the people. An elected and empowered local government system is vital to the democratic process.

Despite being a constitutional obligation, the local government system has never been a priority for democratically elected governments in the past. In fact, every effort has been made to render local bodies ineffective. Even those political parties that have been championing the cause of provincial autonomy are not willing to devolve power further down.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that we did not have functional local governments for several years after democracy returned to the country in 2008. That included the full tenure of the PPP government (2008 to 2013) and the first three years of the PML-N government. It was only after the intervention of the Supreme Court that elections were held in 2015. This was the first time in Pakistan's history that local elections were conducted on a party basis.

However, the provinces did little to facilitate the process of making the local governments truly functional. The truncated powers under the new legislation enacted by the PML-N government in Punjab and the PPP in Sindh had rendered the elected local bodies ineffective. The local governments had nominal powers and few funds at their disposal to carry out development work. Matters improved somewhat when the Supreme Court intervened again, ordering the provincial bodies to speed up the transfer of authority to the new elected local bodies.

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Ironically, the local government system was much more powerful under successive military governments, though for reasons other than strengthening democracy. Notwithstanding some flaws, the local governments enjoyed much greater administrative and fiscal powers under Gen Musharraf's military-led dispensation. Instead of improving upon it to make the system more democratic, the PML-N and PPP governments disempowered them. There were heavily centralised power structures in both provinces.

Although the PTI's experiment in KP may not have been a great success, there has certainly been a sincere effort to strengthen the local government system. It is apparent that the decentralisation in KP is much broader than in the other provinces. The province has devolved power beyond the district, tehsil and union council levels of local government to even the lower tiers of village and neighbourhood councils.

There is, however, still a lot of room for improvement in the system to make it much more effective. Political and bureaucratic hurdles need to be removed in order to make the system work more smoothly. It remains to be seen what kind of changes are made by the provincial government.

Undoubtedly, the latest local government law for Punjab envisions far wider and more radical reforms. Elected neighbourhood and village councils with powers to decide and supervise development work in their areas are likely to give the people greater control over their lives. It may also lead to the weakening of the existing power structure.

The new system promises to devolve 30 per cent of the annual provincial development budget to the local governments. It is a move in the right direction that could help reduce regional disparity. Surely, it will take some time for the new order to take root, but it is a first, and significant, step towards involving people in development work. The centralisation of power is one of the major reasons for the backwardness of some regions.

One of the most radical provisions in the act is the direct election of town and city mayors. This system exists in most democracies but was never implemented in Pakistan. It certainly makes sense. Direct elections will strengthen participatory democracy. Taxation powers and control over development work will indeed make the office of mayor effective.

Surely we have a mayoral system in a few big cities in Pakistan, but without much authority as the real administrative power is with the provincial governments. Cities with millions of people are more or less run by the provincial minister for local government.

The extensive devolutionary process proposed in Punjab's new law may bring a radical shift in existing power dynamics. Instead of MNAs and MPAs, the elected mayors will be controlling development in their areas. Thus the reservations of some lawmakers within the ruling PTI and outside over the reforms are understandable.

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A major question is whether or not the Sindh government will also be willing to change its existing local government system to devolve power to the grass roots. Accumulation of power including muni-cipal jobs leaves the local bodies non-functional.

Karachi is a glaring example of how the concentration of power by the provincial government has left little authority for the elected authorities of the country's largest city with a population of 20 million. Even the responsibility of solid waste collection has been taken over by the Sindh government.

No wonder Karachi has become the most mismanaged city, resulting in the complete collapse of essential municipal services. The situation in other metropolitan centres, like Hyderabad, Sukkur and Larkana, is not very different. This state of affairs has widened the political fault lines in the province. The PPP's resistance to devolving power is likely to make the situation worse.

While being the main architect of the 18th Amendment that turned Pakistan into a truly federal state by giving greater autonomy to the provinces, the PPP is not willing to comply with one of its most important clauses relating to devolution of power to the local governments. It prompts questions about the party's democratic and progressive credentials. Its policy on devolution of power to the local level is dictated by vested interests.

Meanwhile, although the new law in Punjab is indeed a radical move, much more is needed to strengthen and revitalise the devolution process critical to achieving as many layers of democratic governance as possible.

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Chapter 45

DIALOGUE WORKS BETTER

01 May 2019

THE charges were serious and so was the tenor. There was no mincing of words. Time was up for the PTM, warned the DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor, hinting that some kind of action was being contemplated against the group's leadership, though there was no elaboration.

The briefing again highlighted the growing political role of the military's media wing as a number of non-military subjects were discussed, including madressah reform that should come under the education department. But the remarks about the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement were perhaps the most worrying.

It is not for the first time that the PTM leadership has been accused of working on a foreign agenda. But the allegation of receiving funding from hostile intelligence agencies is extremely disconcerting. Some specific details were given about the group's alleged foreign links, a charge that was denied by the PTM leadership.

Certainly, given their seriousness, the allegations must be investigated. But public indictment of political leaders some of whom are elected members of parliament, without substantive evidence that could prove the charges in a court of law carries its own perils. More worrisome is getting the security establishment directly involved in a matter that should be dealt with politically and through a legal process. Engaging in public polemics is damaging for security institutions, and only reinforces the perception of the state's growing militarisation.

Curiously, the warning has come just days after Prime Minister Imran Khan publicly endorsed the demands of the movement, though deploring the tenor of its leaders and their anti-military campaign. The PTI had also offered party tickets to top PTM leaders in the last elections,

Meanwhile, a Senate committee had invited PTM leaders, including Manzoor Pashteen, for a hearing. Mushahid Hussain, the chairman of the committee hailed the

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event as historic and stressed the need for a continuing dialogue. Where were the charges of foreign links and foreign funding then? Would the prime minister and Senate committee chairman not be aware of seditious activities?

What prompts public scepticism is that several Pakistani political leaders have faced charges of being foreign-sponsored. Even prime ministers and others holding high public offices have been declared security risks and foreign agents in the past. Political leaders accused of treason were often allowed to take the political centre stage after they mended fences with the security apparatus. One such example has been that of the MQM that had long alternated between being ostracised as a foreign proxy and becoming part of successive governments.

Surely, one cannot condone the provocative slogans and inflammatory rhetoric of some of the PTM leaders, but looking for a foreign hand behind the rise of a popular nationalist movement does not help resolve the basic problem. Both the civil and military leadership acknowledge that there have been genuine reasons for anger on the part of the tribal population. Being in the conflict zone for almost four decades the people of KP, including former Fata, have suffered not only because of fighting but also due to the negligence and apathy shown by the state.

It was the anger particularly among the young generation of Pakhtuns that caused the PTM's rise as a mass movement. Instead of seriously addressing the causes, there seems to be an attempt to prevent it from getting media coverage. Such moves only prove counterproductive and increase the alienation of an already angry generation.

In fact, in this age of social media blacking out events in the mainstream media does not work. It was the closing space for rational dialogue at home that caught the attention of the international media, which contributed to strengthening the narrative of Pakhtun victimisation, however false it may be.

It might be true that the Pakhtuns are not in any way a marginalised ethnic group, and they have significant representation in the establishment. However, ordinary people have suffered most in the so-called war on terror. They have also been the main victims in the past when militancy was perceived as a tool of foreign policy. Millions of people were displaced from their homes for years. Many of them went back to the ruins of their homes after the military operations. Their anger was galvanised by the rise of the movement.

Notwithstanding the conscious efforts of some elements to turn to chauvinism, the movement has so far remained peaceful, and there have not been incidents of any violence in its protest rallies, which is quite a rare phenomenon in Pakistani politics. The move to turn it into an anti-state movement can only be criticised, and the use of force would fuel negative propaganda.

There is no denying the sacrifices rendered by Pakistan's security forces in eliminating militancy and bringing the former tribal areas into the national mainstream. It

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is wrong to blame the security establishment for everything that has gone wrong in the strife-torn region. But any attempt to suppress the protests will only widen alienation.

It may be true that in this age of hybrid war, hostile foreign intelligence agencies are exploiting discontent for their own vested interests. But the inept handling of the situation will only help their agenda. Any rash action could be disastrous for the country. Warnings of the sort given at the briefing can only make people angrier.

It is an issue that must be dealt with politically. The prime minister has taken the right approach in handling the problem. The allegation of foreign funding is very serious and no state can tolerate foreign meddling in its internal matters. There is an urgent need to investigate the matter and action must be taken if the charges are substantiated.

More important, however, is that the blackout of the PTM should be lifted. The Senate committee has done a right thing by hearing the PTM leaders. This kind of dialogue must continue. A rational dialogue is the only way out of the problem.

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Chapter 46

A TECHNOCRATIC SOLUTION?

08 May 2019

THE change may have been in the offing for some time, but still the abruptness of it was disconcerting. The cabinet shake-up within eight months of coming to power indicates that a serious problem has beset the PTI government. The sacking of a few ministers and reshuffling cabinet positions is not likely to stem the rot. Now a hapless prime minister is seeking a technocratic solution to his predicament. Can it work?

Nothing could be more bizarre than the decision to sack the country's finance minister in the middle of critical negotiations with the IMF and just weeks before the announcement of the annual budget. Asad Umar may have his shortcomings, but he cannot be held solely responsible for the chaos in economic policy. The prime minister must accept part of the blame for the drift too.

It was extremely humiliating for a leading member of government and the party to be shown the door in this manner. The news about his imminent exit was already out when Asad Umar was still in Washington negotiating a bailout package with the IMF. Hours before the notification, he sounded secure about his position. Surely he had been in the eye of the storm for quite some time and had also faced criticism for his handling of the economy within the party. Yet, few expected the axe to fall in this way.

Then there is also the question about the other factors influencing the shake-up. Curiously, the rumours about the change suddenly gained currency after the reported interaction of a group of media persons with the top military leadership. The security establishment appears increasingly concerned about the financial crisis. A floundering PTI government has allowed it to further expand its space. Its shadow is now perceptible over a wider political spectrum.

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There may not be any doubt about the competence of Hafeez Sheikh, but his choice as the new economic czar reinforces the perception of the growing role of the establishment in policy matters. Hafeez Sheikh's name came from nowhere at the last moment. It seems that even senior PTI leaders were not in the loop.

A former finance minister in the last PPP government who had also been an important member of the Musharraf government, Sheikh was never known to have any association even remotely with the PTI. It's no more a secret that his induction in the PPP government also came on the recommendation of the then security leadership. Even though he is very much an experienced hand and an able economist, the challenges he will be facing are daunting.

Whether or not the new economic adviser will be able to deliver depends largely on the political will of the PTI government. One cannot expect miracles to happen with a weak political leadership unable to take tough decisions and effectively implement much-needed structural reforms. Moreover, for economic reform to work, there is also a need for the government to build political consensus. It needs more than just putting a competent economist at the helm.

It is apparent that Sheikh's appointment is part of a move by the prime minister to rely more on technocrats to run the government. Besides finance, some other key ministries are headed by non-elected advisers now, including commerce, health and information. Surely technocrats are important as they bring in expertise where it is lacking, but the responsibility of policy formulation cannot be left with the non-elected technocrats.

No policy can be successful if it is not based on ground and political realities. Greater reliance on technocrats in a parliamentary form of government weakens the political process. The idea of technocrats delivering good governance is a myth and has repeatedly been proved wrong. As the PTI government relies more on non-elected technocrats, the party has become weaker.

Restructuring the cabinet is indeed part of a normal political process. Ministers who do not perform ought to be sent home, but arbitrary decisions can also have a demoralising effect on the party and government. The manner in which the changes have been made has certainly not reinforced the confidence of the party in the leadership. Some of the new appointments are extremely controversial.

While Sheikh's appointment was a surprise, perhaps Khan's most controversial move is the elevation of retired Brig Ijaz Shah as the new interior minister, a portfolio that was earlier held by the prime minister himself. A former Intelligence Bureau chief, Shah now holds one of the most powerful positions in the federal cabinet. The move has reinforced the perception that Khan's government represents Musharraf's legacy.

The induction in the cabinet of such relics of the past prompts an important question, and one that negates Khan's promises to break with the status quo and introduce a new

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generation of leaders. At this point, the PTI government looks no different from previous governments. The fact that there's still more of the old than the new has further dented the PTI's claim of being a party of change.

Disarray and widening divisions in the party are more palpable post cabinet shake-up. The speculation about a change of guard in Punjab and KP has intensified the jostling among various groups and factions within the party. Khan's recent warning to the provincial chief ministers to get their act together is viewed as a signal for change. But continued indecisiveness has added to the prevailing uncertainty, further affecting governance in the provinces.

Most worrisome is the ruling party's weakening hold in parliament. The PTI's inability to effectively defend the government in the face of an increasingly aggressive opposition has been badly exposed in recent sessions. It was an embarrassing situation for the ruling party when Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari launched a blistering attack on the government and the prime minister in the current National Assembly session. There was no one from the front benches to counter the criticism.

What the prime minister will not understand is that merely turning to technocrats may not deliver. More than new faces, the government needs a clear direction and a vision for change.

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Chapter 4:

BETTING ON PRESIDENTIAL RULE

17 Apr 201

WHETHER Pakistan will be better off with a presidential system of government c not — the debate is perennial. But the proposition now seems to have assumed a mor serious connotation. There is a growing scepticism within the ruling PTI and th establishment over the viability of the existing parliamentary democracy.

In a recent media interview, President Arif Alvi revealed that the PTI has seriousl been discussing whether to switch to a presidential rule. For many in the party, only centralised power structure could ensure political and economic stability in the country Such arguments are not new. They manifest an increasing tendency toward authoritarianism. It's more about the crisis of governance rather than failure c parliamentary democracy.

It is apparent that Imran Khan is not comfortable working within the confines of th parliamentary system. He has been voicing his frustration at various forums. He feel constrained without absolute power. He would not even attend parliamentary session because of a vociferous opposition. He would not interact with the opposition leader even on issues that require consultation according to the law and the Constitution.

Lacking a clear majority in parliament, the prime minister needs the support of th opposition to legislate, but he would not seek it. As a result, the government has failed t do any legislation in the last eight months. Can this be described as a failure of the syster or as Imran Khan's own egotism? In a parliamentary democracy one needs to learn t make compromises where they are needed. One cannot blame the opposition for one' own ineptitude and mistakes.

Over the last 70 years, the country has alternated between authoritarian militar regimes and ineffectual elected civilian rule. For most of its history, the country has bee

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ruled by the powerful military with short spans of elected civilian democracy in between. Consequently, democratic institutions and values that are necessary to sustain parliamentary democracy have remained weak.

Still, we have seen three democratic transitions in a row. While there may be questions about the credibility of the elections, democracy has taken root, though it is still very fragile. Surely, the parliamentary system has its flaws and does not have an enviable record when it comes to performance. But a unitary form of government doesn't provide a solution to the problems. In fact, an attempt to return to a centralised state will have very serious political repercussions. The controversy over the 18th Amendment is also a part of the move to weaken the federal structure. Such attempts could widen various political and ethnic fault lines.

What is needed is to reform the existing system rather than move toward a more centralised power structure. A major problem hindering the democratic process is that there has been no fundamental change in Pakistan's political power structure. A small power elite has dominated the country's political scene under both civilian and military rule. The extractive nature of the state's institutions has prevented the country from embarking on a path of economic and political progress.

Despite the economic and social changes that have occurred over the past 70 years, the stranglehold of family-oriented politics has been perpetuated. A limited number of influential families continue to control Pakistani legislatures. A sense of dynastic entitlement dominates the country's political culture, impeding the development of institutional democracy.

With few exceptions, almost all the political parties are an extension of powerful families with hereditary leadership. This decadent power structure has been strengthened by authoritarian military regimes that have ruled the country for the larger part of its history. The control exercised by a narrow oligarchy has impeded the critical structural reforms needed for sustainable economic development and for strengthening democratic and economic institutions.

Another challenge hindering the democratic process is that Pakistani politics has increasingly become region-based, with even the mainstream national political parties now focusing on their provincial strongholds. This regionalisation of politics has also been a factor in the country's failure to build a national narrative on critical issues. While the 18th Amendment has turned Pakistan into a truly federal democracy by giving the provinces greater autonomy, the failure to further devolve power remains a major problem.

Some promoters of the presidential form of government contend that the economy performs much better under authoritarian regimes. This is a completely flawed argument. The relatively high economic growth achieved under military rule had mainly been

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driven by massive foreign aid as payback for the military's services in various American wars.

The increasing dependence on foreign financial support had also been a major factor in our failure to carry out any structural reform that could put the country on the path to sustained economic progress. There had been very little investment in the development of human infrastructure. Education, health and population planning remained on the lowest rung of priorities.

That has been one of the major reasons for our backwardness. Imran Khan does not hide his admiration for Ayub Khan and other military rulers for their development work. But he forgets to mention much else. Thirty years of direct military rule has also been responsible for the country falling behind in all social indicators. Interestingly, all the military governments in Pakistan had tried to civilianise themselves, thus strengthening the power structure that remains the basic obstacle in the way of the development of democratic culture and economic progress.

Whether the presidential order suits the country more is a futile debate. It will not be possible for the PTI government or for the establishment to change the Constitution. Imran Khan is neither Recep Erdoğan, nor is Pakistan Turkey. A unitary form of government cannot keep a multinational country united. A presidential form of government does not provide the solution to our complex political and financial problems.

Instead of trying to change the system, the government must focus on removing the shortcomings in the existing political order by working with other political forces. The country cannot afford to experiment with a system that has long been thrown into the dustbin of history.

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Chapter 48

PTI IN LA-LA LAND

April 2019

THE magic wand has not worked. The promise of change has turned into a nightmare. Still, there is no shortage of self-congratulations. The eight-month rule of the PTI has so far been a lesson in how to blunder through.

It is not just about incompetence and inexperience but also about the self-righteousness that has become the hallmark of the Khan government. The promise of instant good governance is far from being fulfilled; instead, chaos and paralysis have stalled even the regular functioning of the administration. The drift seems unstoppable. The performance of the government shows the limits of populism.

Imran Khan is now doing everything that he had criticised the previous governments for. He is launching the same kind of tax amnesty schemes that he had vehemently opposed in the past. He had labelled such schemes as 'legalised corruption'. Has it now been declared kosher? For him, taking U-turns is a sign of leadership.

His so-called austerity drive has been flaunted by the PTI government in Punjab that has recently ordered a new fleet of 70 luxury cars for provincial ministers. The total cost of these new vehicles is certainly much higher than the money fetched by the auction of the Prime Minister House vehicles that he had declared were symbols of status quo that needed to be broken. A 'humble' background has not stopped his handpicked chief minister in Punjab from attempting to secure substantial benefits for his life after the high post.

Once described as relatively better governed than the rest of Pakistan, the country's biggest and most powerful province has now gone down the ladder. Multilateral and donor agencies find it much harder to deal with a provincial administration lacking leadership. Being under the constant scrutiny of the National Accountability Bureau, the bureaucracy is not willing to put its neck out and take responsibility for any decision that may land it in trouble.

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It's not much different in KP. The PTI government, which is serving its second term in the province, is implicated in a deplorable scandal involving the metro bus project that was launched in 2017. The cost of the project that is yet to be completed is nearly Rs70 billion. A recent report by an inspection team has revealed massive mismanagement of funds and other flaws in the project. To the anti-corruption crusaders, the scandal in their backyard does not seem to bother them very much. That also reinforces allegations of a politically driven accountability exercise against the opposition leaders.

With the induction of Ijaz Shah, the federal cabinet now looks more representative of the legacy of the Musharraf era. The former IB chief has certainly not been appointed on any political merit. The overwhelming presence of old faces in the cabinet raises questions about Khan's promise to break with the status quo and introduce a new generation of leaders.

While in opposition, Khan had vowed to bring aboard talented technocrats from among Pakistani expatriates, but after the Atif Mian episode, no one is willing to come here. Given people like Shah and his ilk in government, professionals would hardly be motivated to come forward to serve the country. The PTI is no different from any other status quo party, though it may be less tainted.

Nothing quite puts into perspective the la-la land in which the Khan government operates than the latest claim by the finance minister that the economy is out of "intensive care" and on the path to recovery. "The crisis is over," Asad Umar declared before his departure to Washington for the final rounds of talks with the IMF for a bailout package.

This wildly optimistic declaration came as inflation approached double digits, the rupee plunged to a record low against the dollar, and the stock market appeared in a state of free fall. Revenue collection has shown a record shortfall of more than Rs300 billion in the last nine months. And the economic growth rate is likely to decelerate to 3.4 per cent this financial year, and further down to 2.7pc next year, according to a World Bank report. Given this state of affairs, the economy is certainly not out of the woods as the finance minister has indicated.

Part of the problem may be attributed to the 'pain of stabilisation', but it is mostly to do with the voodoo economics practised by the government and the state of uncertainty that has been fuelled by its inaction. Domestic investment remains low for that reason. There are few signs of any reforms being undertaken or incentive being provided by the government that could spur investment.

Massive cuts in the development budget have also been a cause of slow economic growth. A high inflation rate combined with low economic growth could lead to stagflation with dire consequences. Surely, the borrowing from friendly countries has helped avoid default on the repayment of foreign loans, but it is short-term relief as new debts continue to accumulate. The current account deficit will remain a major problem,

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despite the finance minister's claim of plugging the gap. Pakistan's external debt has crossed $100bn and is predicted to grow further.

More worrisome is the worsening unemployment problem because of the sluggish economy and high population growth rate. The PTI's promise to create five million new jobs seems far-fetched in this situation. Yet Faisal Vawda, the federal minister minister for water resources, has announced that there will be such a spurt of employment opportunities in the next couple of weeks that there will be more jobs than people needing them.

He might have been inspired by his prime minister's statement that Pakistan was on the verge of discovering huge reserves of oil and gas that may change the fate of the country by making it a part of oil-exporting nations. The minister who is fond of riding motorbikes and maintains a collection of expensive sports cars is ironically a part of the 'crazy crew' in the la-la land that the PTI operates in.

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Chapter 49

CRACKS IN THE RANKS

03 Apr 2019

IT can't get more bizarre: a government at war with itself and at war with all other political forces. The latest spat between the two top party leaders has opened wide the cracks within the ruling PTI. It has unleashed a vicious Twitter war among the cabinet ministers declaring their allegiance to one group or the other. It is a free for all.

Meanwhile, a mulish prime minister refuses to come out of his container mode and show some statesmanship to make the system work. The politics of confrontation have paralysed parliament and blocked the legislative process. The chaos and disarray have affected governance. More worrisome is that the drift could lead to an economic meltdown. Yet there is no realisation of the gravity of the situation. The great new hope is withering away fast.

Although the turf war between Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Jahangir Tareen is not new, the latest war of words has far more serious connotations for the party that is now in power. It has laid bare the divide within the ranks. Both political heavyweights belong to south Punjab, the PTI's main political stronghold in the province. Their rivalry intensified during the elections when they tried to undermine each other.

Though Tareen, after being disqualified by the Supreme Court, was already out of the electoral race, Qureshi blamed the former PTI secretary general for his defeat on a provincial assembly seat that thwarted his bid for the coveted post of chief minister of the country's biggest and most powerful province.

After remaining in oblivion for a while following the elections, Tareen has recently taken centre stage again in his party. He not only sat in on federal cabinet meetings but also presided over some departmental meetings. He has been conspicuous by his presence in public meetings at the side of Imran Khan. It is obvious that his return to the front row and active involvement in the affairs of the government could only have happened with the approval of the prime minister.

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A past master of political wheeling and dealing, Tareen was responsible for getting the independently elected members of the Punjab Assembly to join the PTI thus allowing the party to form the government in the province. He has certainly been Khan's most trusted confidant and his disqualification was a huge loss to the party. Tareen had been openly expressing his frustration over the state of affairs in the government before his restoration to prominence by the PTI leadership.

One of the reasons for his being brought back seems to be the governance crisis in Punjab with the selection of an extremely ineffective chief minister. Tareen's increasing involvement in Punjab seems to be the main reason for Qureshi's resentment. While his political acumen and craftiness are extremely useful to the party leadership, Tareen also has a reputation of being divisive. It is not surprising that while many ministers jumped into the fray in Tareen's defence, others kept quiet.

For many in the party, Qureshi's public denunciation of his old foe was also an implicit attack on the prime minister. The first shot was fired by the savvy foreign minister who covets too much political ambition even for Imran Khan's comfort. The foreign ministry was his last choice. In the absence of the prime minister from parliament, he has been acting as leader of the house.

One may admit that he has conducted himself much more prudently. Unlike Khan's hard-line positions, Qureshi has been much more conciliatory towards the opposition inside and outside parliament. He has not been shy of openly expressing his differing views. Last week, he publicly distanced himself from Khan's decision to change the name of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP).

Qureshi has shown far more maturity while dealing with political matters than handling foreign policy issues. That has certainly helped him raise his political profile. But his latest outburst and slight to the prime minister may weaken his position among the loyalists. It was a snub to him when Tareen was invited to the cabinet meeting the very next day. This party infighting, however, is not going to go away.

It is not just about the Qureshi-Tareen feud; there are other reasons too for the disarray in the party. There is growing frustration over the government's lack of clear direction. One may argue that such polemics among cabinet ministers and Qureshi's opposition to the prime minister's decision about BISP is a sign of democracy in the party, but this kind of open battle seriously affects the government's working.

This infighting has worsened the predicament of the government which is facing serious challenges on every front. The economy is in free fall and there is hardly any sign of the government's ability to stem the rot. The steep rise in inflation is directly affecting the common man. The latest State Bank report indicates a grim prospect for the economy. With economic growth likely to remain below 4pc, declining tax revenues and the rising balance of payments gap makes for a depressing picture.

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The government's claim of creating millions of new jobs sounds highly improbable. In fact, the lower economic growth rate means more unemployment. The multibillion-rupee social security programme launched by the government may not be able to deliver given the shrinking economy. A major problem with Khan is that instead of concentrating on these challenges, his entire attention is on the confrontation with the opposition. It was extremely senseless to talk about changing the name of BISP.

Khan refuses to talk to the opposition even on issues where the government needs its support and cooperation. The vacant seats in the Election Commission of Pakistan could not be filled because the prime minister would not undertake any consultation with the opposition, which is a constitutional requirement. That also makes it difficult to pass any legislation. His one-dimensional approach to the anti-corruption campaign has also paralysed the bureaucracy. The government may still enjoy public goodwill, but it would not take much time for it to dissipate.

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Chapter 50

SHAPING PAKISTAN'S FUTURE

20 Mar 2019

"NATIONS fail economically because of extractive institutions. These institutions keep poor countries poor and prevent them from embarking on the path of economic growth."

This excerpt from the book Why Nations Fail, a seminal work on the subject by two of the world's foremost economists, could relate to the Pakistan of today. More than seven decades after its formation, Pakistan remains one of the poorest nations, sliding behind regional countries on almost all social and economic indicators.

Although we pride ourselves as being a nuclear-armed state, the security of the country is threatened by a failing economy, population explosion, poverty and environmental degradation. A massive youth bulge and a rising uneducated and unskilled population with few prospects of finding productive employment present a terrifying scenario. But can this situation be turned around? Where will Pakistan be three decades from now when it crosses the 100-year mark?

In its landmark report, Pakistan@100: Shaping the Future, the World Bank projects two scenarios. One would take Pakistan to a $2 trillion economy by the year 2047, placing the country in the middle-income Second World group. This is a highly optimistic scenario that requires the country to achieve sustainably high economic growth rates for approximately the next three decades.

The second scenario is extremely depressing. Failing to change the country will cause it to slide further into the abyss of poverty. Pakistan today is standing at a crossroads and, as the report warns, decisions over the next decade will decide Pakistan's future. It all depends on whether we are willing to change the extractive nature of the state institutions that mainly serve the interests of a small ruling elite, and so remove the

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fetters that prevent the country from embarking on the path of economic growth and social progress.

A major challenge is how to transform a crumbling institutional structure and address the key constraints to economic growth. Pakistan will have to overcome the barriers to structural transformation that have been stifling its development in previous decades. Partial and half-hearted reforms cannot take Pakistan out of the current morass. It is not just about economic growth but also the welfare of the people that matters.

One of the major reasons for our backwardness, as pointed out by the report, has been low investment in developing human capital. Investments in family planning, maternal health and early childhood development are the foundation of human capital accumulation. The empowerment of women is a key component of efforts to increase human capital in Pakistan. "A first priority for Pakistan is to make the best use of its greatest asset, its people," the report said.

Pakistan has one of the highest population growth rates in the world, offsetting efforts to improve social indicators. With a 2.4 per cent growth rate, Pakistan's population has crossed the 208 million mark, making it the fifth largest populated country. It is sitting on a potential demographic disaster with more than 60pc of its population under 25 years of age. The number of individuals ready for the labour market is expanding faster than the total population.

According to the report, Pakistan's situation today suggests that it will not be able to generate a demographic dividend. The inability of the state to productively utilise a large young generation has already turned the country into a breeding ground for violent extremism, and could cause further social dislocation and conflict.

The fertility rate in Pakistan is far higher than that in other regional countries. The population growth rate must be brought down to 1.4pc to achieve the goal of entering the middle-income group. But there seems no urgency to contain the population explosion.

Regional conflicts have also been a strong factor in exacerbating Pakistan's economic woes. Strained relations with neighbours have closed opportunities for economic cooperation and the expansion of trade. Hostile borders and the country's being a front-line state in the Afghan wars over the last four decades has had huge costs in both economic and social terms.

The blowback of the conflict in the region has turned Pakistan itself into a battlefield. The internal security problems have also affected foreign and domestic investments, retarding our economic growth. High expenditure on defence leaves few resources for economic and human infrastructure development. Peace could open up massive opportunities for expansion of trade and economic cooperation. A transition from a national security state to a social welfare state is critical to shaping Pakistan's future.

Increased regional cooperation and connectivity must be a top priority in order to achieve structural transformation and a stronger economy. Higher investment in

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economic and human development will also ensure our national security. The traditional approach of security is becoming increasing unsustainable.

Pakistan occupies a pivotal position in what is described by Peter Frankopan, an Oxford professor, as a 'silk road'. According to the author of The New Silk Roads, "We are living in the Asian century already, a time when the movement of global GDP from developed economies of the West to those of the East is taking place at an astonishing scale and at an astonishing speed". Its geographical position provides Pakistan a massive opportunity to transform the country into a trade and transit hub.

Surely CPEC, which is the flagship project of China's ambitious One Belt One Road scheme, can open up vast economic and connectivity opportunities for Pakistan. Given its geostrategic position, Pakistan has the potential to serve as a nexus for the two routes envisaged under OBOR — the continental Eurasian 'silk road economic belt' and the Southeast Asian 'maritime silk road'.

According to the report, increasing regional integration within South Asia could cause Pakistan's economy to expand by 30pc by 2047. Stronger regional relations can support Pakistan's economic transformation and security objectives, increasing its leverage to resolve disputes with its neighbours and freeing up resources for public investment in economic and human development.

But that requires a clear strategy for greater integration with other countries in the region. With clear policy direction and political will, Pakistan could join the other countries as a formidable economic power at the age of 100.

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Chapter 51

MAINSTREAMING OF JIHADISTS

13 March 2019

THE latest crackdown on outlawed militant outfits and their charity wings may appear to be conducted with more seriousness of purpose than before, yet there are questions about the undefined policy of mainstreaming elements that are willing to give up militancy. Some forces contend that bringing these elements into the political process would help defuse a delicate situation. But doing so without a clear policy will open up another can of worms.

While the government claims to have devised a three-pronged — economic, political and administrative — strategy to deal with the problem of militancy that has put Pakistan once again in the eye of the storm, there is still no clear national policy to achieve those objectives. Perhaps the thorniest issue pertains to the question of dealing with the thousands of activists affiliated with extremist groups that have continued to operate despite being outlawed.

In a countrywide swoop, the authorities have reportedly taken control of scores of religious schools and arrested several activists of groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Jamaatud Dawa (JuD), listed as terrorist entities by the UN Security Council. It is not the first time such actions have been taken against these groups. It has almost become a ritual to clamp down on them after each crisis and under international pressure.

Almost all previous actions against these groups had proved largely cosmetic. There was hardly any serious effort to take the campaign to its logical conclusion. As a result, these groups kept resurfacing after the pressure was over. This has been evident over the last 15 years since a decision was taken to outlaw jihadist and extremist religious groups, manifesting a nonchalant approach towards a most serious security and diplomatic challenge.

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Political expediency and the old habit of creating distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' militants made it harder to deal with the problem. There has hardly been any tangible sign of containing the activities of the groups that are now under intense international scrutiny. In fact, groups like JuD, though apparently involved in charity work, are alleged to have expanded their operations in the past, despite being put on the terror watch list. There are few who believe the argument that the group was only involved in charity work and had no connection with extremist politics.

Where the JeM is concerned, this outlawed group has been blamed for militant attacks across the LoC including the one on the Pathankot airbase three years ago. There were claims of a crackdown on the madressahs allegedly run by the group then but afterwards this action seemed to have petered out. The group has come into international focus once again in the latest Pakistan-India military stand-off.

Indisputably, there is a greater resolve now to wind up all jihadist outfits and their offshoots because of domestic and external compulsions. There is a tangible move to effectively implement the ban. Of course, the timing of the action is extremely important. Last year, the FATF, the global watchdog on money laundering, had placed Pakistan on its grey list for not doing enough to prevent terror financing and money laundering. The threat of being blacklisted will remain if Pakistan does not strictly implement the anti-terror measures required of it.

Moreover, Pakistan now faces much greater international pressure in the aftermath of the recent crisis with India. It appears almost certain that the UN Security Council sanctions committee will declare JeM leader Masood Azhar a global terrorist. In the past, China had blocked the move on technical grounds, but it would be difficult to do that now.

That would oblige Pakistan to act against Azhar. It would have been much better for Pakistan not to have tarried until now; it should have taken action against these non-state groups much earlier because of its own security considerations. That would have also saved it from diplomatic embarrassment.

There is no room any more for any expediency and slackness in dealing with outlawed militant groups. The argument presented by some that these outfits have not targeted the Pakistani state is not acceptable because it is equally dangerous for our national security if non-state actors who are accused of using our territory to strike beyond the borders are not reined in.

There should not be any problem now in taking decisive action against the groups that Pakistan itself has banned with the civil and military leaderships standing together on the issue. There is also a consensus among all mainstream political parties on fighting militancy and violent extremism. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to draw a clear line of action.

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More importantly, there is a need for greater clarity on the contentious issue of mainstreaming former jihadists. Surely it is a serious question regarding what should be done about the thousands of activists who had been allegedly involved in the past in militant activities and charity work. There is no denying that there has to be a national policy on how to allow repentant former militants to come back to society.

The biggest nightmare for the security agencies is JuD workers joining terrorist groups in fighting the state. According to one official estimate, there are thousands of well-trained former militants who are to be reintegrated in the society. There has also been some suggestion that those having renounced militancy should be accommodated in government and private-sector jobs.

There is some weight in this argument. But there has to be a clear policy and a strict process of scrutiny before they can be reintegrated. Otherwise, the dangers of allowing unrepentant militants to operate with impunity and spread their radicalised worldview to the rest of society are only too obvious.

Any arbitrary decision about mainstreaming militancy could be extremely damaging. Allowing the banned groups to turn into political parties would be a dangerous move. There has to be a process through which the former jihadists are strictly scrutinised before being reintegrated into society. The success of the latest operation depends on whether we have learnt any lessons from our past policy failures.

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Chapter 52

PULLING BACK FROM THE BRINK?

06 Mar 2019

DEFT handling of the recent crisis by the Pakistani leadership may have helped de-escalate tensions with India. But it is not all over yet. The stakes for Pakistan are still high even though it has made India pull back. With artillery guns blazing along the Line of Control, the situation remains volatile and even a minor incident could cause it to spiral out of control again.

Pakistan has countered Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attempt to successfully use India's overwhelming superiority in conventional force, keeping hostilities below the nuclear threshold. It has responded to the Indian airstrike on Balakot by shooting down two Indian Air Force jets and targeting Indian military installations across the LoC thus challenging that country's conventional military prowess.

The realisation of the dangers of the conflict spinning out of control and crossing the nuclear threshold appears to have forced the two sides to step back from the brink. While retaliating to the Indian incursion, Pakistan demonstrated prudence and restraint by not escalating the conflict beyond the LoC. Modi's bluff was called by Pakistan in a more measured way. But there is hardly any sign of India lowering its war rhetoric yet. The war clouds may have receded but they have not gone away completely.

Meanwhile, the military stand-off has highlighted the underlying causes of conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbours — Kashmir and militancy. These two issues are intertwined and cannot be separated. The Pulwama attack on an Indian army convoy, claimed by the Jaish-e-Mohammad, gave the Modi government an excuse to launch what was described as a preventive strike against what it alleged was a JeM training camp on the Pakistani mainland.

It is not too surprising that there has not been any international condemnation of the blatant military incursion that India successfully managed to present as a

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counterterrorism strike and not military action against Pakistan. The fact that the attack was claimed by an organisation that allegedly operates from its territory has put Pakistan in an awkward position.

But Modi's reckless military adventure has also drawn the world's attention to the plight of the Kashmiri people in the occupied territory. In the words of Arundhati Roy, one of India's most outspoken writers, "By goading Pakistan into a counter-strike, and so making India and Pakistan the only two nuclear powers in history to have bombed each other, Modi has internationalised the Kashmir dispute." She added, "He has demonstrated to the world that Kashmir is potentially the most dangerous place on earth, the flashpoint for nuclear war," she added.

Unsurprisingly, the growing human rights violations and India's brutal use of force to crush the Kashmiris' struggle for the right to self-determination has drawn a much larger Western media coverage now than at any time in the past one decade since the latest surge in the popular uprising.

The situation in the disputed territory is worse than at any other time in the past. They are mostly home-grown fighters who are now leading the uprising in India-held Kashmir. The suicide bomber who rammed his explosives-laden vehicle into the Indian military convoy in the occupied territory was a teenaged Kashmiri who had taken up arms after he was shot in the leg and humiliated by the Indian forces.

What the Indian government refuses to accept is that it is India's problem rather than an external challenge — and one that it needs to deal with. The Kashmir issue must not be seen as a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, but as a struggle for a people's right to self-determination.

Imran Khan has earned plaudits internationally and at home for his statesman-like act that has prevented a full-blown conflagration between Pakistan and India. But now, he faces, perhaps, a more serious challenge of winding up the legacy of jihadi politics that has put Pakistan's own security at greater risk and that threatens to isolate the country internationally. It is now time to put our own house in order.

There is renewed international pressure on Pakistan following the latest stand-off with India to completely dismantle the jihadi infrastructure in the country. The government has pledged to comply with the UN Security Council order that requires Pakistan to take action against individuals and organisations that have been blacklisted as terrorists.

There have also been reports of a renewed crackdown on the proscribed organisations working under different banners and their so-called charity wings. Among those detained are said to be the brother and son of JeM leader Masood Azhar who has been blamed for masterminding attacks inside India and across the LoC.

It is true that it is too early to confirm or deny the Indian allegation of JeM being involved in the Pulwama attack, but Pakistan has once again been put in the dock. For the

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sake of our own national security, prudence required a full clampdown on any militant group accused of using Pakistani soil for cross-border attacks. The latest action has come at a time when Pakistan is on FATF's grey list and is reportedly taking steps to avoid being blacklisted. The government says that it is now pursuing a policy of zero-tolerance towards militancy and religious extremism.

That sounds good. But haven't we seen this approach before, following such incidents that have brought Pakistan under international pressure? Our solemn pledge to not allow our soil to be used against any country must be adhered to otherwise we risk losing international credibility.

Meanwhile, there have been questions regarding the extent of control the state exercises in its own domain vis-à-vis such groups, and it is often asked how effective the authorities have been in eliminating all non-state actors that have become a pervasive challenge to the state's writ. In the Pulwama attack, it is now the government's responsibility to take the investigation to its conclusion.

Meanwhile, unlike in the past, this time the civil and military leadership have not gone into a state of denial and have shown much resolve to deal with the problem.

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Chapter 53

DANGEROUS ESCALATION

28 Feb 2019

THE Indian incursion has raised the stakes for Pakistan. It is reportedly the first time since the 1971 war that Indian jets intruded into Pakistan territory. It was a brazen military offensive though the Narendra Modi government claims it was a pre-emptive strike against alleged militant camps and not military action. It is not the first time that the Modi government has made exaggerated claims of conducting preventive strikes across the LoC.

It is a risky gamble by the Indian prime minister. Such reckless action could easily spiral out of control and turn into a full-blown military conflagration. The underlying calculation of Modi's escalation is that India can afford this brinkmanship given the country's growing diplomatic clout. But it is hard to believe that this blatant act of aggression will go unnoticed. A major challenge for Pakistan is how to respond to the Indian bellicosity.

Some kind of Indian military action was foretold after the Pulwama suicide bomb attack on a paramilitary convoy that killed over 40 Indian personnel in India-held Kashmir earlier this month. Yet few had expected Indian warplanes to strike inside Pakistan. According to several media reports, the attack took place in Balakot, KP and not along the Line of Control. It is not just a violation of the LoC ceasefire; it is also — very clearly — an act of aggression.

India's claim of destroying terrorist camps and killing hundreds of militants in the strike may be preposterous, but the incursion itself has huge symbolic significance and is of propaganda value for the Modi government. There may not be any evidence substantiating the Indian boast of taking out militants; however the intrusion raises questions about our own vulnerability. Meanwhile, the Indian claim has fed into the jingoistic frenzy being whipped up by the Modi government.

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Surely, the Indian claim has far too many holes for anyone to believe it. There has not been any clear answer by the Indian officials about where exactly the targeted camps were located. But the pictures of the crater caused by the weaponry jettisoned by fleeing Indian warplanes do not give any comfort. More importantly, it was the message Modi wanted to convey through the intrusion.

It is an attempt by the Modi government to redefine its nuclear threshold. He is pursuing a strategy of what is described as 'vertical and horizontal' escalation. He is testing Pakistan's capability to respond without crossing the threshold. Modi believes his government can manage the diplomatic fallout of an escalation because India is today much better placed in the world. Surely, as one of fastest-growing economies India's standing has significantly improved. But there is a question whether that would help it maintain its position in the event of a confrontation with Pakistan.

Domestic political factors too have had a role in Modi's calculus while upping the ante. With crucial general elections in India just months away, 'punitive' action against Pakistan could boost his prospects of winning the votes in the Hindu belt where his party's hold had been eroding. But what happens in the next few weeks could change the situation. A full-scale military confrontation could alter the political balance.

Yet another reason behind Modi's escalation is to divert the world's attention from the popular uprising against the Indian atrocities in occupied Kashmir. Even the brutal use of force by the Indian military and the gross human right violations have failed to crush the Kashmiris' struggle for their right to self-determination. The situation in the disputed territory is worse than at any time in the past.

Unlike in the past, when Pakistani groups were also fighting in Kashmir, these are home-grown fighters who are now leading the freedom struggle. Blaming Pakistan will not help New Delhi deal with the Kashmiri struggle. What the Indian government refuses to accept is that it is India's problem rather than an external challenge — and one that it needs to deal with. Confrontation with Pakistan will only aggravate the situation.

Pakistan has shown prudence and restraint in the face of the Indian threat. The prime minister's offer for dialogue has been rejected by the Modi government that believes that the threat of force could bring Pakistan to its knees. It is highly dangerous brinkmanship that can spin out of control. Pakistan reserves the right to respond, but one hopes that sanity will prevail and India will refrain from another military adventure.

More important for Pakistan is to use diplomatic means to mobilise international opinion against the Indian aggression. Surely, Pakistan has suffered from the absence of coherent foreign and security policies, causing it huge diplomatic setbacks in the past few years. But it is now time to set our own our house in order. Even though India has failed in its effort to internationally isolate Pakistan, we certainly need to do more to get our case heard.

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The decision by the National Security Council to show zero tolerance to militant groups and religious extremists still operating in the country is right. But it is not enough to issue statements under international pressure. It is imperative to show resolve and implement our pledge. One major factor that has weakened our case is that the international community is not convinced about our sincerity to fight militancy and extremism — and India has fully exploited this situation.

Last week, the government reportedly launched a crackdown on madressahs run by Jaish-e-Mohammed. How come the group that was outlawed in 2002 and was allegedly involved in high-profile attempted terrorist attacks in Pakistan was not reined in as tightly as it should have been? There is no room now for any expediency. It is perhaps the most serious security situation the country has faced. The only way we can deal with this external challenge is to unite the nation.

Putting aside political differences, the opposition has offered full support to the government, and it is now the responsibility of the government, and particularly the prime minister, to show statesmanship in leading the country as the national security challenge is dealt with.

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Chapter 54

GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES

20 Feb 2019

RECENT events underscore Pakistan's geopolitical challenges and options. India's jingoism following a suicide bombing on a paramilitary convoy in India-held Kashmir has heightened our security concerns. Blaming Pakistan for sponsoring the deadliest attack in the disputed territory that killed over 40 paramilitary personnel, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has threatened to retaliate with full force.

While keeping the option of military strikes open, he has vowed to isolate Pakistan and cripple it economically. A day after the attack, the Indian government announced it was withdrawing the Most Favoured Nation (trade) status for Pakistan. There was nothing unpredictable about Modi's battle cry given the timing of the attack. It happened months before the general elections with the ruling BJP struggling to retain power.

As responsibility for the attack has been claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammad, the finger is conveniently being pointed towards Pakistan despite the fact that the attacker was a native of IHK. But even before the attack the Modi government had upped the ante, with greater military manoeuvring along the Line of Control.

Most alarming is Modi's decision to give a 'free hand' to the Indian armed forces to take any action against Pakistan. Such a reckless move that has also drawn criticism in India is tantamount to a declaration of war. In the words of a retired Indian general, giving a 'free hand' to the armed forces against a nuclear power is not acceptable. Modi's brinkmanship could lead to a conflagration in the world's most combustible region.

Pakistan's response to India's war hysteria has indeed been a measured one. The prime minister was right in offering to cooperate with India in any investigation into the incident and taking action if the latter provided verifiable evidence regarding any Pakistani connection. He has also issued a firm warning against any Indian military adventurism.

Nothing could be more ridiculous than Modi's claim of isolating Pakistan and crippling it economically. Surely, Pakistan has some serious foreign and security policy

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problems that have greatly harmed our interest and damaged our position in the international community. But it is a tall claim that one can isolate a country enjoying an extremely important geostrategic position. The withdrawal of the MFN status will hardly make a dent in Pakistan's economy.

Pakistan's relations with the US may have hit a low over the past few years but the interests of the two countries converge in finding a negotiated political settlement to the Afghan war. The emergence of a multipolar global order has led to ever-changing alignments. Pakistan's strategic alliance with China has strengthened and so have its relations with Russia and Saudi Arabia. A country can only isolate itself through its policies, not because of any foreign power. There are, though, some problems related to the country's antiterrorism policy that need to be fixed.

Yet another event at the same time has brought some relief. The visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman amid a pomp and show rarely witnessed before sealed a $20 billion investment deal with the kingdom. The grand reception in Islamabad must have come as a morale booster to the crown prince who is still reeling from the allegations of having ordered the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have long maintained a strong strategic relationship. The two countries have worked together very closely within the framework of several bilateral, regional and global forums. Their relations, however, hit an all-time low when Pakistan declined the Saudi request to send troops to fight in Yemen in 2015.

Surely, the Pakistani military leadership has played a huge role in bringing the alliance back on track. Both nations share strong military ties. Riyadh has traditionally maintained a close relationship with Pakistan's military establishment. The appointment of retired army chief Gen Raheel Sharif as head of an 'Islamic alliance force' is an example. Pakistan is one of the 41 members of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition.

The strategic relationship has now taken a new dimension with the promise of Saudi investment that is a part of Vision 2030 launched by the crown prince to diversify the Saudi economy and make investments in other countries. The close ties between Riyadh and Islamabad can provide more opportunities for cooperation within the framework of Vision 2030. The fact that Saudi Arabia assured 'maximum assistance' to Imran Khan's government suggests that the two leaders have struck a chord and have developed a good chemistry. The bonhomie between the two was all too obvious.

While the benefits for Pakistan's cash-strapped economy are huge, there is also a risk that the country could be pushed into a regional power game. Surely Pakistan has done incredibly well so far, balancing its relations with Iran despite its closeness with the kingdom. But the latest Iranian charge implicating Pakistan for terrorism in Iran is ominous.

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Indeed, there must be some cause of concern with Iran blaming Pakistani security agencies of harbouring the group responsible for the devastating bombing that killed several members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. It was not the first time Tehran has pointed fingers towards Pakistan but the tenor was much harsher and categorical this time. The charges of Pakistan's involvement may be baseless, but there is need for the two countries to come together to resolve the issue.

Pakistan has declared its neutrality in the conflict between Riyadh and Tehran. Yet there are strong apprehensions that its close cooperation both in defence and economics with the Saudis could push the Pakistani government into taking sides. The scathing remarks made by the Saudi foreign minister describing Iran as the biggest exporter of terror would certainly not have gone down well.

The complex external circumstances surrounding the country demand prudent management of foreign relations. Fast-changing regional geopolitics have a direct bearing on our national security and internal political stability. Given our geostrategic position there is a greater need to take a more balanced approach.

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Chapter 55

MOVING TOWARDS KAKISTOCRACY

13 Feb 2019

THE fall has been steep. Not that we had a very competent leadership in the past but the PTI government's rush to what is termed as a 'kakistocracy' is alarming. It is not so much about the absence of government as a government by the least suitable.

Theatrical performances by cabinet ministers have become the stuff of satire. Slander and using abusive language against opponents are not unusual features of the Pakistani political culture, but the PTI has taken the practice to new heights. Self-righteousness has never before been witnessed in such abundance, often being used to cover up one's own ineptitude. It is one government that has done more harm to itself than what the opposition could do to it. Irresponsible statements from the ministers raise questions about the party's commitment to the democratic process.

No wonder, six months into power the PTI government is still groping in the dark. The working of the National Assembly as a legislative body has been virtually paralysed because of the unending controversy over Shahbaz Sharif's chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee. One thought the issue had been settled, but not really. It remains a contentious issue, keeping ministers engaged in frivolous polemics.

Prime Minister Imran Khan is shy of coming to parliament because he does not want to confront a noisy opposition. How does he expect the opposition to behave when his ministers hurl slanderous remarks at the opponents? Being in government, he should have the confidence to face criticism. The responsibility of maintaining decorum in the house lies more with the treasury benches.

The prime minister's absence from the house appears as more of a case of contempt for parliament than misconduct on the part of the opposition. The proceedings in

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parliament are always raucous with the presence of a strong opposition. The real test for any leader is to be able to deal with the situation.

A government that is facing daunting challenges is expected to focus more on economic revival and governance than engage in confrontation with the opposition. The offensive language used against former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and making light of his illness are unbecoming of a government that claims it believes in a pluralistic democratic culture. Economic stability and good governance require political sanity.

Finally, the government is close to reaching an agreement with the IMF on a bailout package. It is a bitter pill the government has to swallow given the serious current account crisis. One may or may not agree with the government's approach to dealing with the problem, but the IMF programme will give the administration much-needed space and allow it to carry out long-delayed structural reform.

It will be extremely difficult for the government to achieve its objectives in an atmosphere of political confrontation. But there is no indication yet of the government making any effort to defuse political tensions. What the prime minister needs to understand is that sooner or later the government that enjoys a wafer-thin majority will require the opposition's support for legislation and the smooth functioning of democratic institutions. It certainly does not mean any unprincipled compromises. It is also not in the interest of the opposition to subvert the democratic order.

This state of political confrontation also seems to have diverted the government's attention from the more important issues of governance. This much is apparent. Some federal cabinet ministers do not even understand the issues they are supposed to deal with. Their frequent gaffes make them a target of ridicule. The recent comments made by the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs Ali Amin Gandapur regarding Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav having been 'freed' by Nawaz Sharif was the height of inanity. He is surely not the only one showing himself in a negative light. There are other 'jewels' in Imran Khan's 'crown'.

It should be worrying for the PTI that the prime minister's handpicked chief minister of Punjab, whom he hails as 'Wasim Akram plus', has yet to blossom. Even many senior PTI leaders lament the setback caused by the selection of Usman Buzdar to head the government in the most important and powerful province of the country. The recent handling of the Sahiwal extrajudicial killing incident and the frequent reshuffling of bureaucracy have exposed the fault lines in the provincial administration.

The arrest of senior minister Aleem Khan by NAB has dealt another serious blow to the Punjab government. He was considered a potential choice for the coveted job if Khan ever decided to dispense with Buzdar. It is never easy to run a province like Punjab through remote control as the prime minister is trying to do. The future of the PTI government depends on whether the Punjab provincial administration is able to deliver. It does not seem good given the ineptness of the Buzdar-led government.

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A major governance problem is the breakdown of civil bureaucracy in the face of alleged harassment by NAB. Senior officials are not willing to take any critical decision because of the fear of being apprehended by the anti-corruption body that is exercising unbridled powers. Prime Minister Khan claiming the ownership of NAB's actions has not helped to calm things down. The prime minister's assurance of service protection to top civil servants has failed to alleviate the latter's concerns. The frequent transfer of officials for disputing the government's decisions is contrary to Khan's pledge to strengthen government institutions and make them free from political pressure.

Its latest move to create a media regulatory body has also raised concerns regarding the government's intentions to curb media freedom. Such a measure will not only be a serious attack on the freedom of expression but also shrink the democratic space. The crackdown on rights activists and civil society is ominous. There is already an unannounced censorship on the media and any draconian law would deal a serious blow to the democratic process.

It is not just the danger of kakistrocracy taking hold but also the fear of the administration getting more vindictive and repressive that is troubling. The PTI government must put its act together and focus on the real issues and strengthen democratic institutions before it is too late.

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Chapter 56

DEBATING 18TH AMENDMENT

06 Feb 2019

THE debate over the 18th Amendment highlights the divide between the proponents of a strong centre and those of the federal system. The fear of the landmark amendment being completely rolled back or watered down may be exaggerated, but it is not without some basis. There is a growing view in the establishment and among some political groups that the amendment has weakened the state and has been a major reason for the country's financial problems.

The debate has become politically more intense over the past one year especially after the PTI government came to power. The PPP and other opposition parties smell a conspiracy to bring back a unitary system curbing the autonomy of the federating units. There is even talk about the imposition of a presidential system.

It is certainly not possible to undo the amendment that was passed by parliament; the consensus involved all the political parties. It could only be repealed through extrajudicial means. There is no evidence of any move to impose presidential rule. Any such adventurism would be disastrous not only for the future of democracy but also the country. The 18th Amendment has indeed been the most radical step in turning the country into a federation in line with the 1973 Constitution.

Unanimously adopted by parliament in 2010 after two years of deliberations by a parliamentary committee that was represented by all the major parties, the 18th Amendment virtually overhauled the 1973 Constitution. The amendment includes 102 important articles and has made the 1973 Constitution more democratic.

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It struck down the 17th Amendment imposed by Gen Musharraf's government that had undermined parliament. It returned the powers to parliament by removing Article 58(2)(b) that gave the president the power to sack an elected prime minister.

More importantly, the 18th Amendment provides the provinces with strong legislative and financial autonomy. Surely, there have been some problems of capacity and coordination between the centre and the provinces, but provincial autonomy has turned the country into a true federation by removing the basic cause of friction among the provinces on the distribution of resources. The system could be further improved by the devolution of power to local governments. Unfortunately, the political parties, which are the greatest champions of provincial autonomy, are not willing to devolve power to the lower level.

One argument put forward by the sceptics is that the administrative and financial autonomy granted to the provinces under the 18th Amendment has paved the way for a confederal structure, thus weakening the authority of the federal government. The criticism is baseless. There may be some issues related to security and finances but greater autonomy strengthens the state rather than weakening it.

A unitary form of government cannot keep a multinational country united. A major cause of political instability in the country has been the over-centralised rule under military regimes. That has also been the reason for the rise of militant nationalism in parts of the country. There is some credence to the argument that the 18th Amendment has contributed to the country's remaining on the path of democracy with political transitions through the electoral process.

A unitary or a presidential form of government does not provide the solution to our myriad political and financial problems. Strongmen cannot bring long-term political and financial stability, a lesson we should have learnt from successive military rules that left the country more divided. In fact, federalism provides greater dynamism to the system. The provincial governments are closer to the reality and serve the people much better.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the 18th Amendment has been the restructuring of the National Finance Commission award. It increased the share of fiscal resources to the provinces to 57 per cent. The insertion of Article 160 (3A) also required that the share of the provinces in each NFC award could not be less than the share given in the previous award. The amendment also gives the control of mineral resources to the provinces, removing one of the major causes of alienation of the smaller provinces that had accused the centre of exploitation.

Critics of the 18th Amendment claim that the transfer of a large part of fiscal resources to the provinces limits the financial space for the federal government which is responsible for defence expenditure and debt servicing that constitute the biggest chunk of the budget. But many economists refute the argument saying that the federal government is still left with a surplus after paying for defence and debt servicing to meet

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other expenses. True, the economy is in bad shape but it is not because of the 18th Amendment. The economy is critical to national security but equally important is the continuation of the democratic process, however flawed.

There are indeed some flaws left in the amendment that are dark patches in the Constitution. While ensuring the supremacy of parliament by removing dictatorial footprints from the Constitution it retained some notorious clauses inducted by Gen Zia, seemingly under pressure from the right-wing parties.

Also some retrogressive and undemocratic clauses were introduced, including barring non-Muslims from holding the office of president. So discrimination against religious minorities has been strengthened under the 18th Amendment. But the political parties shouting from the rooftops in defence of the 18th Amendment would not mention these flaws.

Indeed, some provinces have experienced capacity problems in the discharge of their responsibilities. But that can be resolved in due course. For example, there is a need for a unified education system in the country and for streamlining provincial laws. There is also a need for revisiting some of the clauses of the amendment to remove the incongruities. While protecting the devolution of power one must accept that the Constitution is a living document and can be changed to make it more workable. This can only be done through elected representatives.

Meanwhile, any attempt to strike down the amendment — and that could only be through unconstitutional means — would be disastrous.

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Chapter 57

MURDERS MOST FOUL

23 Jan 2019

THE cold-blooded murder in Sahiwal of a couple, their teenage daughter and a fourth victim in an engineered encounter is yet another manifestation of the brutal culture that allows law-enforcement agencies to employ extralegal actions. It may not be the first incident of its kind but perhaps it is one of the most heinous acts of police brutality in the country and has sent shockwaves across the nation.

The killings could have ended up as yet another statistic in the long list of extrajudicial murders of alleged terrorists had it not been for videos of the terrified children who had survived the hail of bullets that killed their parents going viral on social media, and generating public outrage.

Nothing could be more callous than the remark made by the Punjab governor that the victims were "at the wrong place, at the wrong time" or the provincial law minister calling the deaths "collateral damage". The real issue of the indiscriminate use of force has been lost in the cacophony of political point-scoring and blame game.

For the opposition, the incident is a handy tool to beat up a hapless Punjab administration headed by a clueless chief minister. The fractious team of novices that forms the provincial cabinet has hardly been able to deal with the political fallout and do damage control.

Meanwhile, the federal government, too, appeared rudderless as it sought to defuse the situation. The conflicting prime ministerial tweets did not help calm the public rage either. Although it would be unfair to hold the PTI government directly responsible for the Sahiwal incident, its management of the aftermath and failure to restore the public's faith in the existing dispensation has dealt a serious blow to the fledgling administration.

While the government has fulfilled the ritual of setting up a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) to investigate the matter and has announced monetary compensation for the grieving family, it appears unlikely that justice will be done and facts about the shootout will be fully revealed.

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It is, indeed, not a black-and-white situation, with the fourth victim accused of having had links with an outlawed militant group and involved in several terrorist attacks. Yet nothing justifies the indiscriminate use of firepower. There is no evidence of the police claim that they retaliated to firing from inside the car. The Sahiwal tragedy cannot be dismissed as a shootout by some trigger-happy cops or a botched operation. The gruesome act cannot be seen in isolation. It raises a whole lot of questions about the impunity granted to law enforcers and the breakdown of the rule of law in general.

More importantly, the incident has once again highlighted some basic flaws in the mechanism used for fighting terrorism and violent extremism in this country. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, around 3,345 people have been killed in police encounters in the country between 2014 and 2018, including 12 minors. It is, indeed, a highly alarming number and cannot be rationalised even though the country is faced with an existentialist threat from terrorism and violent extremism.

More disturbing is the fact that no details about the slain 'terrorists' are available. Two alleged terrorists were reportedly gunned down by counterterrorism forces in Gujranwala a day after the Sahiwal killings. The police claimed that both were associates of the fourth victim of the Sahiwal shootout and had been working for the militant Islamic State group. The timely action saved the country from an imminent catastrophe, we were told.

It may be true, but again their death in a dubious encounter leaves many questions unanswered. The veracity of police claims remains questionable given that several victims of previous extrajudicial actions were proven innocent. Hundreds of alleged terrorists have reportedly been killed by law-enforcement agencies in recent years without being identified. They are just numbers.

Such cases have been reported from across the country. Finding mutilated bodies of persons after they were picked up by the security agencies is a common phenomenon. The Naqeebullah Mehsud case in Karachi brought to the surface the horror of custodial killings. The father of two who had never been involved in any militant activity was picked up by police in Karachi and killed in a fake encounter.

Such incidents are symptomatic of a more serious problem of what has been described by Zoha Waseem, a writer on security issues, as the "militarisation of policing". The Naqeebullah incident was not surprising given the vast powers vested in police officers like Rao Anwar. He had been eulogised as a daredevil officer and referred to as an 'encounter specialist'. He was untouchable, reportedly having enjoyed the blessing of the security establishment as well as the top PPP leadership.

A JIT report had implicated Rao Anwar not only in Mehsud's murder but numerous other custodial killings as well. But it seems that he continues to be protected by powerful institutions. Given such impunity and militarisation of police, the Sahiwal shooting was waiting to happen. It is not just about the cops involved in the action, but also the system

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that empowers the law-enforcement agencies to take reckless actions and rationalise extrajudicial killings.

Cases like the Sahiwal and Naqeebullah killings also expose a breakdown in the rule of law and the criminal justice system. What encourages the law-enforcement agencies to resort to extralegal actions is the failure of our judicial system to convict hardcore terrorists. For sure, many of those killed in so-called encounters might have been wanted in militant and terrorist activities, but such actions are not conducive to a long-term solution.

It was the licence to kill provided to the law enforcers that made last week's incident inevitable. Surely a judicial inquiry must be conducted into the tragedy. But it is more important to address the main issue relating to our counterterrorism mechanisms. There is a need for improving the judicial and monitoring system too. Action against a few cops will not change the culture of misuse of power.

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Chapter 58

LEARNING FROM CHINA

09 Jan 2019

PRIME Minister Imran Khan is fascinated by China's miraculous feat of lifting 800 million -people from poverty — and he seeks to emulate that achievement. Then again, who does not? Every speech of his, whether at home or abroad, is invariably laced with profuse praise of the -emerging superpower. But it seems that he has -little understanding of how it happened.

The rise of China is surely an amazing story, and its record in poverty reduction is without parallel in human history. It may not be possible for other countries to emulate the Chinese dream, yet there are lessons to learn from the country's Great Leap Forward. The transformation of a country with around one fifth of the world's population could not have come without the Communist Revolution in 1949 that destroyed the regressive social structure, thereby paving the way for a second revolution which led to phenomenal economic growth.

Since the initiation of China's reform and opening-up in 1978, it has achieved an annual average 9.5 per cent growth rate, increasing almost 35 times in size within the last four decades. There is no precedent in history of such sustained economic growth. This could not have been possible without political stability, a visionary leadership and strong institutions of the state.

It was the second stage of the revolution headed by Deng Xiaoping, who was also one the leaders of the 1949 revolution, that led to the building of modern China. The principles enunciated by Deng guided Chinese policy since the 1980s. According to him, there are three criteria to judge whether or not a political system or policy is suitable or correct for a country, namely; is it beneficial for political stability, economic development and living standards? If it is for all three, then it is a good system or policy.

With its phenomenal scale of economic growth, China also focused on improving the lives of ordinary Chinese people. The enormous improvement in living standards is,

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therefore, the most important achievement China has made since the reform and opening-up. For a country with huge numbers of poor people streaming into its cities, many -living initially in conditions of abject misery, this has been an extraordinary success.

Other factors that contributed to China's economic and social development are the massive investments it made on education and population control. For almost four decades, China strictly implemented a one-child policy that had helped the country achieve its anti-poverty drive. This policy has now been made more flexible to meet the demands of an expanding economy.

More importantly, successive Chinese leaders recognised that economic development and political stability were intertwined. While its entire focus had been on economic development, China has kept itself out of outside conflicts and avoided confrontation despite provocations. It has kept a relatively low profile, notwithstanding its position as a superpower.

When Imran Khan says that he wants to learn from China, he should understand that such -societal transformation can only occur when one has a clear vision and the will to make tough decisions. It is indeed commendable that the PTI -government places greater emphasis on human development, but the welfare of the people also depends on political stability and economic -development. Catchy mantras alone will not take this country out of its current predicament.

Sure, Pakistan has a different system of government and there is no revolutionary party at the helm, but it is not difficult to implement some radical reforms to put the economy on the track of sustainable growth. There is also need for change in existing social and economic structures that are the biggest obstacles to the country's transformation. But, notwithstanding Imran Khan's grand idea of establishing 'Naya Pakistan', the PTI remains a party with no clear strategy for change. Almost five months into power, the government is still unable to set a clear direction.

There appears to be systemic failure in this country. While the PTI government is drifting without vision or purpose, growing political instability has rendered the system dysfunctional. One cannot hope getting the economy off the ground, let alone fighting poverty, in this environment of political confrontation. The country is not expected to move forward while depending on the financial support of friendly countries. It is -disgraceful the way that bailout packages from Saudi Arabia and the UAE are being portrayed as diplomatic successes. In the absence of any clear agenda for reform, these kinds of temporary relief could become liabilities, further dragging the economy down.

There is as yet no indication that the government is prepared to change its confrontationist policy. More alarming is that it does not have any clear strategy to deal with the challenges it faces. Undoubtedly, corruption is a serious problem, but the government seems to only focus on this one issue. Imran Khan's claim that it is the main cause of all economic and political ills is exaggerated. The senseless campaign has

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increased economic and political uncertainty, making it more difficult to carry out any reform. Imran Khan often cites China's latest campaign against corruption. But what he has failed to understand is that China has been able to effectively counter the menace after it had consolidated its economy.

Instead of learning from China how it emerged as an economic superpower in such a short span of time, Imran Khan has superficially picked some aspects of its history to point to. A major factor that has caused Pakistan's economic and political slide is the absence of a long-term vision for -development and social change.

China's model cannot be emulated, but one can, at least, learn some lessons from its success. Poverty eradication, which Imran Khan appears so fascinated with, did not come without economic development and social reform. The establishment of shelter homes for the homeless is indeed a -positive step, but it cannot address the basic -problem behind rampant poverty, unemployment and social backwardness.

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Chapter 59

DESTABILISING THE PPP

02 Jan 2019

THE JIT report in the money-laundering case implicating top PPP leaders has generated a political storm. An attempt to bring about regime change in Sindh has exacerbated matters. The federal government's clumsy move to impose a travel ban on all those named in the inquiry report, including Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, and the PTI's campaign for Mr Shah's ouster have brought the swords out. The chief justice's admonition may have dampened the PTI charge, but the game is not over yet.

Although the veracity of the JIT report has yet to be substantiated, the financial scandal involving the Zardari family has found the PPP and Sindh government in deep water. Most troubling for the party is that it is not only the fate of the former president that hangs in the balance, but also the political future of his son Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari. The young scion is seen by PPP supporters as their last hope of keeping alive the Bhutto legacy.

Despite being politically handicapped because of living under the shadow of his wily father, Bilawal has made significant impact on parliamentary politics. Being implicated in the financial scandal could affect his politics. The charges are indeed damning and could see the PPP leadership engaged in a prolonged legal and political battle that would constrain the party and the Sindh government.

There seems to be little possibility of the provincial government being overthrown or governor rule being imposed in the province. But the crisis may well have revived the old project of political engineering in Sindh that could see defections being encouraged from the PPP. We have witnessed such a move in the province in the past too. The 'successful' political engineering of Karachi seems to have given impetus to the implementation of the plan at the provincial level.

Bad governance and allegations of widespread corruption have not helped the PPP's cause. Still, it will not be easy to manipulate the recently elected provincial assembly.

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There is no Jam Sadiq to coerce into submission its members or buy them over. Any such step could fuel an ethnic divide and strengthen extremist sub-nationalist forces.

Any move to destabilise the provincial government would be disastrous for the entire system, particularly at a time when the country faces multiple economic and political challenges. The politics of confrontation will not benefit either side. The PTI's move is reminiscent of the politics of the 1990s when governments were installed or removed overnight, an exercise that involved forcing or bribing legislators to switch sides.

Ironically, the PTI, which came to power on the slogan of the rule of law and the sanctity of the vote, is becoming a key player in this sordid game. The reason behind the move against the PPP government is not the provincial government's incompetence or the widespread allegations of corruption against party leaders; it is the desire for complete political control that is driving the campaign towards what some analysts describe as the establishment of a one-party system. That may never happen, but such moves could widen the political fault lines and have serious consequences for the integrity of the country.

While the fears of the PPP of the country's being pushed towards a unitary form of government and of an attempt to abolish the 18th Amendment may be exaggerated, there is little doubt regarding the PTI government's intention to take control of the country's second-largest province.

Its electoral victory in Karachi, the country's largest city and its financial and industrial lifeline, has put the party on a strong footing in provincial politics. The PTI's rise to becoming the second-largest party in Sindh with its control in the urban areas has completely changed the political dynamics of the troubled province. That has given the party a heady sense of power. The statements from the federal ministers and the PTI's provincial leadership are a clear manifestation of the power syndrome at play.

Moreover, a strong centre has always been an issue close to the heart of the security establishment. The passage of the 18th Amendment through consensus among political parties across the board is seen with scepticism by the security establishment. The generals believe that greater financial and administrative autonomy for the provinces is detrimental to national integration and security. The top brass has expressed its reservations over the amendment publicly.

The military's main concern is that a greater share of finances going to the provinces not only weakens the federal government's control but is also one of the causes of the country's growing fiscal problems. The military's reservation over the 18th Amendment came out strongly in remarks attributed to the army chief last year. That has also evoked a strong reaction from all the political parties signatory to the most critical changes in the country's Constitution. The PTI, which had no representation in parliament in that period, is obviously not that keen about the amendment.

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Surely there are some questions about devolving power and the capacity of the provinces to handle the situation emanating from the transfer of responsibilities, but those issues can be gradually overcome. For sure, there is also a need for reviewing the NFC award to address the serious fiscal problems faced by the federal government. But comments against the amendment naturally raise questions about the establishment's intention and fuel conspiracy theories.

Unsurprisingly, the PPP has tried to connect the action against its leaders with the purported move to abolish the 18th Amendment. There may not be any linkage between them but it is mainly the responsibility of the government to dispel those concerns. The silence of the administration has further complicated the issue.

It is important to separate the accountability process from politics, but unfortunately, it is not happening. The government's own actions and remarks reinforce apprehensions. Political engineering is not the solution; in fact, it has been the major cause of political instability in the country and the reason for the growing alienation within. Such a move has not worked in the past, nor will it work now.

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Chapter 60

DECAPITATING THE LEADERSHIP

26 Dec 2018

NAWAZ Sharif is handed another jail sentence and Asif Ali Zardari's fate hangs in the balance after a damning indictment in a money-laundering investigation. Though foretold, the two events this week bring closer the decapitation of the leadership of the two major political parties that have dominated Pakistani politics over the decades.

Behind prison bars and banned from holding any public office, the three-time prime minister is already out of the political race, and now it is the turn of the former president. It may not be the first time we are witnessing the accountability roller coaster knocking down the top political leadership, but things seem more serious this time. The ordeal for the Sharifs is far from over with other members of the family too in the dock. Their dynastical legacy is now at stake.

Although having suffered incarceration for almost nine years before making it to the highest echelons of power, things are far more serious for Zardari this time. While we still have to wait for the legal process to conclude, the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) report appears highly incriminating. The PPP leader is accused of running dubious financial and business networks through front men, worth billions of rupees.

Surely, the phenomenal wealth allegedly accumulated through questionable means seems hard to defend. But there is also the question of whether these charges could be proved in a court of law. Some other PPP leaders, including one of Zardari's sisters, are also under investigation for corruption and the misuse of power. The noose is tightening around another powerful political dynasty, which may have far-reaching political consequences.

A major problem is the credibility of the ongoing accountability process itself. There may be some strong evidence of misdeeds against the political leaders under

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investigation, but there are reasons to believe that it is a selective and politically motivated process. The ongoing media trial has also lent credence to allegations of a witch-hunt against political leaders as part of a plan to weaken the opposition parties.

Moreover, the diminishing public faith in our extremely flawed system of justice and investigation is another factor fuelling scepticism. The way the so-called accountability process has been used in the past as a tool to subdue opposition voices also makes the current drive questionable. What some analysts describe as the 'judicialisation' of Pakistani politics, backed by the security establishment, has made things worse.

What happens next is likely to redefine the political template. Indeed, neither the PPP nor the PML-N have the capacity or intention to take the battle to the streets against what they describe as a politically motivated accountability process and witch-hunt targeting their leaders. But they remain a very effective force inside parliament and could create serious problems for a rudderless government.

The decapitation is not likely to push these political parties out of the scene as we have evidenced in the past. They still have a strong popular base and the disqualification of the leadership may not lead to the fragmentation of these parties as being predicted by some elements in the government. There is a strong possibility of these parties evolving into more democratic structures. With the Sharif brothers having been restrained, the PML-N is already moving towards a collective leadership. The PPP may also be pushed towards this leadership model if such a situation arises.

While the crackdown on the leadership has brought both the opposition parties under pressure, the PTI government's own lacklustre performance has given them some confidence. The government's own rhetoric about corruption being the biggest problem faced by the country and its threat of 'fixing' the opposition have made the accountability extremely controversial and exposed the claim of NAB and other investigative agencies being autonomous. The latest development has forced the main opposition parties to come closer.

Having no clear policy direction has made an incompetent government more and more reliant on the security establishment that now seems to be the driving force behind it. The judicialisation of politics has also given the top judiciary unprecedented powers. With the judiciary getting increasingly involved in policy issues beyond its domain, there is a sense that the chief justice may appear more like the chief executive of the country, further distorting the power symmetry.

Such politicisation is of serious concern. It makes it more difficult for accountability to be seen as impartial. The formation of JITs and the inclusion in them of members of the intelligence agencies in cases related to political leaders have reinforced the perception of a selective process of accountability. For a fair trial and impartial investigations, this impression should be removed.

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Sharif's trial by a NAB court under the supervision of the Supreme Court has not set a good precedent for raising the public's faith in the judicial process. The comments made by the court carry political connotations and have not helped to maintain the sanctity of the top judiciary. The reporting of the comments reinforces the impression of a media trial as alleged by the opposition. This trend must stop.

One such example is the reporting of the JIT investigations into the money-laundering case against Zardari. Why should the content of a confidential report to the Supreme Court be made public before the accused is charged? Such practices do not help the justice system. The restrictions on discussion on sub judice matters seem to have gone away a long time ago. That makes an accused a convict even before being indicted.

Consequently, the elected civilian government seems to have become a secondary partner in the existing power troika. There have been observations that a nexus between the military and the judiciary is propping up the government. This has also undermined the elected bodies especially parliament, but for how long can this situation continue when such formidable challenges are confronting the country? It is important to hold those in public office accountable. But it is equally important to make the process of doing so more transparent, impartial and without any political prejudice.

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Chapter 61

A RUDDERLESS GOVERNMENT

19 Dec 2018

THE spectacle of two old rivals greeting each other on the floor of parliament may not be worth noticing. But the handshake between Asif Zardari and Shahbaz Sharif in the house this week was more than just a matter of courtesy.

With the PML-N leader having been 'nabbed' and the noose tightening around the former president from the PPP, the two opposition parties now find themselves pushed into a corner. The handshake could be a prelude to a more effective alliance against a fumbling PTI government. The latest episode in the political soap opera is getting more thrilling with the opposition going for the jugular. What next?

Indeed, there is no imminent threat to the Imran Khan government, but a more strident and united opposition could further jolt a lacklustre and inexperienced administration still trying to find a foothold. Although their top leaders are under a cloud facing graft charges, both the PML-N and the PPP seem to have dropped their initially cautious tone and are now challenging the PTI government more forcefully.

Zardari's latest harangue targeting not only the PTI government but also the security establishment and the judiciary may be driven by his fear of being indicted in money-laundering and corruption charges. But it certainly has turned up the heat. The wily politician that he is, Zardari is trying to use a beleaguered PML-N for his own political chess game.

However, it remains to be seen if the PPP leader can escape the 'accountability trap' by upping the ante. His remarks last week reminded one of his speech some three years ago when he took on the military establishment following a crackdown on some of his closest associates. He later left the country and stayed away for more than a year.

Zardari then tried to mend fences with the establishment when the axe fell on Nawaz Sharif. It seems now politically expedient for both parties, troubled by a judiciary ostensibly backed by the security establishment, to come closer. The PTI government's

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own ineptness and blundering have provided them with an opportunity to regain some lost political ground.

Although the government has inherited the economic mess, its inability to deal with one of the most serious economic crisis facing the country in recent years seems to have given the opposition more confidence that the rulers could crumble under the weight of their own blunders. It may be an exaggerated estimation but it is not completely off the mark either.

Particularly in Punjab, where the ruling party enjoys a wafer-thin majority, its governance has added to the perception of the PTI's vulnerability. Imran Khan has even failed to convince his own party members that Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar, who never held any public office before, was the best choice to lead the administration in the country's most important and most powerful province. His claim of Buzdar being 'Wasim Akram-plus' has exposed Khan's inability to see the difference between cricket and politics. T20 cricket was not in vogue when Khan was playing, but his approach to politics and governance is no different from that short version of the game.

Buzdar's performance in the past four months tells a different story. Three power centres — chief minister, governor and speaker of the provincial assembly — have further complicated the problem. The prime minister's attempt to run the provincial government via remote control has not worked either. The result of recent by-elections showed that the PTI has nor been able to improve upon its mass political support in the province. The failure in Punjab could cost the PTI power.

Interestingly, the opposition parties are now using Imran Khan's own inanity of threatening to call early elections. Addressing a group of TV presenters last month, the prime minister indicated he could go for fresh elections if his government were to be blocked by the opposition. This is unprecedented talk for a government which has hardly been in power for 100 days. It reinforces the popular perception that Imran Khan has yet to get out of the opposition mindset. Such statements only add to political uncertainty and expose Khan's immaturity. Indeed, the opposition does not take the threat of an early election seriously, but uses the remark as a political tool.

It is not just about the opposition joining forces and giving a tough time to the government, it is the disarray within that is also cause for serious concern. Matters may not point to the unravelling of a fragile conglomeration of disparate political groups, but the latest development is ominous. The joining of the MQM and the Balochistan National Party (Mengal) in the opposition walkout from the National Assembly this week, in protest against the nonproduction of PML-N leader Saad Rafique in the house, is a sign of the growing frustration of the coalition partners.

The public dissent of some cabinet members on the party's U-turn on the chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), ceding to the opposition

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demand, is another example of disorder. It is like a rudderless ship plying turbulent waters.

Another issue adding to political uncertainty is the failure of the government to strengthen parliament. It is basically the responsibility of the government to defuse tensions and make it possible for parliament to focus on legislation. On the contrary, it is the PTI that has largely been responsible for the stalemate in the house. It has wasted more than four months because of its irrational position of not accepting the leader of the opposition as chairman of the PAC. Finally, it gave in to the opposition's pressure, but the dispute over the composition of parliamentary committees remains a cause of impasse in the house.

Now things have become more difficult with the opposition raising the stakes. Its initial stance of cooperation in running the business of parliament smoothly seems to have changed with its newfound stridency. The opposition parties are taking advantage of the weakness and ineptness of the ruling party.

With no sign of the PTI government taking a more prudent approach or making an effort to get the system to work smoothly, matters are becoming gloomier in the country.

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Chapter 62

A PRAETORIAN STATE?

12 Dec 2018

IT is not unusual in Pakistan for the military's spokesman to opine on everything from security to foreign and domestic affairs. His press talks are given live TV coverage and his remarks make newspaper headlines. After a brief respite, the ISPR chief spoke again last week. And, sure enough, it covered a range of topics.

DG ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor was pleased with the economy's "revival" and the government's overall performance. While calling for a political solution to the Afghan crisis, he wanted the American forces to stay in Afghanistan. He warned the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) against crossing a "red line". But, more importantly, the good general had some piece of advice for the media: show only 'progress' over the next six months. Is there anything left?

Indeed, the general was presenting not his personal but his institution's thinking on those issues. But should the military spokesman be holding forth on policy matters that do not come under his domain? Should he be commenting on the government's performance and opining on political affairs? Does he need to tell the media what to portray?

It also raises the question of whether there exists an elected civilian government or if this is a praetorian state. Such statements by the military spokesman not only fuel confusion, but also undermine civilian institutions. The extensive media coverage given to his remarks, which often takes precedence over even those of top civilian leaders, is itself a statement.

Is it hard to understand the obligation of the military spokesman to adopt such high personal profile? The ISPR is expected to confine itself to security and other issues related to military matters. But this military organisation seems to have expanded its role hugely over the past few years — getting directly involved in matters that must not fall under its sphere.

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Despite the military's predominance, ISPR chiefs tended to maintain at least some semblance of balance and avoided being engaged in political controversies. But that seems to have gone awry. One clear example is the latest press conference that dealt with domestic political and foreign policies. It is not that the military leadership has not been involved in those matters, yet one does not expect the ISPR to be defining state policy.

Maj Gen Ghafoor maintains that, being a national institution, the military is not linked to any party or person. It was apparently in response to the prime minister's statement that the military stood behind his government. Should it be seen as a rebuff to the prime minister or simply a statement of fact? There may not be any inference, but the clarification was not required.

It is not the first time that the DG ISPR has spoken about Pakistan's Afghan policy. But his latest statement on the Afghan reconciliation process raises some serious questions. More importantly, it is the job of the foreign office to explain Pakistan's foreign policy.

Maj Gen Ghafoor's statement that the American forces should not pull out from the war-torn country was not prudent at a time when the Afghan Taliban is engaged in direct negotiations with the US. One of the insurgents' demands is that of the timeframe for the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. It is better to leave any policy announcement to the relevant civilian forums. Such statements undercut civilian authority and fuel confusion.

His remarks on the PTM, too, have got the institution engaged in unnecessary political controversy. It is a political issue and should be left to the civilian government to deal with. Such warnings could only ignite the situation. Surely there has been provocation from some elements within the movement, but generally the PTM's supporters have remained peaceful. The military's involvement in the matter could only provide ammunition to vested interests. We must learn some lessons from our experience in Balochistan. There is always a political solution to popular discontent. Outside powers can only fish in troubled water.

The DG ISPR's advice to the media seems quite interesting. What the good general may not understand is that journalism is the act of bringing information and opinion into the public arena. It provides a platform for discussion across a range of political, social and development issues. Only when the media is free to monitor, investigate and criticise the state's policies and actions can good governance take hold.

Free, pluralistic and independent news media contributes to social, economic and political development. The job of the media is to provide credible information representing a plurality of opinions, facts and ideas. But, unfortunately, there is now a move to stifle freedom of expression and plurality of views in the name of national security. This is extremely dangerous for the political and social cohesion of the

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country. The ISPR's job should be to provide information, not to try to impose a particular narrative.

A narrow-minded approach and suppression of press freedom intensifies polarisation among the media, as is being witnessed today. Surely the media, too, must show responsibility and be objective, but any pressure to toe certain lines is not going to help. In this age of communication, facts on the ground cannot be glossed over. The paranoia over so-called hybrid war has become a major factor in the move to control the media.

The civil-military imbalance has remained a major source of political instability hampering the democratic process. Despite three democratic transitions, the space for the military establishment has not diminished. Indeed, the PTI government has moved cautiously, trying to maintain good working relations with the generals.

Prime Minister Imran Khan is right in saying that the military is behind him, and that has given the civilian government some space to breathe. It is imperative that this space be maintained for the smooth functioning of the system and to dispel concerns of the rise of a praetorian state.

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Chapter 63

A TOXIC TWITTER WAR

03 Dec 2018

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's latest salvo against Pakistan is yet another reminder that the two countries' already uneasy relationship is getting nastier. It was not the first time that the president launched an outrageous broadside but the response from a Pakistani leader has never been so candid. The war of tweets threatens to completely derail a faltering association.

Intriguingly, the Trumpian invective came at a time when it seemed that the two estranged allies could still work together for a negotiated political solution to the Afghan crisis. A series of recent senior-level interactions had raised hopes that the rocky relationship could be stabilised. The latest spat has made it more difficult to maintain even the illusion of meaningful alignment.

It was certainly not a spontaneous bout of rage that drove an impulsive US president to make such humiliating remarks; it was a well-thought-out move to increase the pressure on Islamabad. The first volley of words came during an interview with Fox News, when out of nowhere Trump blasted Pakistan for not doing a "damn thing" for the United States, despite receiving billions of dollars in aid.

He taunted Pakistan for sheltering Osama bin Laden and insinuated that the latter's presence in a high-security zone was known to Pakistani officials. One wonders why this issue has been raised now, while forgetting that it was as much a failure of US intelligence that the most-wanted terrorist leader managed to escape from Afghanistan despite the presence of American forces there.

Moreover, there is no acknowledgement by the American president of Pakistan's role in destroying the Al Qaeda infrastructure in the region. Pakistan may be blamed for not taking action against some militants operating from its soil, but holding it responsible for the US military debacle in Afghanistan is extremely unfair.

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Surely, it was not the first time that a US official alleged that Pakistan was playing a double game; however, Trump's tenor is becoming increasingly strident. He was equally harsh in his New Year tweet in which he accused Pakistan of lying and being deceitful. The hostility had seemed to lessen a bit in the past months. That, perhaps, prompted our foreign minister to claim that the US was willing to reset ties with Pakistan. One wonders what caused Shah Mehmood Qureshi to believe that the Trump administration could change tack. The latest episode has shattered the myth that relations were getting back on track.

The tough response from the Pakistani prime minister did not come as a surprise. Imran Khan has been known for his strong views on Pakistan's post-9/11 alliance with the US and his fiery anti-American rhetoric. Yet one cannot agree more with the prime minister that the US needed to examine the reasons for its failure in Afghanistan. "Instead of making Pakistan a scapegoat for their failures, the US should do a serious assessment of why, despite 140,000 Nato troops plus 250,000 Afghan troops and reportedly $1 trillion spent on war in Afghanistan, the Taliban today are stronger than before," Imran Khan said in a tweet. He further noted that Pakistan had borne the brunt of the American-led war on terror.

Trump, perhaps, did not expect such a lashing from Pakistan's prime minister and his tenor got harsher in a spate of Twitter replies. The message was clear: the US would further toughen its stance towards Pakistan. Almost all US military aid has been stopped and only a trickle of civilian aid is now coming to Pakistan.

Trump's South Asia policy has brought Pakistan-US ties to a new low. It is even worse than what it was in the 1990s when Pakistan was under all kinds of US sanctions. The interaction between the two countries has been reduced to a low official level though military-to-military contacts may still have survived.

While the illusion of any strategic convergence has been absent for long, even a transactional relationship is now hard to maintain. It is apparent that Islamabad is no more dependent on US aid, and the latest American measures are not likely to force it to comply with the US demand, though Islamabad would need to take some action in its own interest against the militant groups allegedly operating from its soil.

The recent hostility is unprecedented. Trump's demand for unquestionable compliance is unacceptable to Pakistan. The US policy of using pressure tactics to bring Pakistan to its knees has not worked, and the latest Twitter war between the two leaders would have further widened the trust deficit. However, there is still some convergence of interest between the two countries with regard to Afghanistan. That minimises the option of a complete rupture in ties.

Intriguingly, Trump chose to up the ante at a time when his administration is engaged in direct talks with the Afghan Taliban. The US authorities acknowledge that the role of Pakistan would be extremely critical in any Afghan peace process. Pakistan has

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long advocated a negotiated settlement for Afghanistan and has shown willingness to cooperate in the effort. Last month, Islamabad released a number of high-level Taliban prisoners, including the movement's co-founder, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. These prisoner releases are widely seen as a US-directed move aimed at encouraging the Taliban to participate in the talks.

The US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has already held two rounds of talks with the Afghan Taliban representatives in Doha. After three-day-long parleys at the Taliban political office last week, Khalilzad appeared cautiously optimistic about reaching a peace agreement with the Afghan insurgents by April next year. "I am talking to all interested parties, all Afghan groups ... and I think there is an opportunity for reconciliation and peace," he told a news conference in Kabul. Such optimism may be premature, but any breakthrough in the talks should be welcomed by Pakistan.

Notwithstanding these tensions, there is still some convergence of interest between the two estranged allies when it comes to ending the war in Afghanistan. But Trump's war of words will not help the two sides work together.

Published in Dawn, November 21st, 2018

Chapter 64

THE PERILS OF APPEASEMENT

07 Nov 2018

NE thought the moment had arrived. The judges had broken the ring of fear. The prime minister's tough words reassured the nation. The civil-military leadership were said to be on the 'same page'.

Yet, when crunch time came, the government capitulated. Surely, it was not the first time the state had been brought to its knees by rampaging zealots, but the terms of submission had never been so humiliating. And the ordeal of Aasia Bibi, despite her acquittal by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, is far from over.

It is not just about the content of the agreement; in fact, what matters more is the government yielding to radical clerics who openly called for the killing of the judges and incited mutiny against the army chief. Their call for the overthrow of the civilian and military leadership can be seen as sedition. While the government claims that the accord has helped restore peace, its politics of appeasement has eroded the authority of the state and further empowered the religious right.

One cannot agree more with Shireen Mazari, the federal minister for human rights, that appeasement to "avoid bloodshed" sends a dangerous message to non-state actors, and undermines the very concept of democratic peaceful protest. She is among the few saner voices in the ruling party that is torn by its own contradictions. The division within became more pronounced during the handling of last week's crisis.

Surely, the policy of appeasement does not seem to be working as the situation remains volatile with the TLP not backing down. The crackdown on rioters in the aftermath is not going to contain Khadim Rizvi and his followers who appear emboldened after the agreement that promises to bar Aasia from leaving the country. It is tantamount to signing her death warrant.

Even more alarming is that the issue has become a battle cry for all religious groups including the mainstream Islamic parties who are threatening to come out on the streets.

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The blasphemy law comes in handy to whip up public sentiments for Islamic parties of all hues, who had been swept aside in the elections. It is no more an issue restricted to hard-line Barelvi groups such as the TLP. The Aasia Bibi court judgement seems to have brought together squabbling sectarian groups, making it more difficult for the government to deal with the impending challenge.

What happened last week did not come as a surprise. The religious groups with the TLP in the lead had turned the case into a highly emotive issue. The matter was highlighted with the murder of Salmaan Taseer, the Punjab governor, by his security guard for defending the poor Christian woman. The execution of his assassin Mumtaz Qadri also led to the rise of Barelvi militancy that is represented by the TLP.

The movement is built entirely around the blasphemy question. Its followers not only come from the Barelvi madressahs spread across the country but also draw support among the less-educated, poorer sections of the urban and rural population mainly in Punjab. Notwithstanding the rise of religious extremism in the country, this new phenomenon is more dangerous as it evokes wider emotional appeal among the populace. The filthy language used by these clerics and the open incitement to violence has made the lives of not only members of minority religious communities but also moderate Muslims more vulnerable to mob violence.

Their siege of Islamabad last year contributed to the spectacular rise of the group. The capitulation by the state gave the group the boost it needed before elections. The widespread perception that the security agencies were behind the sit-in in the capital may have also been a factor in its meteoric rise on the political scene. Although the TLP may not have won a single National Assembly seat, it did have a significant impact on the elections securing more than two million votes across the country.

This newfound sense of power was manifested in the recent protests that almost brought the country to a halt and forced the government to sign a controversial, five-point agreement, the legality of which is questionable. Ceding to the demands of a group that refuses to accept the Supreme Court order will further weaken the authority of the government and state.

It was evident that despite the warning, the administration had not taken any preventive measures to stop the violence. There was no clear plan or strategy to deal with the situation. One of the reasons for this paralysis is the PTI's own soft position on religious extremism. It was the only political party that justified the TLP's Islamabad siege and supported the demand for the law minister to step down.

Some senior PTI leaders have also attended rallies of extremist sectarian groups and played the religious card in the elections. How can one forget the spectacle of the Punjab provincial information minister visiting the grave of Mumtaz Qadri and paying homage to a convicted murderer? So it was not just a question of the government's capacity, but also the PTI's own hidebound views that have been responsible.

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It was certainly not a spontaneous movement that had paralysed the country. The TLP was well prepared for protests after the Supreme Court reserved its judgement in the case in early October. The violence spread like a prairie fire, taking law-enforcement agencies by surprise. The statement by the ISPR chief at the peak of the violence giving the impression that the military would not intervene added to the confusion. The statement was more surprising as the TLP leaders were inciting mutiny within army ranks.

Indeed, it is primarily the responsibility of the government to protect the rights of the people and uphold the rule of law. But the issue of violent extremism must also be the concern of the state as a whole, as well as other stakeholders in the democratic set-up.

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Chapter 65

WHAT'S THE DEAL?

31 Oct 2018

WHEN Imran Khan returned home last week with a handout of $6 billion from Saudi Arabia, he boasted that he would mediate (between the latter country and Iran) to end the war in Yemen. A tall claim indeed by the prime minister, who had publicly expressed his 'desperation' for a financial bailout on the eve of the visit.

Khan went to 'Davos in the Desert' ignoring the international outcry over the brutal killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi hitmen in Turkey, allegedly on the orders of the powerful crown prince. The prime minister was rewarded. There are no strings attached to this generosity, we are told. But does it give any leverage to an indebted nation to push its benefactor to end a brutal war?

Yemen is a victim of Saudi aggression. The tragic war has killed thousands of people and pushed millions to the brink of starvation. It is not that the Iranians are completely disconnected from the conflict, but Tehran is not the instigator. So the prime minister's desire to play arbiter in the conflict is nothing more than wishful thinking.

It is hard to believe that such a generous Saudi financial package has no costs. Surely, it is not for the first time that Riyadh has given us financial support. One of our closest allies, the kingdom has come to our rescue a number of times in the past. But the munificence this time has been extraordinary, raising questions about such bounty.

Surely, it has not been a payoff for the Pakistani prime minister's attendance at the controversial Saudi investment conference, boycotted by many countries in protest against the gruesome killing of the Saudi journalist. Pakistan, Jordan and Lebanon were the countries represented at the conference at the highest official level. The package may have come after some hard, secret negotiations preceding the prime minister's second visit to the kingdom in less than one month.

It is not clear what have we offered in return. It cannot be Pakistan's offer for arbitration in the Yemen conflict as the prime minister wants us to believe. There is no

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reason to believe that the new Pakistani government has backtracked on its pledge not to send troops to Yemen. Yet, that does not rule out Pakistan's military presence in the kingdom. There is more to the bargain than the government is prepared to disclose.

Since the start of the Yemen conflict, the oft-repeated phrase used in official statements is that any threat to Saudi territorial integrity would provoke strong action from Pakistan. But there is no clear answer as to where the threat lies. The kingdom is certainly not facing any foreign aggression. In fact, Saudi Arabia has a long history of military involvement in Yemen, which Riyadh considers its soft underbelly.

It is the Saudi-led military involvement in the Yemeni civil war that has created greater security problems for the region. According to some reports, the Yemen war has been costing the Saudis more than $50bn a year. The conflict has created one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has witnessed in recent times. The US and other Western countries had either implicitly supported the Saudi aggression or looked away — mainly because of the Iranian factor.

But the situation seems to have changed after the Khashoggi murder case. The Trump administration, that has cultivated close relations with the monarchy, has now called for an end to Saudi aggression in Yemen. Once touted as a reformer who would transform the kingdom, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman now is in the eye of the storm.

Against this backdrop, the huge Saudi bailout package assumes greater significance. Although Pakistan has pledged to stay neutral in the Middle East civil conflict that is also manifested in the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, its policies are heavily tilted towards Riyadh. Not to forget that Pakistan is also a key member of a Saudi-led Islamic force — whose role is not clearly defined and which is headed by former Pakistani army chief Gen Raheel Sharif. That may have been a strong factor in the Saudis bankrolling Pakistan.

Pakistan's support is also considered by Riyadh as extremely important as a new regional alliance takes shape. The only Muslim nuclear-armed nation is pivotal to the Saudis' regional power matrix as tension with Iran has escalated. Although Islamabad may not engage militarily in the Middle East, it is committed to coming to the defence of the House of Saud when needed.

The Saudi bailout package may help Pakistan sail through one of the most serious financial crises in the country's history, but such dependence could also push Pakistan into the Middle East conflict. Instead of claiming diplomatic success, the government must take parliament into confidence about the deal.

Surely, Saudi Arabia is an important ally and it has stood by Pakistan in difficult times, but the relationship must not be at the cost of our national interest. Our relations with Riyadh plunged to a low when parliament voted against sending troops to Yemen some years ago. Now, strategic relations with the kingdom are back on track.

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But still, one has to tread a cautious path given fast-changing regional geopolitics, particularly in view of the growing tensions between the US and Iran following the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Tehran. Saudi Arabia is closely aligned with Washington on sanctions against Iran. The US hard-line position on Khashoggi's killing is not likely to affect the Saudi position on this issue.

These developments present a very serious challenge to the country. Imran Khan must not harbour any illusions of playing the role of arbiter. It is a regional power game and not some territorial dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran that can be resolved through third-party mediation. It is time for us to maintain a low profile on the external front and not become a party to the conflict in any way.

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Chapter 66

POPULATION AND SECURITY

24 Oct 2018

POPULATION explosion, though missing from the country's policy discourse, presents one of the most serious threats to our national security.

There may not be a simple causal relationship between demography and security, but evidence shows that high population growth is a major destabilising factor in the least developed countries. There are many examples to show that tensions leading up to conflict may have been heightened by demographic pressures.

One of the highest population growth rates and a huge youth bulge have created an extremely dangerous situation for Pakistan. We could have used our demographic power to turn around the country's economy, but with little investment in education and slow economic growth, the youth bulge is fast becoming a liability and serious threat to the country's internal security.

The inability of the state to productively utilise a large young generation has already turned the country into a breeding ground for violent extremism, and could cause further social dislocation and conflict.

This runaway population growth has created vast ranks of restless young men with few prospects and little to lose. Their frustrated ambitions can be an explosive force. More troubling is that there is no realisation about this lurking threat. A study conducted by Population Action International shows that about 80 per cent of the world's civil conflicts since the 1970s have occurred in countries with young, fast-growing populations.

Pakistan is a stark example of that; thousands of people have been killed in militant and extremist violence, earning the country the dubious distinction of being one of the world's most violent places.

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Indeed, there are multiple domestic and international reasons that are responsible for the rising violent extremism in Pakistan. But it is not just religious fanaticism that drives young men to resort to violence. It also has much to do with the failure of the state to turn this young population into productive citizens.

Pakistan is sitting on a potential demographic disaster with more than 120 million of its population under 25 years of age. This high number of young people is the face of today's Pakistan. This new generation is also at the centre of an unresolved ideological struggle about what sort of country Pakistan should be. With an extremely low literacy rate and bleak job opportunities, the future prospects of the young generation are uncertain and dark.

Growing frustration among the youth makes them vulnerable to prejudices and extremism. The gravity of the situation can be assessed by the fact that 32pc of our young generation is illiterate and the majority of the others are school dropouts. Enrolment rates are the lowest in South Asia. Pakistan's spending on education is around 2pc of the GDP, about half that spent by India. The poor quality of education hardly equips the youth to face the challenges of the globalised world they live in, further pushing them towards isolation.

Furthermore, the widening social, cultural and economic divide has made the less advantaged youth receptive to extremism and violence. It has created a mindset that facilitates a militant agenda. Many studies have shown that there is a direct link between religious extremism and social and economic marginalisation.

The instability resulting from severe demographic pressures has led to civil war in many countries. Pakistan will not be too far away from such a situation if its present drift continues. In fact, we are already in the midst of one. The growing alienation of young generations and their feelings towards the government and state have been illustrated in some recent surveys. The youth's despair is deep-seated in the present conditions.

With little or no education, as well as the lack of economic opportunities, they have not much to look forward to. Few are hopeful of getting jobs. The continuing downslide of the economy indicates that things are not getting better. Pakistan's population has doubled over the past few decades.

The 2017 population census has shown that Pakistan has moved up the ladder, becoming the fifth most populous nation only behind India, China, the US and Indonesia. With a staggering growth rate of 2.4pc per annum, the country's population is around 207m. That marks an increase of more than 57pc since the last population census in 1998, and is higher than what had been projected.

Pakistan needs an annual economic growth rate of at least 6pc to 7pc to absorb millions of people entering the job market every year. The population of the unemployed has drastically risen with the economic growth rate averaging around 3pc over the past decade, thus creating a dangerous situation

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All this has left the country struggling to provide for a rapidly expanding populace. It is a disaster in the making. What is most worrisome is that this population explosion and its implications have drawn little attention from the political leadership.

Despite the gravity of the situation, the issue has hardly figured in the national discourse. The PTI government that says it is committed to human development appears to have completely ignored the challenge that presents the biggest threat to political stability and national security. Human development is not possible without dealing with the problem of high population growth.

It is a nightmare scenario fast unfolding. Firm and decisive action is needed to contain the population explosion before it is too late. The consequences of further delay will be disastrous. Economic and social problems faced by the country cannot be dealt with effectively unless population growth is brought under control. Other countries have done it, and it should not be difficult for us either. But what is needed is political will and a clear policy.

It may be late but the situation can still be salvaged with the government taking the issue more seriously. The exploding population bomb has put the country's future in jeopardy. Is the government listening?

Chapter 67

SELECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

17 Oct 2018

THE spectacle of a former university vice chancellor and professors being dragged to court in chains has shamed the nation and raised questions about the draconian accountability drive under way. The public humiliation of academics under investigation for 'illegal appointments' highlights the roguish conduct of the country's premier anti-graft body. It appeared that they were condemned even before being charged or proven guilty.

This may be the most outrageous, though not the first, such incident of a media trial conducted by the National Accountability Bureau that seems to have gone into overdrive in recent months. There have been numerous cases where politicians, senior government officials and businessmen have been administered shameful treatment while still under investigation. Under NAB laws they can be detained on mere allegations.

In some cases, the accused have been detained for months without charge to extract a confession from them and make them agree to a plea bargain. Such draconian measures have made the so-called accountability process questionable. It is not enough that NAB officials have regretted the chaining of the detained professors; the chief justice should have taken much sterner action against them. The court's thunder and fury dissipated with the tendering of a faint apology.

By its action, NAB effectively declared the academics guilty. The onus is now on the accused to prove themselves innocent. They have now been remanded into NAB's custody for further questioning. But their reputation would already have been stained by the media trial even if their innocence is proved.

In the words of the chief justice: "It is like death for a professor if he is handcuffed as the impression cannot be undone for the rest of his life." But still the matter was let go

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off without any punishment for those responsible for the humiliation of the detainees. The mild reprimand to arrogant NAB officers does not bring solace to wounded souls.

There are many other victims of NAB's high-handedness. In light of some of the arrests, allegations of selective accountability and political victimisation have a ring of truth. It is certainly not coincidental that most of those targeted in the recent months belong to the opposition PML-N. It is true that many of them may have been involved in wrongdoing, but the way in which cases have been pursued against a selected few has made NAB's actions open to criticism.

The sudden spurt in NAB's operations raises suspicions of some ulterior motive. The recent arrest of Shahbaz Sharif without any formal charge is a case in point. There are many more serious cases of financial crime pending against other former public office holders but NAB has not evinced the same urgency as it has in the cases against PML-N leaders and officials linked to the previous government.

The arrest of the Punjab University professors may not have anything to do with those cases. But the incident has exposed the irrationality of the current accountability system, especially when it is argued that the matter should have been dealt with by the university syndicate or education ministry. It is quite intriguing why NAB should get involved in this case.

Surely corruption is a major problem sapping the economic and social progress of the country. But the flaws in the bureau's operation are certainly not going to help the so-called anti-corruption campaign. Its sweeping authority has rendered the anti-graft body unaccountable.

In fact, there is a need to revisit all NAB laws that violate the basic norms of justice, making the body controversial. The very fact that NAB was established by a military government mainly as a tool against politicians makes it even more imperative to change the draconian laws guiding the anti graft institution. Although NAB is supposed to be an autonomous body, in effect it has never been so.

Established as a federal institution in 1999 by Pervez Musharraf's military government, NAB is responsible not only for investigating financial crimes inside the government and outside but also for providing the government with critical intelligence assessment regarding economic terrorism. Its sphere of operation has been expanded subsequently. According to Musharraf, "NAB was created to put the fear of God in the corrupt". But it was never to be.

Indeed, NAB initially did go after politicians and businessmen, but political expediency slowed down the anti-graft campaign. In many cases, investigations were stopped against politicians who agreed to align themselves with the military government. A former NAB chief publicly admitted that the cases against many leading politicians were withdrawn on the instructions of Gen Musharraf.

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Most prominent among them were Aftab Sherpao and Faisal Saleh Hayat. The former PPP leaders, who faced serious corruption charges, later became key members of the PML-Q government. It was obvious that the anti-graft body became an instrument to be used against political rivals. That may still be true notwithstanding the claim of it being an independent and autonomous institution.

There is also a question mark over the competence of NAB to investigate white-collar crimes. True, the bureau has reportedly recovered billions of rupees of corruption money from businessmen, politicians and government and former military officials through a 'plea bargain' that allows it to negotiate out-of-court settlements. Under this provision, an accused is made to sign a confession and deposit funds of an amount determined by NAB. The accused can keep a part of the illegal money.

Former chief justice Jawwad S. Khawaja in 2015 described the practice of plea bargain as 'institutionalised corruption'. There have also been reports of serious charges of corruption and misuse of power within NAB.

With such questionable credibility, NAB operations have become increasingly controversial. Therefore, it is imperative to overhaul the bureau, make it independent of political pressure, and remove its inhuman face that the incident of chaining and handcuffing of the academics exposed.

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Chapter 68

A ONE-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH

10 Oct 2018

IN his news conference last week, Imran Khan was back on his container. To be more precise, he never got off it, despite his rise to power. He threatened his rivals with reprisal. He wanted to see more politicians put behind bars on alleged corruption charges. He was unhappy with the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) for being 'too slow' in taking action against those he blamed for plundering the country.

Khan has promised to bring back all the looted wealth allegedly stashed in foreign lands that he considers to be the cause of all our economic ills. This populist rhetoric had certainly helped him galvanise the electorate and win the elections. But can such a one-dimensional approach to governance take the country out of the woods?

Halfway through the 'magical' 100 days, the Khan government is still struggling to find its moorings. The prime minister seems to be in a state of nirvana with little sense of reality on the ground. Governance through the occult and inanity sums up the past 50 days of Khan's rule. The government has put its entire focus on fighting real or imaginary corruption, notwithstanding the fact that some of the most tainted people are now part of his administration.

As the political situation has started settling down a bit with the opposition parties limiting their battle to parliament, the country has been thrown into another whirlpool of political turmoil with the arrest of Shahbaz Sharif. The high-profile detention of the opposition leader without any formal charge smacks of the politics of vendetta.

The former chief minister of Punjab has been taken into custody in the investigation of a housing scheme scam, but there seems to be no evidence yet of his involvement in any financial corruption. What justifies his detention while the case is still being investigated? The prime minister's lauding of Shahbaz's detention and predictions of

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more arrests raise questions about the claim that NAB is an independent organisation and that it has nothing to do with the government.

It appears doubtful that the allegations of any wrongdoing could stand in a court of law without substantive evidence, bringing into question the entire accountability process. The remarks made by the prime minister and his hyperactive information minister only reinforce the allegations of a witch-hunt. Selective accountability could cause a serious political backlash that would be disastrous for the entire system. It is not surprising that NAB's latest action has brought the squabbling opposition groups closer, thus exacerbating the problems of the fragile coalition government.

Surely, rampant corruption is one of the biggest curses retarding the country's economic progress, but there are also other more serious issues that urgently need to be addressed. Voodoo economics would not remedy our deep-rooted problems. The ineptitude and lack of capacity of the PTI government were more evident in the latter's handling of the economy. It may be true that the new government has inherited the mess left behind by the previous PML-N administration. Never-theless, it is now the responsibility of the new incumbent to fix it.

Undoubtedly, the country is facing perhaps the gravest financial crisis of its history. But the government has failed to move fast to prevent a free fall. It was only after the signs of a complete meltdown appeared that the government decided to approach the IMF for a bailout. While the government remained confused and indecisive waiting for some miracle to happen the stock market crashed. The delay caused investors' confidence to hit a new low.

Surely, going to the IMF has its own perils, but there was no other choice. It is obvious that the negotiations with multilateral financial institutions will not be easy this time because of our worsening relations with Washington, and the bailout is likely to come with much tougher conditionalities. The government will have to take some unpopular measures in order to gain space for carrying out much-needed structural reforms.

That may require the administration to maintain a balance between belt-tightening and its populist agenda. A one-dimensional approach will certainly not help in facing the grave challenge. There is also a serious problem of lack of professional capacity not only to navigate the country out of the financial crisis, but also to chart a long-term strategy for sustainable economic progress. The much-touted Economic Advisory Council seems to be in tatters if not rendered completely ineffective after Prof Atif Mian's removal from it on religious grounds, with some other members leaving it in protest.

Religious prejudice is anathema to progress and Imran Khan, with what can only be described as a hidebound worldview, does not seem to be cognisant of this. He is certainly not prepared to take on extremists within and outside his party. The

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backtracking on the Atif Mian issue is one such example. It reflects badly on a government that promises to build a 'naya Pakistan' and take the country forward.

Incoherence in policy is another hallmark of the government that is not willing to come out of its populist and opposition mould. The disarray is not only evident in handling domestic political and economic issues but also in external affairs. One such example is the amateurish dealing with CPEC. There are so many contradictory statements emanating from different ministries that the future of the project has been made questionable.

Surely, there is a need to review some of the projects under CPEC, but the chaos indicates that we still have no clear idea of what we really want. Similarly, the unsubstantiated claim about Saudi financial support and investment has caused serious embarrassment to both governments.

Given the enormity of the financial crisis and domestic challenges, the government needs political stability. Defusing political confrontation is in the interest of a minority government whose survival hinges on the support of disparate political groups. There is a greater need now for national reconciliation to face internal and external challenges. It surely does not mean compromising on corruption, but inflammatory remarks can prevent the law from taking its course. The perils of a one-dimensional approach are contagious.

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Chapter 69

CIVIL-MILITARY POWER MATRIX

19 Sep 2018

SECURITY briefings for a newly elected prime minister may not be unprecedented, but the excitement over Imran Khan's intensive parleys at GHQ and the ISI headquarters certainly are. Our hyper-animated information minister described how proud the prime minister and the cabinet ministers were at the rare honour of meeting "the command of the world's best army".

He claimed that it was the first time in the country's history that the civil and military leadership were on 'one page'. True, it is critical for the civilian incumbent to build good relations with all stakeholders. But such hyperbole over an event that should have been treated as routine accentuates the existing imbalance between the two institutions of state. And optics do matter.

Undoubtedly, there is much goodwill among the top brass for the government that had been missing in the past. There was a grudging acceptance of the two previous administrations led by the PPP and subsequently the PML-N. But constant friction over various policy issues made cohabitation extremely difficult. The clash with the military had contributed to the fall of Nawaz Sharif that ultimately boosted Imran Khan's rise to power.

It is evident that the generals feel much more comfortable working with the new civilian dispensation that does not come with any past baggage. The grand reception for the prime minister and his team at GHQ proves the point. All that sounds good for the smooth working of the government. The euphoria in PTI ranks over the goodwill gesture is understandable. But, at the same time, it also demonstrates the party's sense of insecurity and lack of self-confidence.

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A fledgling administration certainly needs the establishment's support that could provide it some breathing space. It is imperative for the military leadership to help stabilise the political and economic situation that also threatens its institutional interests. The fact is that the security establishment has gained greater space and there is no apparent reason for it to feel that it should rein in the current civilian administration.

There is no real challenge to the establishment's predominance in the spheres of national security and foreign policy. Imran Khan government is more focused on firefighting on the economic and political fronts, and security and external matters are not a priority. With no vision and clear policy direction of its own, the government appears happy to accept the lead. Yet, it is too early to celebrate given the inherent problems in the power structure.

Any failure in improving governance, or the inability of the administration to prevent an economic slide, could widen the existing imbalance, allowing the military more space. It is a lesson to be learnt from the past. Such situations increase the security establishment's assertiveness.

Contrary to perception, it was not the clash over foreign and national security policies that intensified the confrontation between Nawaz Sharif's government and the military. It was essentially past baggage, discord on internal political matters, Sharif's style of governance and the deteriorating economy that brought the situation to a head. Gen Musharraf's treason trial and the media 'leak' besides other issues seemed to be the main reasons for moving against the former prime minister.

Sharif lost the game with the emergence of an assertive judiciary as an informal part of the power troika. Seen to be backed by the security establishment, the judiciary in the past year has become, perhaps, the most powerful player in the emerging power matrix. Many have observed that it has gone beyond judicial activism, and has extended its role to areas that come under executive domain. The elections and a democratic transition have not altered that power template. The PTI government may not yet feel pressure from the superior judiciary. But it is not a very comfortable situation for the new dispensation either.

In fact, it has not been a very promising beginning for the PTI-led coalition government composed of disparate political groups. It has yet to find direction with an inexperienced team at the helm. The situation is much more complex as the country faces multiple challenges, both internal and external. That surely demands greater cohesion and cooperation among the stakeholders.

It is true that the security apparatus is keen to prop up this government. Yet there is a limit to what this can deliver if the civilian government does not get its act together, leave behind its populist ways and focus on governance. It appears obvious that a weak civilian dispensation could give greater space to the other two institutions of state, thus widening the imbalance in the power structure. That could lead to conflict among these institutions

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hampering the democratic process as we have witnessed in the past. Power struggles are inherent in the system, but these must not be allowed to disrupt the political process.

Undoubtedly, civil-military relations have remained a major source of political and economic instability hampering the democratic process in the country. There is no denying that civilian supremacy is essential to a democratic dispensation. Indeed, there is a need to change the balance of power in favour of the elected dispensation.

But this cannot be accomplished without carrying out some fundamental reforms in the political system itself in order to make the executive and legislature more effective.

For civilian supremacy, it is essential that the government not only improve governance but also strengthen civilian and democratic institutions. True, the government has launched an ambitious reform agenda to strengthen the local government system and restructure the bureaucracy. They are certainly important steps, but the real issue is of the prime minister's ability to implement those plans from a weak political base.

Unfortunately, both elected leaders and the security agencies have been responsible for undermining civilian institutions. Imran Khan must learn a lesson from the mistakes of past governments and focus more seriously on institution building. In order to strengthen democracy, he needs to develop a broader consensus among all political forces and with other institutions of state.

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Chapter 70

A FAULTY BEGINNING

12 Sep 2018

MAYBE it is too early to judge the performance of the PTI government but the bumbling start has not shown much promise. Almost a month after taking the reins, the new dispensation has yet to find its moorings. A disjointed team of novices and the lack of clear policy direction do not evoke much confidence.

Numerous taskforces have been formed to chart out the plan of action in various fields; but until they start functioning there will be chaos. Additionally, events over the past week have revealed an amateurish approach to handling critical issues related to governance. Populist rhetoric seems to have substituted policy. It is voodoo economics and politics in action — dams will be built through public donations and 'unutilised state land' can be used to reduce our debt burden. Just wait for the 100-day miracle, we are told.

There is no doubting Imran Khan's commitment to bring change. His focus on human development and environmental issues is commendable. But it's the economy that needs to be fixed first. It's surely 'change vs more of the same'. But what kind of change has not been clearly defined.

Without a clear vision it will be more of the same or worse. It is certainly a good idea to seek the services of technocrats to develop a framework for change but there is a question about the willingness of the elected leadership to heed their advice and recommendations. It was a wise decision to form a permanent Economic Advisory Council inducting the best talent from both inside and outside Pakistan. This showed seriousness on the part of the PTI government to deal with the grave economic challenges that confront the country. But all those promises came crashing down, when days after the formation of the EAC, the government asked Prof Atif Mian to step down from the council because of his faith.

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Nothing could be more humiliating for a globally recognised economist and a professor at one of America's top universities, who had volunteered to work for the country. It was a shameful surrender to zealots.

A democratically elected popular leader could not take a stand on his own decision because he appeared to be afraid of religious extremists within and outside his party. One can ask, what kind of 'naya Pakistan' does the prime minister intend to build? Surely not one that is more regressive than what we have witnessed in the past?

Not surprisingly, two other members, both internationally acclaimed economists, quit the council too in protest. In his tweet, Dr Imran Rasul, who teaches at University College London, said: "Basing decisions on religious affiliation goes against my principles, or the values I am trying to teach my children."

Other members may not have resigned but they have reservations. The episode has dealt a blow to the image of the new government and could discourage any self-respecting Pakistani expatriate from returning to help the country.

Most worrisome is the observation that the pressure to remove Atif Mian was stronger within the PTI, bringing to the surface the paradox of a party that claims to represent the educated middle classes and youth. No action was taken by the party leadership against the Punjab information minister who went to the grave of Mumtaz Qadri to pay homage to the convicted murderer. It does not matter if the religious parties were routed in the elections; the zealots continue to hold sway.

Meanwhile, the conduct of diplomacy too has been amateurish. Despite being an experienced hand, the over-exuberant foreign minister has been at the centre of controversy. His fondness for holding frequent press talks generates more confusion. His misreading of a letter from Narendra Modi to Imran Khan that New Delhi was willing to resume bilateral talks caused embarrassment, especially as the Indian authorities denied there was any such offer.

Similarly, the hype regarding the outcome of talks with visiting US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was also misplaced. It did not make much sense for the foreign minister to hold a long press conference after the meeting when the Americans did not choose to have a joint presser. In addition, there was the report of the prime minister refusing to take a prearranged call from the French president while he was busy talking to a group of journalists — if correct, it was an undiplomatic approach. There was no denial by the Prime Minister's Office of the media report.

True, such matters may be dismissed as initial glitches, but can also cause serious diplomatic embarrassment. A faux pas by the adviser on commerce and trade has caused some problems with Beijing. In an interview with the Financial Times, he suggested that work on CPEC could be stopped for a year or more because the Pakistani government wanted to renegotiate the terms and conditions with the Chinese companies on some projects.

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The government has time to fix things. But some mistakes could be hard to remedy. For instance, the government compromises on its authority and credibility when it gives in to the pressure of a small minority using religion as a weapon. The PTI and the government must decide what kind of future they want to chart for the country. The Atif Mian case has dealt a blow to the government's credibility, and has further emboldened the bigots and extremists who present the biggest threat to the political and economic stability of the country. Now is the time for the government to get down to the business of governance before it is too late.

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Chapter 71

ON THE EXTERNAL FRONT

29 Aug 2018

WHILE foreign policy may not be the top priority for the new government, the challenges on the external front are no less important. The truism that foreign policy begins at home is more relevant to this country in midst of serious economic crisis and political instability. Undeniably it is vital to put our house in order.

Yet the complex external circumstances surrounding the country also demand prudent management of foreign relations. Fast-changing regional geopolitics have a direct bearing on our national security and internal political stability. Given our geostrategic position there is a greater need to take a more balanced approach.

While one cannot disagree with the prime minister focusing on the domestic front, it is hard to understand Imran Khan's pledge not to take any foreign visit for at least three months. It's swinging to other extreme. There are some critical capitals the prime minister needs to visit and interact with the leaders of friendly countries.

There is no decision yet whether the prime minister would attend the United Nations General Assembly session in September. The occasion provides a huge opportunity for the new incumbent to meet other world leaders. That would not divert attention from domestic priorities. It certainly makes a huge difference to have an experienced and full time foreign minister, yet some issues need to be tackled at the highest level.

As a norm most critical foreign policy decisions lay in the domain of the security establishment. This is certainly not just a perception but a fact. One of the major reasons for this incongruity is the country being turned into a national security state given its geostrategic situation. It is also a fact that Pakistan has been a frontline state in two wars involving superpowers across its western borders twice in the last four decades giving the security establishment a much greater role in determining the direction of the country's foreign policy.

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The long period of military rules has further increased the predominance of the security agencies in the decision-making process. The incompetence of successive civilian rules too has been responsible for this imbalance. The narrow security prism has restricted our foreign policy options. This situation must be changed.

One cannot agree more with Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the foreign minister, that it is primarily the responsibility of the foreign office and the civilian government to formulate foreign policy — of course with the consultation of the security agencies as happens in other countries. It, however, remains to be seen how the new government takes charge in determining the policy direction and conducting foreign relations.

Growing estrangement with the United States, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, tension with India and relations with China will be the major foreign policy issues the new government will have to deal with. Managing its relations with Washington is going to be the most serious challenge for the new PTI administration. The alliance that emerged after 9/11 seems to have come the full circle.

The turbulent relations between the two countries have come almost to a breaking point. Once perceived to be a strategic alliance, the relationship has long been transformed into a transactional arrangement. That relationship too is not working with the widening trust gap between Washington and Islamabad.

Now the residual transactional relationship has also come under strain after President Donald Trump announced his administration's South Asia policy earlier this year and suspended military assistance. Like its predecessors, the Trump administration demands unquestioned cooperation, ignoring Islamabad's interests. Yet a complete breakdown of relations between Washington and Islamabad is not an option.

It was a testy first interaction between the new Pakistani administration and Washington. The controversy over what transpired in the telephonic conversation between the prime minister and the US Secretary of State has clouded the coming visit to Islamabad of the most senior US official in years. But it is time to move forward and find some common ground for cooperation between the two erstwhile allies.

Afghanistan remains a thorny issue. The resumption of bilateral talks seems to have broken the ice and reopened a window of opportunity for Islamabad and Kabul to build an atmosphere of mutual trust and put ties on a more stable footing — the lowering of hostile rhetoric, thus paving the way for a conducive environment in which rational discussions on critical issues affecting the two countries can be held.

There is, indeed, strong reason for optimism but it would require a greater effort by both sides to remove the major sources of tension, not an easy task given the huge baggage of mutual distrust and certain adverse internal and external factors. The recent series of meetings between Kabul and Islamabad has taken the discussions forward with more concrete suggestions for evolving a common strategy to deal with cross-border sanctuaries that have been the biggest cause of tension between the two countries.

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Another foreign policy challenge for the new government would be to figure out how to normalise relations with New Delhi and manage business with Beijing. Imran Khan appears serious about improving relations with India, but Indian intransigence and the Kashmir issue remain a major hurdle to a breakthrough. Also given that India is having a general election next year, there is no hope of any major development on the Indian front.

Meanwhile, the growing China-Pakistan axis reflects Asia's emerging geopolitics and realignment of forces. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has brought a dimensional shift in the two countries' relations at a time of significant geopolitical change. But while it promises wide-ranging benefits for infrastructure development and economic growth in Pakistan, a number of important challenges remain to be overcome if the project is to be sustainable and produce long-term benefits for Pakistanis. A major challenge for the new government is to negotiate better terms with the Chinese firms so as to reap maximum benefit from their investments.

Given all the complexities, the new government needs to diversify its foreign policy options keeping in view Pakistan's national interest. While internal political and economic stability must remain the top priority, it is also important to take charge of foreign policy too.

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Chapter 72

POPULISM AND GOVERNANCE

22 Aug 2018

IMRAN Khan has set ambitious goals for his government. While his priorities seem right the challenges are enormous. His first address to the nation has indeed inspired people giving them some hope. No Pakistani leader in the recent past has spoken so earnestly about the problems faced by the common people and also the difficulties confronting the nation. He believes he can change the destiny of this crisis-torn country. All that sounds reassuring. But can he deliver on his promise?

The transition from the position of an opposition leader to one of power is never easy, particularly when it has taken one decades of relentless struggle to reach that level. Khan's outburst during his first speech at the National Assembly following his election as prime minister was seen to prove the point. He lost his cool in the face of the PML-N's unruly protest and went into his confrontationist 'container' mode. He, however, appeared more in control during his televised address.

Notwithstanding some populist rhetoric, the prime minister has given his vision of turning Pakistan into a social welfare state. His emphasis on human development is in contrast with the PML-N government's obsession with big-ticket infrastructure projects. Health, education, environment and institutional reform are at the top rung of Khan's priorities.

It is rare for our political leaders to take such an emphatic position on critical issues directly linked to the well-being of the masses. The lack of investment on human infrastructure has been a major cause of Pakistan lagging behind in economic and social development. Surely successive governments had pledged to improve education and health services but there has never been any serious effort to fulfil those promises.

Financial constraints have also been a factor in low investment in the social sector. Khan's promise to get millions of children into school needs massive resources. It is a

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similar story in the health sector. The party may have succeeded to some extent in reforming the education and health sectors in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that it ruled for five years, but a lot more needs to be done.

The financial crisis is certainly the most serious concern for the new government as acknowledged by the prime minister. The current account deficit and falling foreign exchange reserves need urgent action. But Khan does not seem to have clear thoughts on the question of whether to seek an IMF bailout or to see if other options are available to deal with the crisis. The massive debt burden has limited our options. The delay in making decisions could worsen our predicament.

Equally serious are the burgeoning circular debt affecting the power sector and the massive losses incurred by public-sector organisations that have added to our financial woes. There is an urgent need to formulate a clear policy to stop this haemorrhaging. The government has made it clear that it did not have any plan to privatise the losing state-owned enterprises. But it will be hard to revamp organisations like PIA and Pakistan Steel Mills and make them run more efficiently by just making changes at the top. The government will have to take some tough and unpopular measures early in its tenure. It remains to be seen whether it is ready to bite the bullet while keeping its populist promises.

Khan has promised to double the tax revenue by reforming the FBR and appealing to the conscience of the people to pay taxes. That sounds great. But it requires much more to instil the tax culture in society. There is a lot of symbolism involved in Khan's austerity drive. His decision not to live in Prime Minister House and cut down on protocol certainly has great symbolic value, but the administration needs to do much more in order to decrease public expenditure.

Given the enormous challenges of governance, the new government needs a more prudent approach on the political front. But there seems to be no let-up in the party's confrontational politics. The decision to put the former prime minister and his daughter on the Exit Control List does not make any sense as they are already in prison. The move smacks of vendetta and it only serves to divert attention from the government's reform agenda.

Also on the issue of accountability, the PTI government has taken populist rhetoric too far. Indeed, there is a need for across-the-board accountability but the government's actions reinforce allegations of a witch hunt. The pledge of bringing back looted money is nothing more than rhetoric. It would be much better for the PTI administration to let the law take its course rather than have its leaders trumpeting the mantra day and night.

Although Khan has vowed to implement the National Action Plan, there seems little clarity on how the administration plans to deal with the menace of religious extremism that threatens to tear apart our social fabric. There was not even a mention of the problem of violent extremism in the prime minister's address to the nation.

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In order to accomplish the ambitious target, the prime minister needs a good team. Surely the 22-member cabinet has many capable and experienced people, but there is no new blood to bring in dynamism and fresh thinking in the administration. One can understand the compromises one has to make in a coalition setup, yet some space could have been created to bring in new faces.

Most shocking has been the choice of chief minister of Punjab. The logic offered by Khan on the odd appointment that Sardar Usman Buzdar comes from the most backward region is astonishing. The selection of a man who had never held any public office before and has a dubious personal record to head the government in the country's biggest province is more alarming as the provinces are responsible for carrying out the reform agenda announced by the prime minister.

Notwithstanding Imran Khan's commitment of building a 'naya Pakistan', there is now a need for the new incumbent to focus more seriously on governance rather than pandering to populism. Governance is serious business and must be taken as such.

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Chapter 73

INSIDE THE NEW ASSEMBLY

15 Aug 2018

IT is a mixed house of old lineage and fresh entrants in the game. On Monday, the front row of the treasury benches of the newly installed National Assembly illustrated the shifting power dynamics. It is more representative of the federation than the Punjab-dominated huddle witnessed under the erstwhile PML-N rule. With Imran Khan and Shah Mehmood Qureshi sat Akhtar Mengal, Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui and Asad Qaisar. It has more than optics value and symbolism; it manifests a new power coalition.

With the numbers game over, Imran Khan is now fully in the saddle, though still dependent on disparate groups to run the government. Old and new faces now adorn the treasury benches promising to build a 'naya Pakistan'. The prime minister in waiting looked poised and visibly burdened. He certainly seemed to have mellowed with the sense of the coming responsibilities. The pledge of turning over a new leaf and changing the country's destiny is indeed overwhelming.

The presence of a large number of turncoats from other parties has made the task more arduous. Khan thought it was necessary to accept them in order to win the elections. It did work, finally getting him to the pinnacle of power after 22 years of resolute struggle. But there are also highly dynamic and committed men and women now in the house, forming a strong base for the PTI to bring about change.

Khan's victory speech last month sounded conciliatory and the vitriol against his rivals that marked his previous speeches during the election campaign was missing. One has to wait and see whether he would be able to maintain this composure while dealing with a potentially hostile and formidable opposition. It is never easy to run a government without an absolute majority in parliament giving it very little space for implementing a reform agenda. Yet, coalition rule also makes the government more inclusive.

Across the aisle on the opposition benches, Shahbaz Sharif led the truncated former ruling party. His colleagues are all a chip off the old block with few stalwarts having

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jumped ship before the polls. Some renegades are back on the treasury benches of course, under the new banner of 'naya Pakistan'. But does it matter in Pakistani politics?

Interestingly, the PML-N benches appeared subdued under the uncharismatic and lacklustre guardianship of Shahbaz Sharif. There was a creepy silence regarding the fate of the imprisoned leader Nawaz Sharif who was brought to a trial court in an armoured prison van on the day. The humiliating spectacle just miles away did not seem to bother the new PML-N leadership and lawmakers. It is questionable whether Shahbaz Sharif who has been eulogised for his administrative skills as chief minister of Punjab can provide the kind of leadership that the party needs in such testing times.

His leadership skills were badly exposed during the election campaign. His woes have exacerbated with some signs of cracks in the party torn between the two different narratives espoused by the older and the younger Sharif. The leadership has gone to the other branch of the family, but Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam continue to cast their shadow on the party from prison. Although the PML-N remains a formidable political force in Punjab, the party as has happened in the past, finds it extremely difficult to maintain unity in the face of a crisis. It is not known for its resilience.

There was, however, more zing in the ranks of the PPP, another major opposition party, and with good reason. The party has returned to the Assembly with a larger number of seats. More exciting was Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari making his debut in parliament. The scion of Pakistan's once most powerful political dynasty made his mark in the election campaign trying to lift the party from the abyss.

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari may not have the charisma and political acumen of his illustrious mother and grandfather yet, but he has shown a degree of maturity missing in many of our leaders. But living under the shadow of his crafty father, Asif Zardari, it may not be that easy for him to take full charge. The former president is back in the National Assembly after decades and will certainly be in the driving seat when it comes to the PPP's policy matters.

The paradox of the party is evident with the return of old faces and a very dynamic group of female members, some of them elected on general seats. The PPP is part of a grand opposition alliance, but there is no probability of its going too far.

It is evident that the PPP has far greater stakes in the new order than any other opposition group, with the party maintaining its stranglehold in Sindh. The increase in the number of seats in the National Assembly has given the party greater space for political manoeuvring, and master wheeler-dealer Zardari's return to the house has given the PPP some more clout.

Conspicuous by his absence was the once ubiquitous Maulana Fazlur Rehman who has suffered the worst humiliation of his political career. He lost on both seats with his party having been routed in its stronghold by the PTI wave. It was seen as a personal victory for Imran Khan who had relentlessly campaigned against the JUI-F chief. More

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disgrace came when he had to move out of his residence in the ministers' enclave that he had occupied for years as chairman of the Kashmir committee.

Enraged by his defeat, he blamed the 'establishment' for the debacle. He suffered further embarrassment when his allies slammed him for his anti-establishment speech at a protest march. He has almost disappeared from the political scene since then. Missing also has been veteran parliamentarian Mahmood Khan Achakzai. He has also accused the intelligence agencies for the defeat. His absence will be felt hugely by the opposition.

Notwithstanding the controversy over alleged rigging, the democratic transition has been a big stride forward. Despite some flaws in our democratic political system, there is hope for change even if the dream of 'naya Pakistan' is not fully accomplished.

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Chapter 74

THE POLITICS OF RELIGION

08 Aug 2018

THE 2018 elections have proved to be a mixed bag for the religious right. While the vote bank of the mainstream Islamic parties has shrunk, the strong showing of a newly formed radical group has led to jitters. Although it has failed to win even a single seat in the newly elected National Assembly, the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has emerged as the fifth largest group in terms of vote share, and is nominally behind the MMA which itself is an alliance of the mainstream Islamic parties.

Indeed, the growing electoral support for the extremist outfit whose politics is based on animus against other religious groups and that justifies violence in the name of faith is worrisome; yet it is not likely to change the power matrix in the country. The rout of the top leadership of the MMA came as a huge surprise in the elections, and so has the expansion of the TLP's popular base. There may or may not be any correlation between those two developments; still, the spectacular rise of a radical Barelvi movement has given a new and dangerous twist to the issue of religion and politics in the country. It may be indicative of disenchanted voters of the mainstream Islamic parties leaning towards extremist groups with a stronger bias against adherents of other religious beliefs.

Although they remain on the fringes of power politics, religious groups in the country continue to wield more influence than their electoral support base indicates. The combined share of the vote for the religious parties, mainstream or otherwise, however, remains below nine per cent. It was significantly lower than the over 11pc achieved by the MMA during its remarkable success in the 2002 general elections when for the first time in Pakistan's history the religious parties had managed to lead a provincial government. Their triumph, however, was largely limited to one province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

While also losing ground in its stronghold, the mainstream Islamic coalition seems to have been completely wiped out in Punjab and Sindh where the TLP has made significant

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inroads. That also raises the question of whether the TLP electoral gain has largely been at the expense of relatively moderate Islamic parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami and the JUI-F.

Traditionally, the JI, in particular, has had a significant vote bank in the two provinces. This time, it was perhaps the worst electoral performance by the party that has long been the face of political Islam in the country. Most shocking has been the humiliation suffered by the religious parties' coalition in KP where the entire top leadership comes from. Its resurrection has raised the prospect that the MMA would at least present a formidable challenge to the PTI juggernaut. But that did not happen. There have been several factors contributing to the defeat.

It was evident that both the JI and the JUI-F which remained in opposite camps for the past five years had lost much credibility in KP. It was mainly an alliance of expediency to prevent the division of the religious vote that had cost the two parties in the 2013 elections. Moreover, there was nothing new the alliance could offer to the electorate to counter the PTI's overwhelming support in KP. The slogan of Islam was not enough to win public support.

Meanwhile, the spectacular rise of the TLP over the past one year has changed the dynamics of religious politics in the country. In fact, it is a movement rather than a well-knit and organised political party born out of the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, the murderer of former Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. It has also been an assertion of Barelvi radicalism against Wahabi and Salafi groups.

Led by firebrand cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the TLP used the blasphemy issue to whip up religious sentiments both in the urban and rural areas. It was given further impetus during a two-week siege of Islamabad. The virtual surrender of the state emboldened the group. The clerics were also encouraged by the widening civil-military divide.

The group showed its electoral prowess for the first time in the by-election for NA-120 in Lahore last year by getting a significant number of votes, more than the JI candidate. Its growing electoral appeal was also witnessed in the Peshawar and Bhakkar by-elections. Yet the TLP's performance in the general elections across Punjab and Karachi was beyond expectation. It had put up candidates in almost all the constituencies of the national and provincial (Punjab) assemblies, eating not only into the vote bank of JI but also of the PML-N that had traditionally enjoyed the Barelvi vote.

Surprisingly, the TLP's biggest success came from Karachi where it won two provincial seats and came very close to winning a National Assembly seat. The party seems to have received support from followers of groups like the JUP that has traditionally had a significant vote bank in the metropolis. The disintegration of the MQM and the gap thus created also helped the TLP make inroads.

It was most intriguing how the Election Commission registered a party with a sectarian/communal base and that preached extremism and violence, and then allowed it

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to participate in the elections. It gets more and more bizarre as even Pemra had banned the telecast of TLP rallies because of the vitriolic speeches of its leaders. How come the two state agencies have different laws applied to a such a group? Similarly, some banned militant outfits were also allowed to participate in the election under new banners in violation of the law. This is more than a policy of appeasement and has raised questions of tacit backing from some state institutions.

Radical groups deal a serious blow to the nation's struggle against extremism and militant violence. The TLP may not have a concrete programme for it to be a formidable electoral force in the long term. But allowing such groups to operate freely and participate in elections could be disastrous. It remains to be seen how the new PTI administration deals with this scourge of extremism. Given its soft stance towards the religious right, fears are that such groups may get greater space.

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Chapter 75

TIME TO MOVE FORWARD

01 Aug 2018

WITH the numbers game more or less over, the PTI appears well set to form the next government both at the centre and in Punjab. It was already in the saddle in KP and, most likely, the party will be a part of an emerging ruling coalition in Balochistan. It is indeed a great moment for the PTI and its leader Imran Khan who relentlessly pursued his course to the pinnacle of power. However tainted they might have been, the July 25 elections have cleared the clouds of political uncertainty — though not entirely. Now, it is time to move forward.

Shunning the call for a boycott, the opposition parties have prudently decided to use the forum of parliament to fight their battle. Derailing the system was not an option, however serious the reservations over the fairness of the polls may be.

Surely, allegations of foul play on polling day and the delay in the announcement of the results must be investigated. But there is also a question regarding whether the reported irregularities would have drastically altered the overall outcome. Confrontation over the issue could provide an opportunity for non-elected institutions to intervene. A strong opposition in the house will certainly help strengthen the democratic process. Let there be a new beginning.

Imran Khan's victory speech has raised hopes for the return of some rationality to his politics. He certainly sounded more circumspect and conciliatory while offering his party's cooperation in addressing the opposition's complaints about poll rigging. He has laid down the priorities of the incoming administration, promising greater focus on institution building, human development and the alleviation of poverty. Improvement of relations with Afghanistan and India seem to be at the top on his foreign policy agenda.

This is all good but things are not as simple as they sound. It will require more than populist rhetoric to move forward. The challenges are grave, and difficult for any administration to deal with, perhaps more so for a minority government that is dependent on a coalition of disparate groups and a leader with no prior experience of government.

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The new administration will be constrained by the worsening state of the economy and civilian institutions being in a state of utter shambles. The crisis of governance is much more serious than it appears to be.

Delivering on their promise of a 'naya Pakistan' will be a test for Imran Khan and his team. True, the PTI has ruled Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for a full five-year term, but it is a completely different ball game running the central government and the country's biggest province. The party had given an ambitious plan for its first 100 days in office, which includes turning around the economy, expanding job opportunities, dealing with the housing problem and carrying out structural reforms.

But does the party have the capacity and expertise to deliver on these promises? Imran Khan says he will gather a team of technocrats to help the government. This may be a good idea, but these experts cannot deliver without an effective administration in place. There are certainly many good people among the newly elected lawmakers to fill the cabinet positions. One can only hope that the new PTI administration has learnt from the mistakes of previous governments that promoted cronyism

Moreover, the existing political polarisation in the country worsened by widespread protests over alleged poll manipulation has made the situation more complex. With not enough numbers in either house of parliament at the centre, it will be extremely difficult for a fledging coalition to introduce any meaningful legislation needed for the implementation of the party's reform agenda, without the cooperation of the opposition benches. That will require a more pragmatic approach. Is Imran Khan ready for that? A strong opposition could create a serious hurdle for the new government.

Imran Khan's own attitude towards elected institutions in the past raises questions about his ability to take parliament along. His disdain has been evident in his derogatory remarks about the elected house. He would rarely attend parliamentary sessions. It remains to be seen if he changes his attitude when his party is in power. He must understand that by strengthening parliament he would be strengthening the democratic process and his own government.

The requirement of parliamentary democracy is very different from personalised rule. Will Imran Khan shed his apparent arrogance and adhere to an institutional decision-making process? The question becomes more pertinent given the imbalance of power among various institutions of the state. Only a strong parliament can help the government regain its democratic space. The ugly race to win over independently elected legislators in order to form the government in Punjab has dealt a serious blow to the credibility of the democratic system.

There are some legitimate concerns about the PTI's controversial position on religious extremism that poses a serious threat to national security and the country's unity. The use of the blasphemy card against the PML-N during the election campaign reinforced the perception that the PTI was catering to the religious right. This is

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extremely dangerous for a party that seeks to change Pakistan. For the country to progress and improve its image abroad, it's imperative to take a clear position on the scourge of religious extremism. Bowing to radical groups out of political expediency is costly business that the country can't afford.

Like his (civilian) predecessors, Imran Khan will also have to deal with the perennial problem of civil-military relations, though his detractors contend that his rise to power owes to the backing of the security establishment. The issue of the civil-military imbalance of power is inherent in the system given the overarching shadow of the military over the political spectrum.

The political crisis triggered by the judicial action against former prime minister Nawaz Sharif allowed the military further space. But the problem cannot be resolved through confrontation. The imbalance of power can only be resolved through strengthening parliament and other civilian institutions, and good governance. It is certainly not going to happen overnight. Pakistan's external and internal security situation demands a better balance.

It will be tough going for the new prime minister and one hopes he can deliver on his promises.

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Chapter 76

A NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CHARTER

25 Jul 2018

NOTWITHSTANDING the controversies surrounding the run-up to the elections, the country is set to achieve a second consecutive democratic transition. They may be dirty but the votes still count. The people will give their verdict today in what is believed to be one of the most critical elections to determine the future course of politics in this country. The outcome remains unpredictable.

If opinion polls are to be believed, the PTI seems to be ahead in the contest, but that could change at the last moment with the PML-N running a close race. Whatever the result, one thing is almost certain: no party will be able to get an absolute majority to form the next government. The battle for Islamabad will not be decided at the polls alone, raising the stakes for the smaller parties. So most likely there will be another period of coalition rule for good or bad.

A major question, however, is whether the elections will bring much-needed political stability. Given the intense political polarisation in the country and the growing imbalance of power among various state institutions, the challenges for the newly elected government will be daunting. The worsening economic situation and multiple external problems have made things more complex.

Most importantly, the polls must be seen as credible and the results accepted by all parties and state institutions. Widespread allegations of pre-poll political engineering have already led to misgivings. But any attempt to tinker with the poll results could bring into question the entire democratic process and cause further political instability. It will be extremely difficult for a government with doubtful legitimacy to deal with the internal and external challenges.

It will require a broad consensus among the major political forces to restore the credibility of the democratic process and strengthen the elected institutions. A credible

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democratic transition could open a window of opportunity for a national reconciliation. There is certainly a need for a new social contract to end the confrontation between various institutions of state that has been the major cause of political instability in the country.

Surely, the democratic process cannot be sustained with the existing imbalance of power. But the supremacy of elected institutions is also linked with the rule of law. One hopes the newly elected lawmakers and government will learn from past mistakes that have allowed non-elected institutions to gain greater space. The politics of vendetta should come to an end after the elections and a broad agreement must be reached on key national issues. Surely, it is imperative to resolve the civil-military conflict, but it is also wrong to see all the issues in that binary.

It is evident that the economy will be the thorniest issue for the new government. Unfortunately, there has not been much focus on this most critical issue in the election campaign beyond rhetoric. It is alarming that foreign exchange reserves are falling and the current account deficit growing, and it seems that the new administration will have no other option but to seek an IMF bailout. That means tightening one's belt. The previous government had failed to enforce critical structural reforms vital to sustainable economic development. It is true the growth rate remained relatively high, but the increasing debt burden, both domestic and external, has compounded financial woes. The circular debt has ballooned yet again, intensifying the energy crisis.

Indeed, the new administration will have to introduce some tough reforms to deal with this serious financial crisis. But for that it will also need the support of the opposition parties and other state institutions. There is a need for a national economic charter to deal with the worsening economic crisis that also threatens our national security.

Terrorism and religious extremism are another serious problem that would require parliamentary consensus. True, the level of militant violence has come down significantly because of successful military operations in the tribal areas, but the recent attacks show that the terrorist threat is far from over. The growing activities of the militant Islamic State group must be a cause of serious concern.

Political opportunism and expediency have further emboldened radical elements as seen in the emergence of new, even more extremist groups that have been allowed to participate in the elections. Similarly, banned organisations now functioning under new banners seem to have been legitimised in violation of the law and the National Action Plan.

The arbitrary mainstreaming of some militant groups has provoked international criticism. At least three candidates belonging to a banned group are on the UN terror list. The issue has become serious with Pakistan having been placed on the FATF grey list. The concern is that unless it takes action, the country could be at risk of being blacklisted.

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Such a situation could increase Pakistan's international isolation compounding our economic woes. Can we afford this? More worrisome is that some political parties have a soft corner for these extremist groups and ignore the concerns of the international community including some of our closest allies. It is time our lawmakers realised the gravity of the situation.

External challenges also demand a clear policy direction with all the stakeholders on board. The fast-changing regional geopolitics has exacerbated Pakistan's foreign policy predicament as well as opened a new window of opportunity.

Growing estrangement with the US, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, tensions with India and relations with China will be the major foreign policy issues the new government will have to deal with. Our alliance that emerged after 9/11 has come full circle. We need to have a clear stance on how to protect our interests, but a complete break from Washington is not an option.

Perhaps the biggest foreign policy challenge for the new government will be to figure out how to normalise relations with New Delhi and manage business with Beijing.

Pakistan finds itself in complex foreign policy circumstances and once the new government is sworn in, managing foreign relations will be one of its biggest challenges. For that, there is a need for a national consensus.

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Chapter 77

HAS IMRAN KHAN'S MOMENT ARRIVED?

18 Jul 2018

IMRAN Khan thought he was there in 2013, but it was not to be. He claimed the elections were stolen. He won't accept defeat and was willing to go to any extent to force mid-term polls. He failed. He was a man in a hurry, yet the 'umpire' would not come to his help.

It's 2018 now and back to the hustings. Has IK's moment finally arrived? He is surely much closer to fulfilling his dream this time with a favourable playing field. Various opinion polls show the PTI is fast closing the gap with the PML-N, its main rival. It does not seem difficult for the party with a strong, popular base to cross the barrier with 'electables' and 'angels' on its side.

A change of tack — from idealism to pure expediency — has certainly helped bring Imran Khan closer to his goal. The dice is further loaded in his favour with the decapitation of the main opponent. Yet nothing is ensured given the volatility of electoral politics. It's not over till the last lap.

Described as the dirtiest ever, the 2018 polls are already mired in controversy. The zing witnessed in the previous elections is missing, with widespread allegations of pre-poll engineering. The wave of terrorist violence targeting election rallies has also dampened the spirit. Nonetheless, electioneering has picked up momentum with the aspirants out on the campaign trail. The trend is much clearer now with only one week left to go.

It seems almost certain the PTI will be able to hold its ground in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, breaking away from the tradition of the province not re-electing the incumbent. Most opinion polls show that the party could even expand its tally in the province which it has ruled for five years. Although electables may have enhanced its prospects, the party, unlike in Punjab, has mainly relied on the old guard.

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Some fundamental institutional reforms carried out by the PTI provincial government in education, health and the police system, sectors that matter most to the ordinary people, seem to have paid off. Of course the PTI faces challenges from other political parties in the field but none of them is in a position to dislodge it from its stronghold. The revival of the MMA was expected to lay the groundwork for a strong electoral contest, but there is no indication as yet of the religious alliance generating the wave needed to contain the PTI. The squabbling among the allied parties and the rise of an extremist sectarian group like Tehreek-i-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah has further eroded the MMA's chances even in its stronghold.

Other political parties like the PML-N, PPP and ANP are also in the field vying to get a share of the pie, but four-way electoral battles in most of the constituencies, especially in the Peshawar valley, give the PTI a clear edge. The PML-N is likely to retain some seats from the Hazara region that has traditionally been an extension of Punjab politics.

While a clear victory in KP does matter in the final reckoning, the real battleground is Punjab that could make or break Imran Khan's dream. It is certainly not going to be an easy battle despite the alleged pre-poll management tilting the balance in the PTI's favour. The large-scale defections from PML-N ranks and the electables joining the party's bandwagon has certainly increased the PTI's chances in south Punjab. But it is not going to be smooth sailing given the existing political polarisation that seems to have intensified after Nawaz Sharif's conviction and imprisonment.

It is central and northern Punjab that will finally determine the country's future political scenario and of course Imran Khan's fate. With the bulk of the National Assembly seats concentrated in the region that largely constitutes urban constituencies, unlike feudal-dominated southern Punjab, the rules of the game are completely different in the heartland.

There is no indication of the PML-N losing ground in its bastion despite some high-profile defections and alleged meddling of the 'angels' persuading candidates to switch sides. There may not be a groundswell of mass sympathy for the PML-N after the imprisonment of Sharif and his daughter Maryam, but there is no evidence of any major cracks yet in the party's popular support base either.

Surely the PTI seems to have made some inroads into the PML-N powerbase, yet it is difficult for it to dismantle the fortress notwithstanding 'intervention' from any quarter. The PTI will be banking on some independents getting elected, but there will not be many from central Punjab. It may still stay in contention even if it manages to get 25 out of 95 from central and northern regions because of its potential advantage in KP and south Punjab.

In Sindh, the party has reached an electoral adjustment with the Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) a conglomeration of disparate anti-PPP groups. With the party itself

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likely to get some seats and the GDA supported candidates winning a few more from interior Sindh, the PTI hopes to have some electoral presence in the province where the PPP appears unassailable. The disintegration of the MQM that has dominated the politics of urban Sindh for almost three decades has provided an opportunity for the PTI to grab a few more seats from Karachi.

Electoral politics in Balochistan is entirely a different ballgame where electables hold sway irrespective of which party they belong to. The emergence of the establishment backed Balochistan Awami Party on the scene following the Senate elections has brought a new element to provincial electoral politics. The PTI seems to have already established some understanding with the group during the Senate chairman's election early this year.

With these likely permutations, the PTI certainly stands a chance of scraping through to the pedestal in what are being described as one of the most controversial elections in the country's recent history. It is the best and probably the last opportunity for Imran Khan to fulfil his dream. But there's still a long way to go before the final lap.

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Chapter 78

THE PLOT THICKENS...

11 Jul 2018

FIRST it was Nawaz Sharif's conviction and now the noose is tightening around former president Asif Ali Zardari. The plot is getting thicker. It is all happening in the name of accountability, providing convenient cover to what many describe as a creeping 'judicial martial law'. The dramatic development just a few weeks before general elections has raised questions about the polls proceeding smoothly.

Does it appear coincidental that days after Sharif's conviction, a multibillion-rupee money-laundering scandal involving Zardari and his sister should surface? It is obvious that investigation into the alleged crime of such a huge magnitude has been going on for a long time. There is also no apparent reason to doubt the veracity of the charges. But one wonders why the case has been taken up now so close to the polls.

With Sharif and his daughter returning to challenge the conviction and the leader of another major political party being put on the Exit Control List, the situation has become extremely ominous. A major question is how the caretaker government and the security establishment plan to deal with this situation and ensure a smooth democratic transition.

Interestingly, the action against Zardari has come at a time when stories about some kind of a deal between the establishment and the PPP have been circulating. The speculations had a ring of truth to them when last year the security agencies suddenly pulled back from taking action against persons considered close to the PPP leaders. Ostensibly, the purpose of the alleged deal then was to stop the PPP joining hands with the PML-N when Nawaz Sharif was ousted and put on trial on corruption charges. Learning a lesson from 2014 when the PPP helped the PML-N survive the PTI dharna, it was deemed necessary to neutralise the party.

It was also expedient for Zardari to get the pressure off himself and his friends. The plan did deliver as the PPP not only endorsed Sharif's removal, but also supported his trial on corruption charges. A crafty politician who prided himself on being a wheeler and

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dealer, Zardari thought of gaining greater political space for the PPP in the emerging landscape with the PML-N having been contained.

Zardari had even boasted that the PPP could form the government after the elections. He may have thought that his party with its electoral position in Sindh assured could play the role of kingmaker in a, most likely, hung parliament. His confidence must have been reinforced after the PPP grabbed the position of Senate deputy chairman by entering into an alliance with the PTI in order to block the PML-N getting control of the upper house of parliament. It is no more a secret how the alliance of disparate political forces sprung up overnight.

However crafty Zardari may appear to be, little did he know that it was simply a matter of time before he too would come under the axe of accountability that has already fallen on a far more powerful political leader. The investigators claim to have collected enough material to proceed against the former president.

If media reports are correct, the laundered amount is to the tune of tens of billions of rupees. The alleged transactions have reportedly been carried out through dozens of fake bank accounts, many of them thought to be leading to Zardari, his sister, friends and business associates. Most of the alleged transactions have reportedly been carried out through a bank owned by a close friend of the PPP leader. The charges are indeed damning and the case must be taken to its conclusion.

But equally disturbing is the fact that the investigation into the matter had started years ago. Some of the information is believed to have come from close associates picked up by the intelligence agencies during the crackdown in Karachi in 2015. But no formal charges were filed against Zardari and his associates. That reinforces the widespread perception that it was out of political expediency that no legal action was initiated. If true it gives some credence to allegations that charges of financial corruption are often used to maintain control over politicians.

There have been many instances when such cases had been put on the back burner and revived when it was politically expedient to do so. Unsurprisingly, people have little trust in the investigation agencies and the judicial process. Despite all the charges of financial corruption against him and having languished in jail for several years, Zardari could never be convicted.

What could be more ironical than the fact that the most slandered man became the president and controlled the destiny of this country? Not surprisingly, many people would react to the latest charges against Zardari with scepticism and perhaps see it as an act of political victimisation, however substantive they may be. Can one blame them given the flaws of the justice system which is often perceived as being manipulated by the powers that be?

The timing of the action is particularly curious and has provided fuel to conspiracy theories about politicians being targeted before the polls in an effort to achieve the

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'desired result'. The sequence of events has added to the suspicion. Undoubtedly, white-collar crimes, particularly financial crimes, are never easy to prove, especially in Pakistan where investigations can easily be manipulated.

Moreover, it is still to be proved whether it is just a case of money laundering or corruption. The suo motu notice taken by the Supreme Court has added to the confusion. The reported decision to put Zardari and Faryal Talpur on the ECL even before they have been formally charged, let alone convicted, is certainly a premature one. It would have been more appropriate if the investigation were allowed to be completed before any such action could be taken. The PPP is right in pointing out that Nawaz Sharif was not put on the ECL even when he faced trial by an anti-corruption court. Such actions will only sour the political atmosphere and cast a long shadow over the coming elections and the democratic transition.

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Chapter 79

THE PML-N PARADOX

04 Jul 2018

IT is no more just a matter of a differing tack within the ranks. The latest defections, engineered or otherwise, have virtually wiped out the PML-N's prospects in the coming elections in south Punjab and made it more difficult for the party to defend its bastion along the Grand Trunk Road. The dice is now more heavily loaded against the former ruling party. The outcome seems already certain before the polls. But the game is not over yet.

There is more gloom than hope as the country moves closer towards its second consecutive democratic transition. Politics is a dirty game but it has gotten dirtier with the 'angels' getting into the act. Surely, the last-minute rejection of the PML-N ticket by the candidates has not been just an act of jumping off a drowning ship. It was a well-calculated move not to give time to the PML-N to put up alternative candidates.

Only a moron could believe that such large-scale desertion on the eve of elections was driven by the sudden awakening of these politicians' conscience. The allegation about the role of security agencies in engineering the revolt is not entirely baseless, though there may be some other factors too behind the defections. The swelling number of electable independent candidates has reinforced conspiracy theories about 'managed' elections.

Those standing independent not only include defectors from the mainstream parties but also members of some religious outfits like the Milli Muslim League, an offshoot of the banned Jamaatud Dawa, that has been refused registration by the Election Commission. The disparate bloc may affect the electoral scene in parts of Punjab that remains the main battleground. The squeeze may have weakened the PML-N, yet it cannot push the party out of contention. The election scene still remains murky less than three weeks to polling day.

Surely, the PML-N candidates' exodus has given a further boost to the PTI that has put its entire stake into the turncoats jumping onto its bandwagon. Unlike in 2013, when

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the party's main power base was the youth, Imran Khan is now looking towards the pirs for their blessings. The PTI has certainly gained momentum by taking advantage of the 'engineered defections' from the PML-N, but there is still a big question about the party reaching the magic figure or even close to it in order to fulfil Imran Khan's dream of finally making it to the pedestal of power.

It is evident that the long absence of Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam from the country has seriously affected the PML-N election campaign. The internal squabble over ticket allocations and the defections have caused creeping demoralisation among the supporters. There is no evidence of any sympathy wave for Nawaz Sharif sweeping across Punjab that could enhance the party's electoral fortunes.

In the absence of his older brother, Shahbaz Sharif has effectively taken over charge of the party and its election campaign. But he has miserably failed to motivate the party supporters let alone inspire the voters. Notwithstanding his reputation as a good administrator, his uncharismatic persona cannot lift the party up. His politically un-savvy remarks during his recent trip to Karachi put the party in an extremely embarrassing situation.

Moreover, the widening rift between the Sharif brothers has further compounded the party's predicament. The PML-N paradox has been exposed by the two opposite narratives espoused by the brothers. While the elder Sharif and his daughter have shown no change in their hard-line confrontationist position, the younger sibling has taken an increasingly conciliatory path. In fact, Shahbaz has publicly challenged Nawaz's stance on khalai makhlooq being behind his ouster and undermining his party.

As party president, Shahbaz is seeking a vote on the performance of his government in the province rather than on the anti-establishment agenda being pursued by the elder Sharif. While most PML-N candidates would like Nawaz to return home and lead the election campaign, his uncompromising stance has few takers.

That is where the line pursued by Shahbaz prevails among the senior members whose only interest is to win the elections. For them, the policy of confrontation can only divide the party and spoil its chances to return to power. The latest defections of candidates have reinforced this argument. The widening policy gulf is also illustrated by Shahbaz's recent TV interviews where he stressed on the formation of a national government, even if the PML-N won the elections, and opening negotiations for a new political charter involving all stakeholders including the security agencies in order to face the internal and external challenges faced by the country. This positon is contrary to Nawaz's uncompromising stance.

While there is no option for Nawaz but to come back at the earliest to keep himself politically alive, his presence is likely to sharpen the contradiction within the party between the two opposing positions. Undoubtedly, his leading the campaign would help inspire voters, but it would also intensify the clash with the security

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agencies. It will be for senior party members and the candidates to choose between the two opposite narratives.

Yet another predicament facing the PML-N and its leadership in the run-up to the elections is the possibility of the former prime minister and Maryam Nawaz being convicted on graft charges. The accountability court is winding up the trial. With the judgement all set to be announced before the elections, the entire political dynamics will inevitably change. This situation would present a serious challenge to both the PML-N and the establishment.

Some PML-N leaders believe that Shahbaz's reconciliation offer could provide a way out of this situation. But what would that way out be — one that is acceptable for Nawaz as well as the military establishment? It is quite evident that the establishment will not agree to anything less than the former prime minister leaving politics. It is highly improbable that Nawaz will accept any such deal. There is no resolution of the crisis in sight, which renders the second democratic transition extremely controversial.

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Chapter 80

RETURN OF THE MMA

27 Jun 2018

THE Islamic parties that have experienced a steep decline in their electoral clout over the years are now going into the 2018 elections hoping for a better outcome. The revival of the, albeit truncated, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) is aimed at regaining some lost political space for the religious elements. The coming together of the squabbling religious groups would certainly add to their electoral weight. But can the Islamic political alliance offer a viable alternative to the voters thus making inroads into the existing power matrix?

Essentially, a united front of the JUI-F and the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), the two most powerful religious groups, the MMA may have a significant support base in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but its influence in other parts of the country is debatable. The differences between the two major component parties over key political issues and their distrust of each other will make it more difficult for the alliance to repeat its 2002 success in KP. There is no indication as yet of the MMA making its presence felt across the country.

A major challenge for this mainstream Islamic coalition comes from the rise of more extremist sectarian groups dividing the religious vote bank. The emergence of the newly formed Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), an extremist Barelvi group, is likely to hurt the MMA the most. It is quite evident that the rise of religious extremism benefits sectarian groups more than the mainstream Islamic parties whose share of votes has fallen significantly since 2008 with the disintegration of the MMA.

A conglomerate of six Islamic parties, the MMA saw its spectacular rise to the country's political centre stage after the 2002 elections held under military rule when the alliance swept into power in KP. It was the first time the squabbling religious and diverse sectarian groups had come together to achieve the most significant electoral victory yet for the Islamic parties, though they were mainly limited to KP and Balochistan. The alliance may have failed to make any impact in the two other, larger provinces, but its

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success in the most sensitive border regions changed local political dynamics and also caused international concern.

In KP, it was almost a revolution through the ballot box when in many constituencies, local mullahs defeated powerful political dynasties. This electoral success of the MMA, owed both to the domestic and external political factors arising from post-9/11 events. The role of the military regime may have helped prop up the alliance, but there were other more critical elements that contributed to the MMA's sweep.

Undoubtedly, the Islamic parties, particularly the JUI, traditionally have had a significant political support base in the region that was further strengthened in the 1980s during the Afghan 'jihad' against the Soviet occupation. That was also the period of the rise of Islamist militancy under the patronage of Gen Zia's military regime. The Afghan war carried long-term consequences not only for the region, but also for the country. The rise of the radical Taliban regime in Afghanistan too had a spillover effect in the border areas further changing the political landscape in KP and the adjoining areas.

While unity among the Islamic parties was an important factor, the success of the MMA in the 2002 parliamentary elections came, in fact, on the wave of strong anti-American sentiments following the invasion of Afghanistan. 'It is a war against Islam', was the slogan that struck a chord with voters. The Islamic parties successfully exploited the religious sentiments calling people to vote for the Holy Book. The symbol of the book allotted to the alliance candidate came in handy in mobilising religious support. The field was also left open for the them because of the military government's action against the PPP and PML-N.

But the five-year MMA rule in KP failed to deliver. The persistent power tussle between the JUI-F and the JI was a major reason for the disaster. The religiously motivated rule encouraged more radical groups to increase their influence. The rise of the Pakistani Taliban movement in Swat and other parts of the province happened with the tacit support of the MMA government.

Inevitably, the alliance fell apart after the end of the MMA government in 2007. The JI's decision to boycott the 2008 election dealt a further blow to the party. Internal party problems such as young and more radical elements joining global jihadi groups like Al Qaeda have also been the reason for the party's falling electoral support base. The JUI-F, however, remained active in the electoral field.

In 2013, both the JI and JUI-F fought elections separately, putting up candidates against each other. While the two parties cut into the religious vote bank, they together polled more votes than the PTI. The two parties received 20.38pc votes against the PTI's 18.99pc. Following the 2013 elections, they followed different political tracks. While JI joined the PTI in the coalition government, the JUI-F remained engaged in a bitter fight with the KP government.

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Given expediency and the realisation that a divided house could only damage their electoral prospects, they are back to an alliance of convenience. The decision of some smaller parties to sit out may not affect the reactivated MMA much. But the political environment has also changed hugely from what it was in 2002. Meanwhile, the PTI has encroached on the religious vote bank. But the united front including the two major Islamic parties with their respective strong support bases may present a formidable challenge to the PTI in KP.

Still, the irreconcilable difference between the two parties on some major policy issue such as integration of Fata with KP may seriously affect the MMA's electoral prospects. The TLP which is putting up candidates in many constituencies could also spoil the game for the MMA. With its extremist slogans, the group evokes wider emotional appeal among the less-educated populace. Although the TLP is essentially a Punjab-based phenomenon, it has also developed something of a support base in KP.

The revival of the MMA may improve the electoral prospects of the religious elements in KP and Balochistan but it is highly unlikely that it would have any significant impact in the other provinces.

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Chapter 81

HORSES OF THE SAME STOCK

15 Jun 2018

THERE is only a difference of shade among the political parties participating in the electoral race. It is not a battle of ideas or even of political values. It is an obscenely crude power struggle among the vested interest groups that have dominated Pakistan's political scene. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, the candidates pitched by the mainstream political parties are horses belonging to the same stock.

As in the past, political parties have placed their bets on the so-called electables or local influentials. Principles and issue-based politics take a back seat when it comes to winning the elections without disturbing the existing power matrix, notwithstanding some populist slogans. Not surprisingly, the current election campaign has hit a new low, mainly revolving around personalities with virtually no debate on the critical political, economic and social issues confronting the nation.

Of course, people's problems matter little in this power play. Launching an election manifesto is just a ritual that political parties are mandated to perform under the election rules. There is no real conviction involved behind hollow promises and targets. It is true that the situation was not much different in previous campaigns, but one had expected things to improve as we prepare to make the second consecutive transition from one elected government to another, a significant milestone indeed in the country's rocky democratic political journey. Real issues affecting the common people are lost in the cacophony of false promises. For young and new voters comprising almost 40 per cent of the electorate, there appears little promise for change.

For example, the PML-N's slogan to 'give respect to voters' is not really about the democratic rights of the electorate; in fact, it is driven by the sense of 'entitlement' of an all-powerful dynastic leadership that considers itself above the law — one which has never given respect to the vote in its quest for the pedestal of power. Why didn't we hear

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this slogan earlier? 'Respect for the vote' reminders are only issued when the law strikes the leadership.

It is apparent that the PML-N's campaign revolves around the defence of the Sharif family. Though the party appears to be standing united behind the disgraced former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, some cracks are visible in the ranks, given Sharif's no-holds-barred attack on the judiciary and security establishment. The veneer of an anti-establishment stance does not run too deep in the ranks of a party that has traditionally been on the right side of the security agencies. A major question for the party would be: is the country better off today than it was five years ago when it returned to power for the third time?

Similarly, the PTI's pledge to create a 'Naya Pakistan' is equally deceptive given the party's new face and ambiguous positions on key political and social issues. Even if there was a semblance of it being a party for change in the 2013 elections, the perception has vanished as political turncoats and opportunists dominate the list of party candidates. The confusion and the growing discontent in the ranks is illustrative of the party losing its way.

One wonders where the promise of ending a dynastic political culture has gone. The growing perception of the PTI becoming the biggest exponent of status quo has a ring of truth to it. Its list of candidates reads like a who's who of some of the country's most dubious political figures. Many PTI candidates were members of the treasury benches in the last parliament that Imran Khan has accused of protecting the corrupt, and had refused to grace with his presence.

Not surprisingly, the PTI seems to have lost the momentum it had gained in the past with the support of the younger generation. Given the dynamics of constituency politics, the presence of a large number of 'electables' may have brightened the chances of the party in the coming elections, but there is little hope of it bringing any meaningful change to the system.

Meanwhile, the less said the better about the PPP's erosion as a major national political force in the country. Most disappointing is that the party has refused to learn any lesson despite it having been virtually wiped out in Punjab. With nothing new to offer to the electorate, it has stuck to what is described as the 'politics of the shrine', invoking Bhutto's legacy and martyrdom.

The pathetic performance of the party's government in Sindh can hardly stimulate its supporters to revive the party in the other provinces. With no real challenge from any other mainstream party, the PPP is likely to maintain its sway in Sindh thus staying in the game of thrones. Political wheeling and dealing has become the hallmark of a party that once truly was a party of the masses. The PPP's decline has left a huge vacuum that appears hard to fill.

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The revival of the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal appears to be a desperate attempt by the mainstream Islamic parties to regain some space in an electoral field that is wide open. But the religious alliance does not seem to be making any impact with its pledge to enforce a radical Islamic system, notwithstanding the rise of religious extremism in the country. Its hard-line religious rhetoric does not seem to hold much appeal for young voters. Its election manifesto does not go beyond old rhetoric. The record of both the JUI-F and the Jamaat-i-Islami in the last MMA government does not give them any advantage in the coming elections.

For sure, the coming elections are extremely critical for strengthening the democratic political process in the country. But it is also imperative for political parties to make the electoral process more substantive. There is a need to change the political culture that is presently detrimental to the improvement of democracy. Elections must be fought on the basis of ideas and programmes, and not for the protection of vested interests. Campaigning sans issues is not likely to take our democratic journey very far. It is time our political parties focused on the critical issues that Pakistan and its people face; they should not reduce the campaign to a fight for personal gain.

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Chapter 82

DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

06 Jun 2018

TIMELY elections are, indeed, important for the democratic process. But it is equally important for citizens to be able to make an informed decision. For that, the electorate must know that the candidates are credible and bound by a moral code of behaviour as enshrined in the Constitution. Democratic accountability means empowering citizens to reject corrupt and ineffective rulers and to be able to choose better representatives.

In suspending the decision of the Lahore High Court that had restored the mandatory information and declarations of assets required from the candidates, the apex court appears to have bypassed a fundamental principle of democratic accountability. The chief justice's stance that restoring the old nomination forms could cause a delay in the upcoming polls may not come across as convincing.

It is imperative to ensure that the elections are held on time, but they must also be free, fair and transparent. It is vital that the electorate is provided with complete personal information about the candidates and their assets. While in previous elections, it was a mandatory requirement, the provision was not included in the new electoral law.

"The lack of disclosure and information ... essentially means that a voter will not have the required information on the basis of which an informed decision can be made," declared Justice Ayesha Malik of the Lahore High Court in her judgement. Denial of a fundamental right that enables the electorate to make an informed assessment of aspiring lawmakers raises questions about the transparency of the coming elections.

But the chief justice has set aside the ruling on the grounds that restoration of old forms at this stage could delay the polls. "Parliament is autonomous; what can we do when it has already legislated?" he declared. Indeed, it is the prerogative of parliament to

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make laws; but it is the responsibility of the judiciary to protect the fundamental rights of citizens. Moreover, the additional requirement of information may not necessarily delay the polls as being feared by the court and some political leaders.

According to some legal experts, the nomination forms can be uploaded in no time and can easily be filled within the stipulated time for the filing of the nomination papers. Many are using the bogey of 'democracy under threat' and conspiracy theories to cover up the questionable and undemocratic action by parliament.

It is inexcusable the way all political parties came together to defend the controversial change in the electoral laws that would allow even people with criminal records to stand in the elections. The plea that the Lahore High Court ruling came too close to the elections is also not relevant. It seemed a deliberate move by the PML-N government to drag on the case. It took six months for the government to submit its response to the court.

The controversial amendment in the Election Act was passed by parliament last year. Now the candidates are not obliged to provide information about their tax returns, dual nationality status, education and source of income. It makes them virtually above the law, further tarnishing the image of our civilian political leadership.

With this amendment in place, no judicial action can be taken against those hiding their assets and details about their source of income. The amendment has helped remove the sword of disqualification hanging over corrupt lawmakers and other political leaders. Not surprisingly, the bill had received support from political parties across the board. The way the bill was passed by parliament also raises questions about it legality.

According to some legal experts, parliament had infringed on the Election Commission's authority in the matter. The Lahore High Court in its ruling asserted that while parliament can make laws to regulate the conduct of elections, "the ultimate authority and responsibility to ensure free and fair elections is of the ECP".

In fact, the ECP had initially questioned the authority of parliament to change the electoral rules. But later, it changed its stance. The commission also became a party in the petition to the Supreme Court challenging the Lahore High Court decision.

During the hearing of the petition, the ECP's attorney admitted that mandatory provisions of the law had been ignored and vital information not been provided for in the forms. In fact, the ECP in a letter to the parliamentary committee on electoral reforms requested that it should be heard by the committee before any draft was prepared. However, the request was ignored.

Through this amendment, political parties may have protected their leaders and lawmakers, but it will have serious implications for democracy in the country. It has certainly damaged the image of parliament and elected representatives.

Rule of law and accountability are two important pillars of a liberal democracy. A major weakness of the democratic process in Pakistan is that lawmakers are not bound by

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code of moral behaviour enforced by judicial authority. Nothing could be worse than the growing public perception that a major endeavour of parliament is to provide protection to the misdeeds of politicians.

These two pillars ensure good governance. They are also essential for the development of democratic institutions. While the country is close to achieving an important milestone in the second consecutive transition from one elected government to another, there is a greater need for making the election process more democratic and transparent. The electoral law amendment has shrunk the space for growth of democratic values. It would make elected representative less accountable. Elections would become controversial if the amendment is not reversed.

The restoration of the old nomination papers would certainly improve democracy in the country. The demand for greater transparency in the electoral process must not be misconstrued as a conspiracy to postpone the elections. We may be very close to the polls, but it is still not too late for the restoration of the old form. Voters must be given due respect.

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Chapter 83

CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

23 May 2018

DEFYING the doubters, the National Assembly will complete its five-year term next week. Notwithstanding the thunderbolts that frequently jolted the political process, the system has survived. Transition from one elected government to another now appears a reality, though there are still a few hurdles to cross.

It will indeed be a high point in the country's rocky democratic journey. These five years like the previous ones have also been extremely tumultuous, in which yet another elected prime minister has bitten the dust. The unceremonious ouster of arguably the country's most powerful elected figure continues to cast long shadows over the fragile democratic political process.

Already barred from the electoral process for life, the exit may mark the end of Nawaz Sharif's long yet chequered political career, though not the end of the Sharif political dynasty. The elections would certainly lead to a changing of the guard but can that bring any qualitative transformation in the system?

It remains to be seen whether the much-touted transition could change the existing power dynamics and bring political stability to the country or would it result in further weakening of the elected bodies, with non-elected institutions filling the void. The apprehensions about installation of a hybrid political system with the military and judiciary becoming an informal part of the power troika are not without reason. In fact the country is already experiencing this creeping phenomenon.

It is not just imbalance of power and persistent confrontation among various institutions of the state that has caused the disorder; the political leadership too is responsible for undermining the democratic process. Parliament has been reduced to a chaotic debating club with the leadership showing no deference to the elected house.

Members and top political leaders alike show little respect for legislative proceedings as attendance frequently falls way below the 25pc mark leading to premature adjournments and even prorogation. During the four years when he was in power, Sharif

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seldom attended parliamentary sessions. His slogan "give respect to the vote" sounds hollow, given his utter contempt for the elected forums.

Some of the opposition parties too have been responsible for undermining the role of parliament. The PTI boycotted the National Assembly for almost one year and Imran Khan never refrained from expressing his disdain for the elected forum. He rarely appeared in the house, even after the party ended the boycott.

Moreover, when they did deign to be present in the assembly, parliamentarians would hardly participate in debate, even on important national and foreign policy issues thereby rendering the legislative body ineffective. This has also led to the inability of the lawmakers to resolve political and institutional crises. Unsurprisingly, the country failed to make a steady transition towards improved democracy.

Despite the fact that Pakistan has entered the longest uninterrupted period of elected civilian rule in its history, democracy appears to be weakening. While elected governments and political leadership ceded space in policy spheres, the military has increased its overreach into areas outside of its professional domain.

With parliament and the civilian law-enforcement agencies having been rendered ineffective by the elected leadership, weak governance has allowed the judiciary to extend its role. Some judges too appear to have succumbed to populist pressures when they give mostly unwarranted observations during the course of judicial proceedings.

Lack of internal policy cohesion and focus on national issues has further weakened the democratic process. One of the factors obstructing the growth of a democratic culture and ethos has been the absence of democracy within the political parties. Most have turned into family enterprises or revolve around personalities.

There is no tradition of internal party debate on critical policy issues and it all depends on the whims of the leaders. Party elections are a sham and conducted merely for the sake of fulfilling a legal formality. The swiftness with which politicians change their party affiliations overnight for the sake of expediency, and the manner in which political parties woo so-called 'electables' illustrate the lack of principles in our political culture.

Instead of a steady transition towards an improvement in the quality of democracy, Pakistan has been sliding in the opposite direction more rapidly since 2013 when the PML-N returned to power and Nawaz Sharif was elected as prime minister for a record third time.

According to a report by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, while the quality of democracy in 2013 scored its highest in four years at 54pc, the scores slid 10 percentage points in 2014 to 44pc, rose a little to 50pc in 2015 and slipped again to 46pc at the end of 2016. The situation has become worse in the past two years.

The challenge to democracy in Pakistan has worsened because there is a lack of crucially required reforms. There has not been any substantive improvement in the

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fundamental functioning of key democratic institutions. The failure of parliament in resolving issues such as the Panama scandal and the inability of the government to take the lead in formulating national security and foreign policies have further eroded civilian control.

The government's failure in institutionalising a consultative decision-making process too has been a major factor in the expansion of space for unelected institutions such as the military and judiciary. Another aspect of the systemic failure of democratic governance is its inability to deliver on critical economic, social and political issues. That has resulted in waning public faith in democracy.

These are the vital issues plaguing the country's political process. The coming elections are critical to the future of democracy in the country. Following this exercise, the new parliament and the government will have to address these key issues in order to consolidate governance and deliver to the electorate. It is apparent that democracy cannot function without the rule of law. There is a need for fundamental structural reform to achieve these objectives. Will our leaders learn from their own shortcomings and take the country to democratic stability?

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Chapter 84

NAWAZ SHARIF'S ET POLITICS

25 May 2018

FORMER prime minister Nawaz Sharif claims he is up against an extraterrestrial species or aliens (khalai makhlooq). He is certainly not alluding to a character in Steven Spielberg's epic thriller E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial. The ousted leader would not elaborate on what he really meant. But it is too obvious to miss.

It is the ubiquitous 'security establishment' that Sharif seems to be blaming his predicament on; the same 'invisible forces' that are believed to have initially propelled him to power three decades ago and that were also responsible for the overthrow of his second government. It all may sound a bit disconcerting yet it does illustrate the political game of chess we have been witnessing.

Sharif may be right about the stand-off with the military, but it is not the only reason for his miseries. While the role of the 'invisible hand' in political scheming cannot be disputed, the responsibility lies with the civilian leadership too. Sharif is certainly not telling the whole truth. It is not just the irresolvable conflict with the military but also his hubris and utter disregard for democratic accountability that has brought about his downfall.

Sharif's claim of turning to 'ideological' politics sounds pretentious. There is certainly no principle involved in his latest political campaign for self-preservation. It is questionable whether his rhetoric about khalai makhlooq would have many takers, however plausible it may sound. The reopening of the Asghar Khan case by the Supreme Court at this stage has certainly played against both sides — Sharif as well as the military.

Most intriguing is the timing of the court action in the long-forgotten case that had brought to the surface what is perhaps the sleaziest political scandal in the country's history. It has exposed the dark side of the security agencies being used for the manipulation of the electoral process through money and power. Most shocking is the

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blatant rationalisation of such actions by those involved in political engineering at the time.

It was not just about the machinations of the top security leadership then but also a whole lot of political leaders who were willing partners in the crime. Interestingly, it was Nawaz Sharif who was the leader of the pack. He was the chosen leader of the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) cobbled together in 1989 by Gen Hamid Gul, the then head of the ISI to counter the PPP led by Benazir Bhutto.

It all happened during the 1990 elections after the ouster of Benazir Bhutto's first government in what is described as a 'constitutional coup'. Millions of rupees were distributed among the IJI leaders for financing their election campaign. It was part of a wider plan to bring the IJI to power. Moreover, it was not just money but also alleged rigging that was used to thwart a PPP victory. That's how the IJI came to power with Nawaz Sharif as the prime minister.

The scandal came to the surface when former ISI chief Asad Durrani spilled the beans a few years later in 1995. It was the veteran political leader Asghar Khan who then took the case to the Supreme Court. In his affidavit submitted to the court, retired Gen Durrani gave a list of the names of dozens of politicians to whom he had paid money on the instructions of Gen Aslam Beg, the then chief of army staff.

It was the most damning indictment of both the military and the civilian leadership in a scandal that shook the country. But the case was put in the deep freeze after a few hearings following Sharif's return to power in 1997 for the second time. The hearing was resumed in 2012 and the court ordered the law-enforcement agencies to take legal action against all those involved in the scandal. The instructions were never implemented. Now the apex court has reopened it yet again.

For sure, it was not the first or the last time the political process has been tinkered with by the security agencies, thus causing the electorate to lose faith in the system. Most troubling, however, is how political leaders again and again fall into the trap, willingly doing the bidding of nondemocratic elements and thus undermining the entire system. One major reason is the politics of expediency; most believe that it is the way to power.

It is also something to do with the lack of principles and a democratic ethos. Even when elected, there is little focus on governance and delivering on promises. It is also a fact that the security agencies are blamed for everything that goes wrong with political parties in the polls. One such example is Imran Khan's allegation that the security establishment plotted against the PTI, thus causing the party to lose the 2013 elections in Punjab. Interestingly, it is the PTI which is generally accused of being backed by the security establishment. The latest Senate chairman election is cited by the PML-N as evidence of this.

But the most amusing claim has been made by Chaudhry Shujaat Husain that manipulation by the then army leadership was responsible for the defeat of his PML-Q in

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the 2008 elections. His is the same party that was created by the military leadership, splitting the PML-N after the 1999 coup that ousted the Sharif government. Such lamentation appears to be a case of the jilted-lover syndrome that some elements patronised by the security agencies suffer from.

Surely it is imperative that the Asghar Khan case be taken to its logical conclusion. It will set a positive precedent for reforming our political system and stopping political engineering by the security agencies. It is indeed a hard task given the fragility of our democratic political system. More important is for all democratic political parties to come together to reform the system from inside and strengthen democratic institutions.

This must especially be a lesson for Nawaz Sharif. There is no point in crying oneself hoarse over khalai makhlooq. It is time the disgraced leader at least accepted his own mistakes and showed respect to his voters.

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Chapter 85

BACK TO THE HUSTINGS

02 May 2018

BANNERS are up and political leaders are out at the hustings. It is now the season of rallies and shifting alliances as the countdown to the 2018 general elections has begun amidst deepening uncertainties. Given such an intensely polarised political atmosphere, the run-up to the polls has never been trickier.

There are still many hurdles to cross on the way to what is believed to be the most critical vote that would determine the future course of politics in this country. The outcome is never easy to predict given the volatility of our political landscape; it is much more complicated now with other factors influencing the process.

Principles and ideology have never been virtues in Pakistan's electoral politics. This is clearly evident, with so-called electables ready to ditch their parties for better prospects. At the other end, political parties are only too eager to embrace the turncoats. Not surprisingly, the exodus is mostly taking place from the ranks of the ruling PML-N which seems to have come under greater pressure following the life ban on Nawaz Sharif's holding public office.

Another top PML-N leader bit the dust as the Islamabad High Court last week unseated foreign minister Khawaja Asif for perjury and hiding his employment and assets abroad. Predictably, the ruling has added to the controversy about the use of constitutional Articles 62 and 63 to disqualify political leaders. Although the charges against the former foreign minister seem much more substantive, the ban is being depicted by party supporters as yet another example of victimisation and selective judicial action.

Meanwhile, the former prime minister faces possible conviction by an accountability court on a litany of corruption charges. While Nawaz Sharif appears determined to fight back, it is not clear how many senior party leaders and lawmakers would stand by him when it comes to the crunch. Given the perception that the security establishment would not let Sharif back in saddle and that there are no signs

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of the judiciary relenting, the cracks in the party have widened. The desertion of some half a dozen PML-N lawmakers mainly from south Punjab is seen by many as just the beginning of the opening of the floodgates.

It is evident that the PML-N would go into the election campaign playing the victim card and on the slogan of 'giving respect to the vote'. However phony this mantra may sound, it has helped Sharif maintain his mass popular support base in Punjab. But it may not be enough for the party to sweep the polls as the noose tightens around it. The disqualification of Khawaja Asif has dealt a serious political blow to the PML-N and intensified the demoralisation within its ranks.

There are conflicting views on the political fallout of the expected conviction of the former prime minister and members of his family on the eve of the elections. While some believe that it could reinforce a sympathy wave for Sharif, others think it could deepen the cracks within the party. Whatever the situation, it will cast a long shadow on the entire election process, adding to the prevailing uncertainty.

It is evident that Punjab will be the main electoral battleground where the PML-N is being challenged by the PTI. Given its formidable mass base and capacity to challenge the incumbent, it is not surprising that most defectors seek to jump on Imran Khan's bandwagon. The perception of tacit support by the establishment makes the party more attractive to the electables and opportunists. The virtual annihilation of the PPP in Punjab has also given a boost to the PTI.

Last week, the PTI launched its election campaign with an impressive show of strength in Lahore, the citadel of Sharif's political power. Imran Khan has also announced an 11-point charter of reform that his party pledges to undertake if it comes to power. Interestingly, the new slogan of 'one Pakistan' has replaced the old one of 'naya Pakistan'.

It is uncertain whether this rather ambiguous slogan could become a rallying point for the electorate. The change of slogan also signifies the changing complexion of the party. Previously a movement for change that inspired voters — particularly the youth — in 2013, the PTI seems to have lost momentum with the mass induction of defectors from other parties, many of them with dubious records.

This transformation has affected the PTI's image as a party of change. Nevertheless, with a large number of so-called electables in its ranks, the party leadership appears confident it has a better chance of winning the elections. It is a bargain Imran Khan perhaps struck to reach the highest pedestal of power.

One can also argue that the PTI has never been an ideological party and had no clear plan to take the country forward on the path of progress. But even for a reform agenda, it needs some principled people around. The party's 11-point charter indicates a greater emphasis on the development of human infrastructure such as education, health and

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environment in sharp contrast to the PML-N's obsession with motorways and other grand infrastructural projects.

However positive the charter may appear, the real challenge arises when it is time to deliver on the promises. Notwithstanding all good intentions, there is a need for capacity to implement the reform agenda. The experience of the PTI's five-year rule in KP has not been exemplary except for police reform and some improvement in the education and health sectors.

Of course, the PPP is not out of the contest despite its minimal presence in Punjab. Its power base in Sindh has remained unchallenged. In the event of a hung parliament, it can emerge as a power broker. Unlike the two other parties, the PPP does not seem to have any new election message. It still seeks to appeal to the voters on the Bhutto legacy; that will surely not work in any other province. The weakening of the PPP has left a huge gap in national politics that is hard to fill. So it's back to the hustings despite the political uncertainty gripping the country.

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Chapter 86

FACING A HYBRID WAR

25 Apr 2018

ON different occasions last week, the army chief has warned of a 'hybrid war' being imposed on Pakistan. "Our enemies know that they cannot beat us fair and square and have thus subjected us to a cruel, evil and protracted hybrid war," Gen Qamar Bajwa declared in his speech at the passing-out parade of cadets at the Pakistan Military Academy in Kakul. The context of his speech and the inference he was making were evident.

Hybrid warfare is a military strategy that employs a blend of kinetic operations and subversive efforts to destabilise an adversary. It may also be defined as a non-linear or non-traditional war. The army chief is right about the multiple security challenges the country is facing. Being in the midst of intense geopolitical conflicts has made Pakistan increasingly exposed to wars that are non-linear.

There is no denying that adversarial relations with India in the east and an unending war in Afghanistan on its western borders pose serious threats to the country's security and internal stability. It may also be true that the regional conflicts have had a direct bearing on the country's stability. Indeed, in this age of non-linear warfare one has to remain very cautious of outside forces that may be stoking disorder inside the country.

But what our security leadership fails to understand is that external factors can only work in an environment of internal strife and popular mass discontent. Instead of addressing the root causes, we often tend to raise the bogey of a 'foreign hand'. That leads to a besieged syndrome often resulting in the use of coercive force of the state to suppress internal unrest. Over the course of the years, this has been seen in several instances in the country. In the current context, the response of the authorities to the Pakhtun rights movement in the country stands out.

In one of his recent addresses, Gen Bajwa had cautioned against what he described as 'engineered protests', warning that "no anti-state agenda would be allowed under the garb of those protests". Such statements represent a myopic institutional view of the

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suffering of the population in conflict zones, and of human rights in other parts of the country. In fact, the scourge of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings is not restricted to a particular ethnicity; it has been all too evident in many parts of the country and has, over the years, resulted in discontent and protests by the underserved.

Undeniably, there have been extreme manifestations of such protests that cannot be condoned, but declaring any protest as anti-state will not help address the real issue, and can only boost the very forces said to be engaged in a 'non-linear' warfare against Pakistan. In the current case, the protests are peaceful and, unsurprisingly, have received support from almost all mainstream political parties and rights groups.

Protest is a democratic right and protesters cannot be accused of being unpatriotic or of having foreign agents within their ranks; hardline positions in response can only further alienate protesters. Unannounced bans on media coverage of such protests can deal a blow to freedom of expression and damage our democratic credentials. In any case, restrictions on the media and the freedom of expression are often counterproductive in the age of social media.

The space for dissent and pointing out hard truths is growing narrower as seen in the attack on the residence of a consultant to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the sacking of a Punjab University professor Ammar Ali Jan for encouraging debate among his students and supporting the current protest. The recently published HRCP report highlighted the issue of enforced disappearances that is not confined to the tribal areas. The report has cited many cases of political and rights activists allegedly being taken away by security agencies in different parts of the country instead of being produced before a court of law. Propaganda campaigns, including the holding of pro-establishment rallies, to discredit protesters only generate further controversy and deepen polarisation, making it that much harder for the authorities to confront the challenge of a non-linear war.

What is most dangerous is when the views of the government and other major political parties appear to be at variance with that of the security establishment. The divide was very much in evidence during last week's Pakhtun rally in Lahore. At the other end, the growing assertiveness of the establishment has its own perils.

Indeed, measures taken by the security agencies address some of the problems faced by the tribal population are creditable. But there is also an urgent need for addressing the other and more pressing demand of giving the tribal population equal rights and bringing them into the mainstream. The passage of the bill extending the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and Peshawar High Court to the tribal region is only a small step in the process of integration. In fact, there is concern that the slow process of the reform could further alienate the tribal population and lead to a greater challenge for political and military authorities.

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We have paid dearly for the mistakes we have made in Balochistan and in other parts of the country in the past, allowing outside forces to fish in the troubled waters of the country. While cautioning about the country facing a hybrid war, the security establishment must also realise that it is popular discontent and the deprivation of rights that fuel instability and create a conducive atmosphere for external forces to intervene in the country's internal affairs.

The root cause of protest movements lie in the challenges and problems that populations face at home and are not engineered from outside. But external forces can easily exploit the situation if the state fails to address the genuine grievances faced by the people.

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Chapter 87

COERCING THE MEDIA

18 Apr 2018

AN unannounced censorship seems to have been imposed on the media. The restrictions have certainly not been imposed by the federal government or any regulatory body. Still, the media houses are compelled to follow a diktat. Opinion pieces violating 'guidelines' have reportedly been withdrawn by the management of some leading newspapers for fear of being penalised. Indeed, TV channels are much more vulnerable to the threat. And that fear is not unfounded.

Over the past weeks, a TV channel has reportedly been taken off by cable operators or shuffled out of the main bouquet of news channels as 'punishment' for being too 'outspoken on certain sensitive issues'. Such a clampdown, in violation of the directives of Pemra, the electronic media regulator, is more effective in the cantonment areas where certain 'blacklisted' newspapers are not allowed to be distributed. No one can dare challenge these unlawful and arbitrary actions.

What we are witnessing is described by some analysts as the creeping expansion of the power of the 'deep state'. It is not just about media gagging or the increasing number of cases related to enforced disappearances, it is also about the growing perception of political manipulation by 'invisible forces', often referred to as namaloom afraad. The recent political re-engineering in Balochistan and allegations that the Senate chairman elections were 'managed' have reinforced the apprehension.

Not surprisingly, the latest desertion from the ranks of the PML-N lawmakers, too, is being attributed to a perceived wider plan to restrict the power base of the ruling party in its stronghold in Punjab before the elections. However exaggerated the suspicion may sound, it is not unfounded given our shadowy political history where such manipulation has not been unprecedented.

With the political crisis getting deeper, there is a growing feeling of coerciveness accompanied by the weakening of the authority of state institutions notwithstanding the growing assertiveness of the top judiciary. In fact, the current judicial overreach

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encroaching on the domain of the executive has also allowed the deep state to strengthen its stranglehold.

What is commonly meant by the deep state is the security establishment. But the term also includes other non-elected institutions such as the bureaucracy. By definition, the deep state means "organisations that are said to work secretly in order to protect particular interests and to rule a country without being elected".

Subjected to long periods of direct military rule over the decades, the country has seen many fundamental freedoms curbed, including the right to expression. From direct censorship under authoritarian generals to other forms of pressure exerted by civilian governments, the media's gains have been hard-won. Unfortunately, the weakening of democratic institutions such as parliament has provided a greater opportunity to forces outside the government to get more deeply involved in domestic politics while attempting to thwart basic rights.

The removal from office of prime minister Nawaz Sharif has deepened the political crisis in the country and has brought to the surface various contradictions that seem extremely difficult to manage. While trying to fill the vacuum, these forces seek to curb any voice of dissent. The threshold has been further reduced by the growing internal and external security challenges.

Many believe that the unannounced censorship of the media may be a part of a wider plan. The media houses reportedly receive 'advice' on what should or should not be telecast or printed — all in the name of national security interest. In fact, the pressure can be so intense that oftentimes, even if there is no such 'advice', the owners and editors of certain media houses indulge in self-censorship in an attempt to remain on the right side of the powers that be.

Freedom of expression and freedom of press along with the right to vote and the right to a fair trial are critical parts of a liberal democracy. Any move by an elected government or an unelected organisation to curb fundamental rights is a violation of the Constitution. And it is certainly not the job of elements of the security establishment to decide what should or should not be covered by the media. Freedom of expression is one of the biggest achievements of the democratic movement in Pakistan and a free media has helped strengthen civil society.

Indeed, there is a need for the media to be more responsible and formulate a code of ethics to maintain a higher degree of professionalism, as freedom of expression comes with a sense of responsibility. But curbing that freedom on whatever pretext will not help instil a more ethical culture. Instead, such punitive actions will only sharpen polarisation and encourage non-professionalism such as the alleged move to create a parallel pliant media.

Such a divisive approach will be extremely harmful not only to democracy, but also the country's integrity. It could lead to the further widening of the gap between

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the security establishment and civil society. The country has paid hugely for the suppression of democratic rights in the past and it cannot afford any reversal of the democratic process.

Any move to crack down on the media for whatever reason on the eve of a general election that promises to lead to a historic second transition from one elected government to another raises questions about the fairness of the polls. What the elements of the security establishment fail to understand is that a free discussion and debate on critical issues increases faith in the state. Suppressing free debate leads to more discontent, a lesson we have failed to learn from our own history.

There is little probability that the democratic political process will be completely derailed. But the growing perception of the deep state increasingly getting involved in alleged political manipulation raises apprehensions that we may be heading towards a 'managed' or 'guided' political dispensation.

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Chapter 88

THE AWAKENING

11 Apr 2018

LISTEN to their cry of pain. Listen to the multitudes demanding justice and a life lived with dignity. They are young Pakhtun men and women who grew up in the midst of conflict and were uprooted from their homes. They saw their near and dear ones being blown up in the war or becoming the victims of enforced disappearances.

They say they are angry with the state for allegedly sponsoring militant proxies for decades that have brought death and destruction to their cities and villages. The fire of religious extremism and bigotry instilled from outside has threatened their culture and values. Now these young men and women want to take destiny into their own hands. They want to be treated as equal citizens. They don't have guns in their hands; they believe in nonviolence. It is the Pakhtun age of enlightenment; a rejection of obscurantism and oppression.

But the authorities are apprehensive. Instead of listening to them, there is an attempt to stifle their voices. There has been a virtual blackout by the mainstream media of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) rally in Peshawar on Sunday. Interestingly, not long ago, the same media was obliged to broadcast the statements and interviews of extremist groups responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent Pakistanis especially Pakhtuns. Perhaps we are not willing to learn from our own history.

It was the killing of a young Pakhtun Naqeebullah Mehsud in a staged police encounter in Karachi earlier this year that triggered the current wave of protest and brought to the surface the simmering anger below. The incident exposed the plight of a community that has long been caught in the middle of a war between the militants and the security establishment.

That also led to the Pakhtun long march led by few young men mostly from the tribal areas that have suffered the most in a decade of bloody conflict. The four demands at the Islamabad sit-in early this year that continued for several days were simple and genuine. They included bringing to justice the police officers involved in Naqeebullah's murder;

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ending discriminatory treatment of the tribespeople; the recovery of the missing; and the removal of landmines from the tribal areas that have made life hazardous for those returning to their home in regions cleared of the Taliban.

It was a peaceful and disciplined protest; there was no blockade of the roads or obstruction of traffic. The demands were supported by all mainstream political parties across the spectrum. Indeed, the government, too, responded positively and accepted most of the demands. Some of the missing persons did return home. But it was not the end of the matter. The causes of discontent run deeper. The Islamabad sit-in provided an impetus to a nascent group of young activists who organised themselves under the banner of the PTM. Predictably, the 'movement' has turned into a tide rallying around it people ranging from educated urban youth to tribesmen and disenchanted political activists.

Most amazing is the participation of large numbers of women as seen at the Peshawar rally; this is quite unprecedented in a province considered socially the most conservative in the country. Women have suffered most in the conflict that has gripped the region for the past many decades. The rise of the Taliban and militancy has affected them most. Displacement from their homes during the military operations has taken a massive toll on women and children.

A major cause of mass discontent has been the apathy of the state towards the hundreds of thousands uprooted from their homes. Those returning find their villages devastated by the bombing. Indeed, some reconstruction work has been done but it will take years to completely rehabilitate them. After the Islamabad protest, the security forces have started removing the IEDs that are still left but it will take time to clear the entire area.

Indeed, the problem of missing people has remained an explosive issue not only in the tribal areas, but also in the settled districts. Undeniably, many of them could have been involved in militancy, yet there is no justification for keeping them in detention without formal charges.

The PTM is also a protest movement against the existing Pakhtun political leadership that the younger generation feels it has been betrayed by. They are not just the religious parties but also the so-called Pakhtun nationalist and other groups that have shared political power. Not surprisingly, these groups, too, are scared by the Pakhtun awakening. Although it is essentially a rights and democratic movement, it is bound to have a significant impact on the course of politics in the province.

Another major issue fuelling discontent is the government's backtracking on the plan to mainstream Fata and integrate it with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Even some of the minor reforms, such as the extension of the superior judiciary to Fata, have not yet been implemented. The notorious Frontier Crimes Regulation is still enforced in the region thus denying the tribespeople even basic human and political rights. All promises of

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development and making the tribal areas economically at par with other parts of the country have remained unfulfilled.

The rising Pakhtun enlightenment could well be a harbinger of change — and not only in KP; it could also provide impetus to progressive democratic movements in other parts of the country. The PTM reflects growing Pakhtun sentiments against violent religious extremism in the province. Incidents like the brutal murder of Mashal Khan at the Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan have shaken the Pakhtun youth.

They have little trust in the security establishment that they believe still has not broken away completely from its erstwhile militant clients. The fact that Ehsanullah Ehsan, the former Taliban spokesman who claimed responsibility for the death of thousands of Pakhtuns, was perceived to be declared as almost kosher after he surrendered has added to the anger.

Instead of listening to the voice of the discontented youth, the authorities have resorted to their old ways of blocking them. Heed their cry before it is too late.

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Chapter 89

MESSY RUN-UP TO THE ELECTIONS

28 Mar 2018

THE countdown has begun. Just two months are left to the end of the five-year term of the National Assembly, and the ensuing elections may well lead to the second democratic transition from one elected government to another. It would certainly be a milestone in the country's rocky political journey. Yet it seems as if there are miles to go before we are there.

Cynicism abounds with the gathering storm on the country's political horizon. While the so-called Bajwa doctrine has provided fresh impetus to the perennial doubters, some other factors too have contributed to this climate of political uncertainty. Judicial overdrive and the National Accountability Bureau's blitz against politicians and their alleged henchmen in the bureaucracy have also fuelled conspiracy theories.

Meanwhile, allegations of foul play in the Senate election raise questions about the fairness of the electoral process. Many see the security establishment behind the defeat of the PML-N candidate for Senate chairman. It could be true but it had also to do with the opportunistic alignment of political forces to keep the PML-N from succeeding in its attempts to return to power.

Indeed, the plot has been successful in preventing the ruling party from taking control of the upper house, but it may not work in the general elections, with no possibility of the PPP and PTI joining hands. There is also a limit to what the establishment can do to influence the course of politics that is getting murkier with so many factors coming into the play. It is an extremely unpredictable situation and no one seems to be in charge.

More critical, however, is the impending accountability court ruling in the graft cases against Nawaz Sharif and his family. The monitoring Supreme Court judge has extended the deadline for the winding up of the trial in three months. Some perceive that such a

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delay arises out of concerns that a chaotic situation could develop if the former prime minister is convicted while a PML-N government is still in power, and that it is better if it happens under a non-party interim administration.

Yet it will be hard for any government to deal with a possible backlash triggered by a court ruling against the Sharifs on the eve of the general elections. Indeed, the military has promised full backing to the judiciary, and all the state institutions are bound by the Constitution to get the court order implemented; but given the highly explosive political situation, things do not look that good.

There is no indication yet of Sharif, arguably still the most powerful political leader in the country, shedding his defiance. Although chances of any mass protest is unlikely, it would certainly heighten political tensions, with the possibility of the military getting sucked more deeply into the mire. The generals are already in the driving seat with an increasingly weakened civilian government in place.

Surely, a major challenge for the PML-N would be to maintain unity in the ranks in the event of Sharif's conviction and a clash with what is described as the military-judiciary nexus. The signs of a divide are quite apparent with Chaudhry Nisar openly challenging his erstwhile leader. The former interior minister may not have been very popular among his party colleagues; nevertheless, he represents the sentiments of many other senior members.

But a conviction may also give the party a victim card to play more effectively in the election campaign. It has, indeed, worked well so far in mobilising the party and the general masses. It is quite evident that Sharif's popular support has not diminished, if it has not increased. It is a serious challenge to the security establishment to contain the disgraced leader who apparently it will not allow to return to power at any cost.

A serious crisis is waiting to happen on the eve of the general elections the outcome of which is hard to predict. It is an unmanageable chaos that would threaten the entire political edifice. That raises questions about the elections being held on time. The cynics have their reasons to be pessimistic.

It is not just about the fallout of the Sharif trial, the court has also ordered retired Gen Musharraf to return to the country and face trial on sedition charges. Noncompliance by the former military ruler could create a challenging situation for both the judiciary and the administration.

The erstwhile army chief's trial had been a major source of tension between the former Sharif government and the military. The issue could also place the military leadership in an awkward situation, though Gen Bajwa appeared to indicate that his institution did not have any objection to the trial of the former military ruler.

But it will not be that easy for the military leadership to watch its former chief standing trial for treason. It is a well-known fact that Musharraf had the protection of the then military leadership when he returned to the country ending his self-exile in 2013

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when he faced multiple cases including treason charges. It is certainly becoming a messy situation casting its shadow over the coming elections.

Though completely unsubstantiated, there has been speculation about a long-term interim arrangement backed by the military and judiciary. The deteriorating state of the economy is also being used to justify the argument for the postponement of general elections and the installation of a long-term technocratic administrative arrangement. Such suggestions come in handy each time the country faces a political crisis. It is, however, unlikely that any political party would agree to such a proposition that could derail the democratic process.

More importantly, such an arrangement would be an extra-constitutional act without any legal cover. That could pull the the country into a bigger political mess with serious implications for the unity of the federation. It is, indeed, a messy run-up to the elections but they are the only way out.

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Chapter 90

IS IT THE CHIEF'S 'DOCTRINE'?

21 Mar 2018

MYTHS are often woven around men in power. Now we hear about a 'Bajwa doctrine' — a term used by some media circles and, indeed, by the ISPR chief himself in an interview with a TV channel. Going by this so-called doctrine, it would seem that the army chief has a grand vision about everything — from critical political problems to the economy and foreign policy. Should we be surprised? Not really. Didn't we witness similar wisdom being attributed to previous army chiefs?

But the virtues ascribed to Gen Qamar Bajwa make him appear head and shoulder above his predecessors; a messiah the country has long been waiting for. If media circles are to be believed, the so-called doctrine promises to bring about a revolutionary change in foreign policy, making a clean break from the 'chauvinistic' approach of the past 70 years. This is quite amazing.

According to this 'doctrine', the general envisions better relations with neighbouring countries and balance in dealing with world powers. Violent extremism is certainly not acceptable but the mainstreaming of tamed jihadists is important under the perceived doctrine.

While being portrayed as 'pro democracy' and a staunch supporter of the rule of law, the general appears unhappy about the way our political system works, lamenting the 18th Amendment in the Constitution that, he believes, has turned the country into a confederation. His greatest concern appears to be economic policy mismanagement that is seen as having brought Pakistan to the brink of bankruptcy. Lavish infrastructural projects such as motorways and metro buses, that bear the stamp of the PML-N government, are perceived as a massive drain on the economy as is the Benazir Income Support Programme.

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Indeed, in a recent interaction with a group of journalists, the army chief did articulate all that which is is now being hailed as a grand 'doctrine' for change. The truth is that the general was reflecting the thinking of his institution — that must not be projected as his own vision. One may agree with his (or rather the army's) identification of the problems we face, but the solutions to critical political and economic issues are overly simplistic.

Successive military rulers seized power on the pretext of turning things around and fixing problems but they ended up leaving the country in the same mess if not worse. Similarly, while there may be little doubt regarding the expressed intentions, the views enunciated on the political situation, economy and other issues have exposed the widening cleavage between the elected civilian government and the security establishment that has strengthened multiple power centres.

While generals do not seek to take over power, some feel that is the easiest thing to do in a crisis situation. They do not want to give a free hand to elected civilians either. Distrust of politicians remains palpable, though there is no reason to doubt that the general elections will be held.

But if recent elections for Senate chairmanship are an indicator, there's no way Nawaz Sharif and his cohorts will be allowed space in the future political power structure. The long shadow of the military, in a nexus with the judiciary, will hover over the emerging political setup. It is apparent that most of the country's law-enforcement and investigative agencies are already operating under the watch of the security establishment.

What is most alarming, however, is the military's adverse view of the 18th Amendment. The landmark legislation that has lent greater autonomy to the provinces was passed unanimously by parliament with all major political parties on board. Indeed, some provinces have experienced capacity problems in the discharge of their responsibilities. But that can be resolved in due process.

More importantly, the amendment has strengthened the federation and removed a perpetual source of friction between the centre and the provinces. The unitary form of government and concentration of power at the centre had created serious anomalies particularly for the smaller provinces. Indeed, there is a need for a unified education system in the country and for streamlining provincial laws. But any attempt to strike down the amendment — that could only be through unconstitutional means — would be disastrous.

True, the economy is in bad shape, and former finance minister Ishaq Dar, now implicated in graft charges, was largely responsible for financial mismanagement. The crisis has been brewing for a while, made worse by the deterioration of foreign exchange reserves. And yet, the situation is not irreversible.

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The so-called Bajwa doctrine cannot provide an instant solution to the crisis. The economy is critical to national security but equally important is the continuation of the democratic process, however flawed. Economic progress is also linked to political stability. And military rule, too, does not have any enviable economic record.

It is evident that foreign and national security policies have largely remained within the security establishment's domain. One cannot agree more with Gen Bajwa's words that there is a need for improving ties with our neighbours. It is also true that a significant breakthrough has been made in ties with Afghanistan. But our foreign policy challenges are enormous. Most stem from our skewed security-centric policy for which the military leadership is largely to be blamed. It is the era of geo-economics, and to have a dynamic foreign policy it is imperative we focus more on widening trade and economic relations with neighbouring countries including India.

Indeed, we have done well to fight militancy and restore the state's writ in the tribal areas, but there is still no clear strategy to deal with violent religious extremism that presents an existentialist threat.

More must be done to bridge the gap between the civil and military leadership on key foreign policy issues rather than presenting an alternative 'doctrine' on wide-ranging domestic and foreign policy issues. Unfortunately, we don't have a national narrative on anything. The so-called Bajwa doctrine then is more institutional thinking than one man's views.

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Chapter 91

THE NEW POWER TROIKA

14 Mar 2018

THE Senate chairman's election was an indicator of how the die is being cast against the ruling party. The defeat of the PML-N candidate may not have come as a surprise but the large margin was certainly striking. The outcome was craftily sewn up with bitter political rivals PPP and PTI coalescing into an unholy alliance.

It was not just about the control of the upper house of parliament; the main intent was to block any possibility of political revival of an embattled Nawaz Sharif. Surely a victory would have given a massive moral, political boost to the disgraced leader, yet the setback is not likely to blunt his defiance.

Instead, the battle for the Senate has intensified the clash between the PML-N and the security establishment that has been blamed for producing a 'favourable result'. There is no denying that the convergence of interests had essentially brought disparate political groups together, yet the role of the pervasive deep state in the matter cannot be underestimated. What has been happening is not that incomprehensible.

From the political re-engineering in Balochistan to the emergence of an independent group of newly elected senators from the province, the chain of events over the past few months does not appear to have been coincidental. Across the opposition, consensus on a relatively unknown politician for one of the nation's highest elected office too was not unplanned though the move was wrapped in the fancy slogan of remedying Baloch alienation.

Indeed, the mission was accomplished; it did thwart the PML-N's attempt to establish control over both houses of parliament. Winning the Senate election was particularly important for the ruling party to change the laws in order to remove the disqualification of the former prime minister. The Senate election had also assumed greater significance because of rising political polarisation and the approach of the general elections.

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A major challenge for the PML-N now is how to maintain unity in its ranks in the aftermath of the latest setback. There may have been a few defections widening the margin of reversal, but still, there is no sign of cracks in the ruling coalition. In fact, there has been a marked stridency in the tenor of the members of the ruling coalition with their no-holds-barred attacks on the security establishment.

Now Sharif loyalists are engaged in fighting on two fronts. The battle lines are drawn more clearly with the security establishment shedding pretensions of being nonpartisan in the ongoing confrontation between the civilian government and the apex court. The latest warning by the top military leadership that it stands with the judiciary leaves nothing to doubt about the new template of power. That has increasingly marginalised the position of the executive in this emerging troika of power.

Moreover, the deepening political crisis has propelled the the military back in the driving seat in what is seen as a nexus with the judiciary that too is perceived to have become an arbiter of power. Has the backing of the military given greater impetus to judicial overdrive and brought the executive under increasing pressure?

Many observers have gone so far as to describe it as 'judicial extremism' that is encroaching even on parliament's powers to legislate. Some recent Supreme Court judgements striking down legislation passed by parliament are seen to have caused imbalance in the distribution of power among various institutions of state.

There may be some credence to the argument that the judiciary and military have filled in the vacuum created by lack of governance and ineffectiveness of the other civilian institutions, but it is not the whole truth. One may agree that the ineffectiveness of parliament to resolve political issues has increased the burden on the apex court, but the judiciary must also refrain from getting involved in issues that come under the domain of other institutions.

Whatever the reason may be, such growing assertion by the security establishment and the courts has further distorted the balance of power thus intensifying the clash of institutions. The emergence of a new troika of power is reminiscent of the 1990s, the decade of elected civilian rule when the military and president who then enjoyed sweeping powers along with the prime minister formed the troika of power.

The annulment of the infamous 58-2 (b) clause of the Constitution that had given the president sweeping powers to dissolve parliament brought an end to that troika of power. With the office of the president having been reduced to a ceremonial post, the military's position as an arbiter of power has also diminished.

But the growing empowerment of the judiciary in recent years, particularly after the action by the Supreme Court against Nawaz Sharif removing him from power, has created a new though informal power troika. It has provided the military with a new ally to keep a check on the executive.

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Indeed, Nawaz Sharif is to a large extent himself responsible for the present state of affairs. His hubris and his small group of family members running the show had weakened civilian institutions and parliament thus creating a vacuum to be filled by the military and judiciary.

Sharif's clash with the judiciary has been on personal grounds. Instead of clearing himself before the courts, he has chosen to undermine the apex court. There is certainly no principle involved in his battle with the two powerful members of the power troika. What happened in the Senate chairman election this week and the embarrassment caused by the defeat of the ruling coalition candidate reflect the declining hold of his party.

The deep state can only succeed by exploiting the weakness of the party whose entire politics seem to be revolving around the Sharif family. Instead of undermining the judiciary and confronting other state institutions, the party must try to protect the democratic system with the support of democratic forces.

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Chapter 92

SENATE ELECTION AND HORSE-TRADING

07 Mar 2018

GOOD or bad, the Senate election is over, defying all conspiracy theories. Notwithstanding a few upsets, the results were largely predictable though there are some shouts of foul play. The PML-N may have emerged as the single largest party in the house by sweeping almost all the seats up for grabs in Punjab and a few more in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but the battle for the control of the upper house is far from over.

It is certainly not going to be easy for the ruling party to have its nominee elected as Senate chairman despite the combined numerical strength of its coalition partners. Horse-trading is the name of the game and the outcome is extremely unpredictable. The PML-N's endeavour to get control of both houses of parliament is not likely to succeed with the dice heavily cast against it.

Pakistan's Senate elections have all that is manifest in the country's flawed democratic process. Candidates are mostly handpicked by all powerful party heads. Cronies are accommodated in the house. Loyalties are shifted overnight and one is not surprised to see the turncoats returning to the house under a different party banner each time. Money can buy a party ticket or even a seat in the august house standing as an independent. The latest election has not been any different to what we have witnessed in the past, raising questions about the sanctity of the elected forum representing the federation.

What happened in the latest election does not come as a surprise — not even the PPP winning two seats and coming very close to snapping up a third one in KP with only seven members in the provincial legislature. While losing one in its stronghold, the PTI staged the biggest upset in Punjab by snatching one seat from the PML-N. The sweep of

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the so-called independent group in Balochistan too was foretold after the recent political re-engineering in the province.

Predictably, the fragmentation of the MQM came as a boon to the PPP, allowing the party to stay in the game of thrones. Billions of rupees allegedly changed hands to purchase the Fata seats. Now these newly elected members may be up for sale to the highest bidder in the election for Senate chairman.

Interestingly, both the PML-N and the PTI are calling for investigation into the vote-purchase allegation. But it is for these parties to look into their own ranks for the wrongdoers. It's not just about money being used to buy votes; in some cases the upset has also been caused by the revolt within the ranks against the choice of candidates by the party leaders.

In KP particularly, the upset had also to do with the protest against the PTI's choice — not based on merit but on other considerations — of some candidates. The humiliating defeat of Maulana Samiul Haq who was being supported by the PTI is one such example. Similarly, in Punjab, PML-N members rejected Zubair Gul who was handpicked by Nawaz Sharif for his services to the family. The MQM leadership has only itself to blame for the debacle it has experienced.

There have also been questions regarding the PML-N's awarding tickets to Ishaq Dar who has been declared absconder by an accountability court. The former finance minister is also facing graft charges. Another one on the PML-N list is Rana Maqbool, a notorious retired senior police officer who had been accused of torturing Asif Ali Zardari when the latter was under detention. Their election certainly does not add to the prestige of the Senate.

The PPP can be rightly criticised for many wrongdoings, but to its credit, the party sends relatively more credible members to the Senate. It is highly commendable for the party to have had a Hindu woman, Krishna Kumari, elected, and that too on a general seat. The PPP members have traditionally been more active in the house, initiating debate on important national issues. The Senate will miss people like Farhatullah Babar and some other members who have now completed their term.

Now begins the second phase of the battle for the control of the upper house that may also cast a long shadow over the coming general elections. A combined opposition can block the PML-N, though it seems unlikely that the PTI will join hands with the PPP. Interestingly, the newly formed independent bloc in Balochistan has emerged as the main powerbroker staking its claim for the top slot.

One would not be surprised if the group's demand wins the support of both the PPP and the PTI; it may even divide the ruling coalition. Such a move could effectively block the PML-N's bid to capture the coveted post that the party deems critical for its plan to change the Constitution in order to quash Nawaz Sharif's disqualification.

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A person-specific amendment would not be acceptable to other mainstream political parties. It still remains to be seen how the PML-N plays its cards in case it fails to rally the support of the other parties for its candidate. The field is open and it is going to be a tough battle. The PML-N would sail through if the PTI and PPP remain divided.

Indeed, the Senate election has removed the uncertainty surrounding the general elections and the second transition from one elected government to another. It bodes well for the democratic process in the country. But what happens over the next few weeks could change the political dynamics yet again. It is imperative to reform the system to establish the credibility of the elected institutions.

Allegations of horse-trading and the purchase of votes have tarnished the image of parliament. Instead of accusing others of wrongdoing, it is time for political leaders themselves to strengthen democracy within and outside their parties. Those purchasing their way to parliament and fugitives from the law cannot uphold the sanctity of the Constitution and democratic values.

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Chapter 93

FROM DISGRACE TO SUPREME LEADER

28 Feb 2018

THE mantle of the PML-N leadership has apparently been passed on to the younger Sharif, the ubiquitous chief minister of the country's most powerful province, but the real power continues to lie with the elder Sharif endorsed by the party as its 'Quaid for life'. Notwithstanding the recent court ruling, Nawaz Sharif stays at the helm of the ruling party.

Indeed, the nominal change became unavoidable after the apex court struck yet again, barring the former prime minister from leading the party. The elevation of Shahbaz Sharif has also been necessitated not only in order to meet the legal requirement but also to maintain unity within the party as the general election approaches.

However, Shahbaz's ascendancy is not likely to tilt the balance of power within the ruling party to the other branch of the family as is being anticipated. It is hard to envisage how much influence and power the younger Sharif could have under the overwhelming shadow of his elder brother that is not going to fade away and the niece who has emerged as the party's populist face of defiance. In this situation, Shahbaz will just be a figurehead in his capacity as the party's interim head.

Shahbaz had come very close to being crowned when Nawaz Sharif was unceremoniously removed from the country's highest public office that caused him to be stripped of the party leadership too. But an amendment in the electoral rules restored Nawaz Sharif's presidency. The latest court decision against him has, however, changed the situation yet again.

So the dice is cast in favour of Shahbaz though it is not to the liking of the dominating side of the family. The political cleavage between the two Sharifs is too obvious to ignore and may further intensify with the impending court decision in graft

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cases against Nawaz and his family likely to be announced in the next few weeks. Given the stand-off between Nawaz Sharif and the judges, it seems rather improbable that the former prime minister can emerge from the trial unscathed.

The most serious concern for senior party leaders at the moment is how to stop the party from fragmentation. Under the circumstances, Shahbaz appears best placed not only to lead the party but also to be a candidate for prime minister if the PML-N returns to power in the coming elections.

But it will still be Nawaz Sharif calling the shots. This dichotomy of power within the party may have its own perils. The differences between the two Sharifs are too serious to be resolved, especially as there is no sign of the former prime minister backing down from his confrontational position.

A big question, however, is whether the mercurial and extremely temperamental leader who may have proved a good administrator at the provincial level can also deliver on the national stage. Shahbaz is not a charismatic and populist figure who can lead the party to an electoral victory without his older and more popular brother on his side. In such a situation, he will have to walk a tightrope balancing his moderate approach and Nawaz's confrontational politics.

Meanwhile, Shahbaz has also been overshadowed by the rising populist image of Maryam who has emerged as the main crowd puller at PML-N rallies. Even PML-N leaders sceptical of her aggressive stance towards the judges and the security establishment concede that her relentless campaign has infused new life into the party and kept it afloat.

So it may not be smooth sailing for the pretender to the throne as the party ranks are torn between two conflicting approaches. While most potential party candidates in the coming elections may not support the clash of institutions that could jeopardise the polls, they also know that they need Nawaz and his daughter to win the votes. The development work done by the Shahbaz government alone would not help ensure victory for the PML-N in the battleground that is Punjab.

Notwithstanding Sharif's defiance, the challenges for the ruling party are getting more serious. The Election Commission of Pakistan's move to keep the PML-N out of the Senate elections following the Supreme Court's order declaring all decisions of the party taken under Sharif's presidency illegal has shattered the party's hope of achieving a majority in the upper house of parliament.

The candidates put up by the PML-N can stand as independents and join any party after winning the seat — it is not sure how many of them would stay loyal. After the Balochistan experience when loyalties changed overnight, horse trading cannot be ruled out in the Senate elections.

Meanwhile, the latest crackdown by the National Accountability Bureau on senior provincial bureaucrats on graft charges has come as a serious blow to the chief minister

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of Punjab who boasted about good governance and claimed running a corruption-free administration. The action taken by NAB sends a clear signal that the noose is being tightened around those civil servants considered close to the chief minister and the PML-N.

It is the first time that NAB has become active in Punjab targeting senior government officials raising questions about the timing of the action of the anti-graft body. Many ruling party leaders tend to establish a link between the judicial action against the Sharif family and the NAB crackdown in the ruling party's political stronghold on the eve of the general elections.

Undoubtedly, the NAB crackdown has provided ammunition to the opposition parties to target Shahbaz and the Punjab government. But one is not sure whether this clampdown would hurt the ruling PML-N vote bank in the central Punjab that seems to have remained intact or may have even increased after the judicial actions against Sharif.

Although Shahbaz has finally been installed as party chief, the move is not likely to change the power structure within the PML-N with Nawaz being declared as supreme leader. But things may change dramatically in the next few weeks with the possible conviction of the Sharif family.

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Chapter 94

BATTLE TO NO END

21 Feb 2018

MANY had written off Nawaz Sharif after he was unceremoniously removed from the office by the country's highest court last year. He and his family are standing trial on graft charges. He appeared down and out. There were signs of split in the party and within his own family. But six months down the road, the former prime minister has bounced back proving the pundits wrong.

Sharif's victim narrative, however distorted it may be, seems to be gaining public traction. His frontal assault on the judiciary and jibes at the security establishment seem to be working. His daughter and heir apparent Maryam Nawaz has certainly drawn a populist response with her rabble-rousing speeches. Both father and daughter are on the warpath playing a game of dangerous brinkmanship.

From the public rallies and legal battles, Sharif has taken his fight against the judiciary to parliament as well. The government is now seeking to censure the judges for making what it describes 'insulting remarks' against elected politicians. The clash of institutions is getting uglier with Sharif's unrelenting onslaught against the country's top judges. It seems a calculated move to bring the judiciary under pressure. The provocation may not bring the judges under pressure but it certainly has made the credibility of the court controversial.

Maryam has become the ruling party's face of resistance building a new populist culture rarely witnessed in the PML-N where there is no tradition of a woman taking the political centre stage. It also has put her as a front runner in the race for succession within the family and the party, though her confrontationist path makes the party's old guards a bit uneasy. Her aggression may have helped uplift the morale of Sharif's supporters. But it has also intensified the collision with other powerful institutions of the state.

His party's unexpected victory in the National Assembly by-election in Lodhran has galvanised Sharif's supporters and silenced the dissenters in the ranks. Sharif is now fancying a landslide in the coming general elections that may allow his party to change

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the rules and get him back at the helm for a record fourth time. A weak and fragmented opposition and the advantage of his party still being in control of the federal as well as the Punjab government allow him huge space to manipulate the system.

What brings the biggest relief to PML-N is the perceived slide in its nemesis Imran Khan's populist appeal. It may purely be a personal matter, but the circumstances and the timing of Imran Khan's third marriage and the controversy generated by a section of the media has given the PML-N some ammunition to fire at him. While the PTI seems to have lost momentum owing to Sharif's offensive, the PPP has become almost irrelevant in Punjab, which is the main political battleground. Zardari's half-hearted move to regain a foothold for the party in the province does not seem to have made any headway.

But there is still a long way to go before the general elections and there are many hurdles in the way for Sharif to cross. His legal battle is far from over. There are three major court decisions that are expected to be announced by next month that could change the political dynamics yet again and intensify the clash of institutions.

The Supreme Court has already completed proceedings on two petitions — one on determining the period of disqualification under Articles 62 and 63 and the other on the changes made by parliament in the electoral law allowing Sharif to continue as president of his party despite his disqualification as prime minister. These two Sharif-specific rulings are expected to be announced in the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, the accountability court is also expected to wind up the graft cases against Sharif and his family by next month. There is little hope of them emerging unscathed. These three decisions will decide not only Sharif's but also the country's political course in the run-up to the approaching general elections. Sharif's possible conviction or his being stripped of his position as PML-N president will bring the clash between the executive and the judiciary to a head. Sharif has already vowed not to accept any court ruling against him.

Sharif's defiance could create a major political crisis. But can he win this battle for political survival notwithstanding the fact that his political support base remains unaffected? Undoubtedly, the party has rallied around him but can it mobilise the masses against any adverse court ruling?

There were no real public protests when he was removed from the office for perjury and it is not likely to happen in the event of his conviction. Notwithstanding Sharif's newfound aggressive populism, it will be hard for the party to resort to a mass movement to get the court ruling reversed. But the victim could be used by the party to win votes in the elections. It, however, remains to be seen whether it could be turned into the landslide victory that Sharif wants in the hope of amending the Constitution.

Notwithstanding a favorable dispensation, it will not be easy for the party to achieve a clean sweep just on the basis of its support in Punjab and playing the sympathy card. Although the fissures within the party appear to have waned, they could resurface if

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Sharif remains defiant. More importantly, the PTI despite the seeming downturn in its political fortunes, remains a formidable opposition. For an incumbent government, it is never easy not only to return to power but also increase its electoral support. Indeed, there are still some months to go before elections are held and it is hard to forecast any outcome at the moment. But it is the expected court ruling in the three Sharif-specific cases that matters at the moment.

Perhaps more worrying is the growing confrontation between the judiciary and the executive that is spinning out of control. If not contained, it could damage the entire political edifice. Indeed, parliament must debate the issue but any move to obstruct the judicial process would be extremely dangerous.

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Chapter 95

WHO'S AFRAID OF ASMA JAHANGIR?

14 Feb 2018

THOUGH small in stature, Asma Jahangir stood tall against the usurpers and bigots who were her biggest nemesis. They were scared of her. Her relentless fight for justice and for the rights of the people made those in power uneasy. Her fearlessness made them shudder. Her quest for regional peace earned her the wrath of the warmongers.

She was the conscience of a nation that has produced few icons whom the people can look towards for inspiration. In her death the country may have lost its bravest soul and a fearless street fighter, but her legacy lives on. The principles Asma stood for and the causes she championed are very much alive.

Therefore, it is not surprising that while her passing is being mourned across the region and religious divide, there are also some who have not spared her even in death. The kind of filth spewed against her in the social media reflects a sickening mindset of powerful interest groups who were challenged by Asma. They ran a concerted campaign against her when she was alive, but this campaign has become even more vicious after her death. They are afraid of the legacy of struggle she has left behind. She was among the few Pakistanis who also won international acclaim for her struggle for human rights.

Indeed, religion and patriotism are two major weapons in their arsenal that they use in their venomous propaganda campaign against her. There is certainly nothing new about this. They know they can't attack her for her struggle for democracy and justice. Hence these issues come in handy. The adage that 'patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel' fits well in this case.

There is no mystery about who is spearheading this social media campaign. What is, however, more disconcerting is how young minds are being polluted in the name of nationalism and patriotism by some elements. Among them are also members of

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mainstream political parties. Anyone who doesn't subscribe to the narrow notion of national security and nationalism can be branded 'unpatriotic' by the so-called defenders of our ideological boundaries.

Indeed, Asma relentlessly fought against every military regime and struggled for democracy and civilian supremacy. That certainly did not please the so-called patriotic elements. Her campaign against forced disappearances and her criticism of security agencies' role have also been used to question her patriotism. Nothing could be more ridiculous than that.

In fact, her struggle gave hope to the alienated people of Balochistan of getting justice and civil liberties. On her death, Akhtar Mengal, a former chief minister of Balochistan, tweeted: "Balochis-tan is forever in your debt." The remarks also represented the sentiments of the Baloch population towards her for raising a voice for their rights at the national level. She became a symbol of the national unity that our so-called patriots and nationalist chauvinists have never been able to fathom.

And it was not just Balochistan; Asma was there to support any struggle for democratic and civil rights. Her last speech was at the Pakhtun long march in Islamabad. Organised by a group of Pakhtun students and young activists, the protests triggered by the killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud in a staged police encounter in Karachi last month became a forum for the demonstration of grievances of the population affected by the conflict in the tribal areas.

Hundreds of people are known to have become victims of enforced disappearances. Such a policy cannot help win the hearts and minds of the people who have suffered massive destruction and displacement from their homes. Those assembled in Islamabad were not militants; they were victims of war in their areas. They were not sure whether the state has really changed its policy of 'good Taliban/bad Taliban'.

That concern is witnessed in many other parts. Asma shared their concerns and anger over indiscriminate action against the Pakhtuns in other parts of the country. Like many other progressive public figures, Asma had been a strong critic of the disastrous state policy of using militancy as a tool of foreign policy that cost Pakistan massively, both in terms of human lives and the economy.

Asma's campaign for normalisation of relations with India had also become a major issue for the nationalist brigade. They also used this to question her patriotism. An old newspaper picture of her with India's extremist Hindu leader Bal Thackeray resurfaced on social media, though she had met him in her capacity as the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion investigating violence against Muslims in India. What these zealots have forgotten is that Asma also raised her voice against Indian atrocities in occupied Kashmir.

She had long been targeted by the extremist Islamist groups for her unrelenting campaign for women rights and the misuse of the blasphemy laws. This is also being

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used against her in the latest social media campaign. She was never intimidated by the extremist onslaught despite the serious threat to her life. She never left the country; that demonstrates her courage and fearlessness.

As she said in an interview that whatever she did she never deviated from her core principles; she never sought glory or ever tried to benefit from adversity. Her courage has certainly been recognised by the people here and by the international community, notwithstanding the vitriol spewed by the forces of regression that are not willing to let go of their obscurantist worldview. These are the same people who glorify murder in the name of faith. The way Mashal Khan's murderers were lionised is a horrific manifestation of the rising religious extremism against which Asma stood up.

These are the same elements that have been running a concerted campaign against Malala, another international icon of courage. The young Nobel Prize winner has been accused of being a Western agent. They don't want to see how these two brave women raised Pakistan's image. As one American writer has pointed out, Pakistanis often complain about the bad image of their country being projected in the international media, but they refuse to see what they are doing to those who present the dynamic face of their country. These are the people who are afraid of Asma's legacy.

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Chapter 96

DANGEROUS COLLISION

07 Feb 2018

AFTER demonstrating judicial restraint for the past several months, the apex court has finally responded strongly. One senator has been sent behind bars and is barred from holding public office for five years over contempt of court; two federal ministers are facing the same charges. Contempt notices have also been issued to Nawaz Sharif and his daughter Maryam Nawaz by the Lahore High Court.

But that has not deterred the ousted prime minister and his loyalists from attacking the judges. The confrontation between the judiciary and Sharif has become ugly and destructive. Neither side seems to be relenting. To many, it appears like a no-holds-barred clash of egos.

In fact, Sharif's tenor has become more defiant and hostile after the Supreme Court's latest action. The daughter who has now taken centre stage in national politics is far more vitriolic in her statements. It is not just about being hurt by the court ruling that disqualified a third-time prime minister and put the entire family in the dock; in fact, it is mainly to do with the sense of hubris that drives Sharif to carry out his anti-judiciary campaign.

The Supreme Court has not backed down, and, in fact, appears to have gone on the offensive. "If the judges of this court were weaklings or feeble at heart and if they could be frightened or browbeaten by verbal assaults or naked threats, then the respondent, namely Senator Nehal Hashmi, had surely made a valiant attempt at that. It, however, appears that he and those he wanted to obey or please are poor judges of men," Justice Asif Saeed Khosa stated in his ruling.

It is rare that judges enter into polemics and use such strong language notwithstanding extreme provocation from the other side. Could this show of anger possibly cloud the contempt-of-court proceedings against the Sharifs and the two federal ministers?

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Indeed, no one can condone the outrageous and threatening language used by Nehal Hashmi against the honourable judges and their families. Yet slapping a jail sentence on him and unseating him (in the Senate) after he had tendered an unconditional apology does seem too severe, and can open the apex court to criticism and allegations of being 'vengeful'.

It is apparent that the tirade launched by Sharif loyalists is a calculated political move and is meant to bring the judges under pressure as the accountability court comes close to winding up the graft case against the former prime minister and his family. Sharif is also playing the victim card to win public sympathy and mobilise supporters for the coming general elections.

But the judges are expected to exercise prudence. It is indeed a testing time for the judiciary as it is seen to adopt an overly active approach. There is always the danger of the judiciary becoming politicised if it encroaches on the domain of the executive and the legislature. Previously, we saw how the sanctity of the apex court was damaged under former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. It is extremely harmful for the institution if judicial rulings are seen as being driven by populism.

This tendency is now apparent as the clash of institutions turns serious. While it is wrong for political leaders to demean the judiciary it is not becoming of the top judge to indulge in public debate. And it is not appropriate for judges to respond to every criticism or defend themselves in public. They must only speak through their judgements.

Indeed, the present confrontation between the judiciary and the executive is not unprecedented. We have witnessed such tensions between the two pillars of the state in the past as well. It is a manifestation of a systemic failure. For the most part of the country's history, the judiciary largely remained subservient to the executive — both under civilian and military rules. That clouded its independence.

Whenever the apex court tried to assert its authority it would face a strong backlash from the executive. The first thing any military regime would do was to purge the top judiciary to remove any legal challenge to its power. That's how military dictators would obtain legitimacy from the Supreme Court.

This tendency to control the judiciary was equally strong during civilian rule. We have seen every elected government getting into a confrontation with the Supreme Court since the 1990s. It was the clash with the then chief justice that contributed to the fall of Benazir Bhutto's second government in 1996 beside other reasons.

But for Nawaz Sharif, who enjoyed the blessing of the establishment in the past, it has been a totally different story. Unlike as in the Bhuttos' case, the judiciary has traditionally been soft on the leader from Punjab. Only Nawaz Sharif's government could get away unpunished after storming the Supreme Court and dividing the judges. The then chief justice was sent packing by his brother judges.

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It was the darkest episode in Pakistan's judicial and political history when the judges were allegedly bribed to rebel against the chief justice. It is with the same mindset that Sharif and his supporters are now attacking the judges. It is the storming of the court using different means. It is the arrogance of power and a sense of being above the law that is driving Sharif and his loyalists to confrontation.

Sharif certainly did not have any problem when former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry went into judicial overdrive during the PPP government and removed Yousuf Raza Gilani from office for contempt of court. He turned against the judiciary only when the law was applied to him.

Undoubtedly, there is a need for reforming the existing judicial system for the delivery of justice and fair trial. It is also true that politicisation of the judiciary and the judges engaging in public debate must be avoided. But Sharif's campaign against the judges is politically motivated and self-serving. His idea of reform is not about the independence of the judiciary but making the latter subservient to his whims. This no-holds-barred confrontation must be stopped before it destroys the entire system.

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Chapter 97

A LICENCE TO KILL

24 Jan 2018

THE brutal murder of young Naqeebullah Mehsud in a fake encounter has shaken the nation and raised questions about the apparent impunity that some members of the law enforcement enjoy. It is indeed not the first case of extrajudicial killing in this country; the only difference between this and other case is that the media backlash and protest by the civil society forced the administration to act this time.

Hundreds of alleged terrorists have reportedly been killed by law-enforcement agencies in recent years without being identified. They are just numbers. While such cases have been reported from across the country it has almost become a norm in Karachi. Finding mutilated bodies of persons after they were picked up by the security agencies is a common phenomenon.

Given this situation, an incident like Naqeebullah's death was waiting to happen. There were three other 'suspected terrorists' reportedly killed in the same 'encounter', but nothing is known about their identity. Last week's incident is symptomatic of a more serious problem — the breakdown of the rule of law.

Rao Anwar, who is being held responsible for Mehsud's coldblooded murder, had earlier been eulogised as a daredevil officer and referred to as the 'encounter specialist'. He was untouchable, reportedly having enjoyed the blessing of the security establishment as well as the top PPP leadership. He has been a familiar name in Karachi since the 1990s when he earned notoriety for his role in the operation against the MQM.

Rising from the ranks, he owes his senior position to powerful backers. He would certainly deliver what was expected of him. That, it seems, gave him a licence to kill. It is not the first time he has been suspended from the job, but he always came back. His refusal to appear before an inquiry committee indicates defiance that has become his hallmark.

But it is not just about Rao Anwar. He is a product of a system that sanctions extra-legal actions. Custodial killings and fake encounters have become a way to deal with

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suspected criminals, militants and sectarian extremists not only in Karachi but across the country. And it is not just the police but intelligence agencies and the paramilitary forces too that are involved in extrajudicial killings. The ongoing conflict and insurgency in the tribal areas provided a justification for this impunity.

A case in point is Balochistan where bodies of disappeared persons were dumped regularly. It was certainly not the police or other civilian law-enforcement agencies responsible for those killings. The low-intensity insurgency in the province and involvement of foreign-backed separatists has been used as an excuse by the security agencies for taking extreme actions. But such actions have been counterproductive and have further alienated the population. In fact, such indiscriminate use of force is a major cause of public discontent in the province.

Indeed, the situation in the tribal areas where the militants had challenged the writ of the state is different. The killing of militants in combat is not the same as extrajudicial action. But there is always a question about custodial deaths. The suspects must be tried in a court of law rather than eliminated. It may be true that a weak legal system and prosecution often allow even hard-core terrorists to go scot-free. Yet extrajudicial actions are not the solution. The excesses perpetrated by the security agencies in conflict zones are often used by the militants to mobilise support.

Karachi's case has been very different. The country's largest city and economic jugular had become a hub for criminal gangs backed by political parties vying for the control of the city. The battle turned the city into a lawless region. More serious was the influx of militants fleeing the military operation in the tribal areas; they had established their stronghold in the outskirts of the city.

In those areas, police control had virtually collapsed. Indeed, the turnaround over the last few years, bringing some semblance of normality in the city, is remarkable. The credit for it certainly goes to the police, Rangers and other security agencies. But it is also a fact that scores of suspected militants as well as members of some political parties have been killed in so-called encounters as well as in the custody of security agencies.

For sure, many of them might have been wanted in militant and terrorist activities, but such actions do not provide a long-term solution. A licence to kill makes incidents like last week's inevitable. Naqeebullah's case generated much public backlash because he was active on social media and known in the area for his flamboyance, but there may be other innocent victims whose deaths in fake encounters have gone unnoticed. A judicial inquiry must be conducted to probe other complaints too.

Rao Anwar and other alleged perpetrators of the crime must be punished. It will indeed help prevent such excess use of power and authority in future. More important, however, is to reform the police system that produces officers like Rao Anwar. His impunity came from political patronage.

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Not that the police system is much better in other provinces, but the Sindh police has earned greater notoriety. There is a need for improving the judicial and monitoring system too. Action against one officer will not change the culture of misuse of power. There is a need to strengthen the system of check and balances.

While it is important for the media to highlight the cases of police excesses, there is also a need to be careful not to demoralise the entire force that has contributed immensely to getting Karachi back to normal. There is always a danger that demonisation of the law-enforcement agencies could affect the police officers engaged in a counterterrorism drive. A senior police officer rightly pointed out that no officer should go to the job worried about the consequences of his action. But no one should have the impunity to use power indiscriminately.

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Chapter 98

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

17 Jan 2018

JUST as the situation seemed to be settling down a bit, the country was caught in another whirlpool of political uncertainty. The game is on and it is getting murkier. The political re-engineering in Balochistan has gone rather smoothly. Political loyalty has never been a virtue in this troubled province, yet it needed a masterstroke to have a minority party installed in government by getting disparate groups to come together.

Remarkable machinations saw the majority party dissolved into nothingness overnight, and a non-political entity — who was elected to the Balochistan Assembly with less than 600 votes in the 2013 general elections — installed at the helm. It has indeed been an amazing turn of fortunes, even in a country where shifting political alignments have long been a norm.

There is no denying that the members of the ruling coalition may have their own reasons for discontent but it certainly needed a facilitator to ignite the rebellion and make sure that it succeeded. It is not very hard to guess who could be the conductor of this surgical strike that has changed the political dynamics in the country just two months before the midterm Senate elections. It has also raised questions about the coming general elections being held according to schedule.

The empire has struck back bringing down a staunch Nawaz Sharif loyalist as the former prime minister ups the ante by intensifying confrontation with the apex court and the security establishment. His tenor has become even more strident defying all predictions of him having been reined in by his erstwhile hosts in the holy land. Sharif is not backing down and the security establishment will not let him come back at any cost. The confrontation has threatened to destroy the entire political edifice of democracy.

This is a no-holds-barred confrontation that may spin completely out of control. The Balochistan episode has demonstrated the power of the deep state and its apparent ability to manipulate the system from within and without completely subverting it. But it may not always work.

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Now the battleground has shifted to Lahore, the Sharif citadel of power, where Tahirul Qadri is leading the charge and Sharif's two bitterest political rivals are joining hands against him. The 2014 Model Town carnage has long been an Achilles heel of the PML-N government in Punjab, but making public on court orders Justice Najafi's inquiry committee report has given impetus to the demand for the removal of the Punjab chief minister.

Shahbaz Sharif's position has become more beleaguered with widespread anti-government protests in the aftermath of the Zainab murder case in Kasur. Meanwhile, the newly emerged powerful Barelvi extremist groups have also stepped up pressure on the government. The controversy has triggered an internal revolt in the PML-N led by an influential cleric.

It is apparent that the younger Sharif too is in the eye of the storm. It is certainly a well-calculated move by the opposition parties to target the man who is the PML-N nominee for office of prime minister in the coming elections. Having distanced himself from his older brother's policy of confrontation, Shahbaz Sharif had made himself acceptable to the security establishment. He was also seen as a leader who could keep the party united. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court ruling against the NAB petition to reopen the Hudaibya money-laundering case gave him huge relief. Both Shahbaz Sharif and Hamza Sharif were nominated in the case.

But the latest wave of protests in the province has brought him under tremendous pressure. That also raises questions about the party maintaining its unity as Nawaz Sharif's confrontation with the establishment comes to a head. With his relentless attacks, he has strengthened what appears to be an unintended nexus between the top judiciary and the security establishment.

There may not be a direct connection between the Balochistan episode and the Qadri-led opposition's anti-government campaign, but it does provide an opportunity for the unelected elements to further weaken Sharif's position. It may not be an orchestrated move yet it has the potential to paralyse the Punjab government, widening the cracks in the party. Certainly, it could not lead to the Balochistan-like internal revolt bringing down the Shahbaz administration. But it could deal a serious political blow to the party close to the general elections.

Although the PPP and the PTI are at loggerheads and there is no possibility of them entering into any formal alliance, both find it politically expedient to join Tahirul Qadri's sit-in. Their main objective is to keep up the pressure on the Punjab government. For the PPP, it could provide an opportunity to infuse some life into the party in the province where it has lost ground. However, it remains to be seen to what extent the PTI can gain from the agitation. Qadri is just an instrument in the whole episode.

With all the opposition parties ganging up against him and the possibility of a brewing discontent within the PML-N turning into a full-scale rebellion, the ousted leader

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finds himself pushed to the wall. His possible conviction by the accountability court on graft charges in the next few months may seal his political fate. That leaves him with few options other than going down fighting. Many believe that he is fighting a losing battle.

It is, however, not such a straightforward situation. While Sharif is on a warpath taking on the two most dominant institutions of the state, his party still rules both at the centre and the most powerful province of Punjab. Despite being disqualified, he still heads the ruling party and continues to guide the federal government.

A major crisis is waiting to happen. How would the state institutions, including the federal government, respond in the event of the accountability court convicting Sharif and his children? A highly explosive situation is developing on the eve of the general elections. It is hard to see how the government, the opposition parties and the security establishment can deal with this imminent crisis and save the political system. It is an extremely uncertain situation.

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Chapter 99

SILENCING DISSENT

13 Dec 2017

RAZA Khan, a young civil society activist, is the latest addition to a long list of those subjected to enforced disappearances. He has been missing from his home in Lahore for several weeks. His family and friends believe he has been detained by the security agencies. His crime is that he has a thinking mind and idealises regional peace and coexistence, something that is unacceptable to the self-appointed guardians of our ideological frontiers.

In this atmosphere of fear, few dare to raise their voice against the witch-hunt. There is a criminal silence from our legislators over illegal detentions that are no more restricted to the conflict zones. Many more people are now being picked up from cities for reasons never disclosed. Some of them may have returned home after suffering torture, but many others have not been so lucky. No one knows what crime they have committed or are even accused of.

Raza is among the scores of victims of the latest wave of what is widely seen as state-sponsored disappearances. It has been reported that he is the seventh civil society activist to go missing from his home this year. In January, six bloggers and civil rights activists were picked up from their homes in Islamabad and cities of Punjab.

Apart from one, who remains missing, they returned to their homes within two months after protests from rights groups and pressure from the international community. They were reportedly tortured in detention. Moreover, a systematic campaign was launched on electronic media accusing them of blasphemy, thus putting their lives at risk.

Last year, security agencies allegedly abducted from Karachi Abdul Wahid Baloch, a progressive man of letters who also worked as a telephone operator. He returned home after four months and was so shaken that like the others he would not speak about his ordeal. Obviously, no action would be taken against those responsible for his unlawful detention.

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Another high-profile case of suspected enforced disappearance is that of Zeenat Shahzadi, a young journalist who was abducted by armed men in Lahore in August 2015. She had been investigating the disappearance of Hamid Ansari, an Indian national. While there were recent reports that she had returned, nothing has been heard of her since. Her younger brother was so traumatised by her disappearance that he committed suicide.

Raza in his late 30s had reportedly formed a group called Aaghaz-i-Dosti, a platform to further the cause of peace between India and Pakistan. The group collected paintings and letters made and written by schoolchildren focusing on the themes of peace and coexistence. The paintings were published in calendar form. He was also active with a group working for environmental protection. One wonders how any of his activities could have threatened national security.

Raza may come back as happened in the case of most of the bloggers. But the real question is whether we have any rule of law in this country. No legal recourse seems to be in sight for the families of missing persons — a euphemism for those allegedly abducted by the security agencies. A recently published Amnesty International report rightly described the rising number of enforced disappearances as a "blight on Pakistan's human rights record".

According to the report, hundreds and possibly thousands of cases have been reported across the country over the past several years. "Victims of enforced disappearances are at considerable risk of torture and other ill treatment and even death. To date, not a single perpetrator of the crime has been brought to justice," the report said.

What is most alarming is that the number of missing persons has marked a massive rise this year under democratic rule. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances set up by the government received nearly 300 complaints of alleged enforced disappearances from August to October 2017, by far the largest number in a three-month period in recent years.

Although most of these victims belong to Balochistan, there have also been reports of a large number of political and rights activists having been allegedly picked up by the security agencies in Sindh. Some were released after sometime, but the fate of the others is uncertain. It is a pity that the national media reports only a few of these incidents.

It is despicable when a state meekly surrenders to a group of blackmailers resorting to violence in the name of religion but uses strong-arm tactics against people who dare to speak their mind without breaking any law. A narrow and twisted interpretation of national security comes in handy to silence them.

There have been some recent reports of a crackdown on Facebook pages supporting diversity of association, thought and expression in the country. Many of these pages have been shut down and their moderators face threats. Such illegitimate actions are often justified in the name of national interest undermining democratic and basic human rights enshrined in the Constitution.

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It would have been more prudent to allow the law to take its course if someone is engaged in any wrongdoing. Justice must not be denied on any pretext of national security. In fact, the indiscriminate use of coercive power by the state to silence dissent undermines national solidarity and integrity.

We have seen how such a repressive approach has caused alienation in Balochistan, creating favourable conditions for the insurgents and for foreign intelligence agencies to meddle. The recent wave of enforced disappearances is particularly alarming as the military authorities claim to have contained the insurgency.

Now this wide-scale crackdown on rights activists demonstrates the continuing impunity of the security agencies despite protests inside and outside the country. The enforced disappearance of Raza and so many others before him highlights how dangerous the country is becoming for rights activists and for those who dare to raise their voice against excesses perpetrated by the state. It is despicable that this cruel practice is being used against the people who are fighting the forces of obscurantism to make this country more liveable.

It is shameful for a country that is a signatory to the UN Charter of Human Rights that it should have thousands of cases of enforced disappearance unresolved.

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Chapter 100

FROM BHUTTO TO BILAWAL

06 Dec 2017

At 50, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) is not even a shadow of its past glory. Founded as a party of change and later evolving into a party of resistance, it is now a tragic spectacle of a dying legacy. Once the most powerful political force with its roots deeply entrenched in the masses, it has been reduced to a regional party, thus leaving a huge gap in national politics that is hard to fill.

The PPP has become more of a family business enterprise having little connection with the people that it once claimed to represent. Can the attempt to resuscitate the party under a third-generation Bhutto succeed? It seems doubtful that just the Bhutto name would help regain the political space that the PPP has lost.

It may be true that the PPP still espouses a more progressive ethos than most other mainstream national political parties. But the leadership seems completely alienated from the changing social, political and economic dynamics. It will need much more than dynastical appeal and shrine politics to lift the party up.

It is not just Bhutto family charisma but a new political programme and strategy that are needed to mobilise the new generation of Pakistanis looking for change. They will certainly not be impressed by mere slogans of 'jiye Bhutto'. More important is what the party represents today and what kind of change it promises to bring.

Indeed, the party has some highly dedicated old guards still surviving in its ranks, but they seem completely out of place in the politics of wheeling and dealing that has been mastered by Asif Ali Zardari. Under his stewardship, the party has lost its traditional connection with the masses that, in the past, had helped the party survive some of the worst forms of state repression and bounce back after electoral setbacks.

Restoring the populist character of the party will indeed be the biggest challenge for the young Bilawal Bhutto Zardari who still has to go through the rigour that his illustrious mother had experienced. Living most of his life outside and now thrown into a leadership role without any real experience of the tricky game of politics or

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understanding of those who play it does not make it easy for the inheritor of the most formidable political legacy. It is also important to learn from the party's history of struggle and the mistakes it has committed that caused its downfall.

It was half a century ago when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, undoubtedly the most charismatic politician this country has ever produced, founded the PPP that subsequently changed the Pakistani political landscape forever. With its socialist programme and populist slogans, the party instantly drew the support of the youth, the working class and the urban middle class across the country.

Having served as federal minister in Field Marshal Ayub Khan's military government, Bhutto was not a novice in politics. His deep understanding of history and exposure to the outside world rendered him head and shoulders above other political leaders of the time. Bhutto formed the PPP after leaving the government following the disastrous 1965 war with India.

It is imperative to take cognisance of the domestic political dynamics and the international environment of the late 1960s in order to understand the PPP's politics and its phenomenal rise as a popular political force. It was a period when popular movements for change swept across the globe and unrest against the military government in Pakistan had turned into a mass uprising.

Pakistan was ripe for change. Bhutto's slogan of Islamic socialism and nationalism instantly struck a chord with students and the intelligentsia demanding restoration of democracy. Bhutto became a symbol of hope. His greatest contribution was that he gave a voice to the common people. Not surprisingly, the PPP emerged as the largest party in what was then West Pakistan in the first general elections in the country's history.

But history would not judge Bhutto favourably for his role in the political crisis after the elections that ultimately led to the disintegration of the country. However, he certainly lifted the morale of a defeated nation. He rebuilt a truncated country and gave it a constitution. One of his greatest contributions was to diversify Pakistan's foreign policy by shedding the traditional one-dimensional approach of dependence on the United States.

Bhutto's authoritarian style of governance and his sweeping nationalisation of industries and financial institutions had, however, drawn intense criticism. Yet it did not affect his mass popularity. His ouster by a military coup and his judicial murder changed Pakistan's political landscape forever. It has made him immortal in Pakistan's political history.

While Benazir Bhutto took her father's legacy forward, she also emerged as a leader in her own right, giving the party a new direction in the changing situation. Like her father, she had a strong grasp of history and her connection with her supporters was admirable. She suffered jail and hardship in exile more than any other political leader. She led the democratic struggle against the worst military dictatorship.

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Although the people voted her twice into power, it was a constant struggle against the security establishment that tried to block her every step. Her first government lasted for only 18 months, while the second was cut short halfway through her term. Undoubtedly, her own inexperience and the allegations of widespread corruption charges involving her husband also contributed to the downfall of her governments.

There may be some criticism of her signing the National Reconciliation Ordinance with Gen Musharraf, but that move paved the way for elections and ultimately led to the restoration of democracy. She was the only leader who bravely challenged the militants and religiously inspired extremists who eventually caused her death.

Her party returned to power after her assassination. But the leadership gap left by her death has never been filled. The ascension to power of Asif Zardari brought a fundamental change to the party's philosophy leading to its virtual downfall. It is certainly not an auspicious moment for the party to be celebrating its 50th anniversary.

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Chapter 101

SURRENDERING TO MOB RULE

29 Nov 2017

THERE has hardly been an instance where the state has capitulated so humiliatingly to a group of extremists holding the nation's capital hostage. The six-point agreement brokered by the military leadership is virtually a document of surrender. A beleaguered civilian administration has signed on the dotted line conceding all the demands of clerics named in what is described as the Fourth Schedule of the police department, or the extremist watch list.

Not only has the law minister been forced to resign, those involved in attacks on the law-enforcement agencies and engaged in unlawful activities are also to be compensated. While the cases against the rioters are withdrawn the government has agreed to investigate the action taken by the law-enforcement agencies that were following court orders. The cleric leading the protesters claims the administration has promised to do more than what has been stipulated in the agreement.

All claims about the rule of law and authority of the state were cast to the wind in order to appease a few thousand zealots. Those behind the casualties suffered by the police during the operation are forgiven. Most intriguing is that a senior ISI officer is also a signatory to the sordid deal along with the interior minister. It is hard to recall another instance of an intelligence official involved in brokering a deal between the government and extremists challenging the writ of the state here.

Not surprisingly, the clerics went back home triumphant, after paying rich tribute to the army chief for his arbitration. The footage widely telecast on private TV channels of the Punjab Rangers chief distributing cash to the protesters and allowing them to take selfies with him was nauseating. It seemed the zealots were being rewarded for their act of violence when they attacked civilian law enforcers and destroyed public property.

What message was being sent to the millions of people who suffered during the three-week sit-in? The authority of the state has seldom been so compromised. It was not just appeasement but abject submission to the lawbreakers and the non-state actors that

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has undermined the legitimacy of the civil administration. The whole episode has further empowered radical clerics like Khadim Hussain Rizvi who led the Islamabad protests.

Indeed, the deal has ended the protests that had swept across the country but it has also exposed various fault lines that are worsening the existential crisis the state faces. While a weak and bitterly divided civilian government is mainly responsible for the mess, the civil-military conflict and various centres of power working against each other compounded the crisis.

It is evident that the Punjab government facilitated the march on Islamabad as part of an agreement with Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLYRA) thus throwing the problem to the central government. The protesters initially numbering under 1,000 were allowed to block the main highway. No action was taken for days by the administration fearful of a backlash in Punjab. Instead, the government engaged in prolonged negotiations with the TLYRA leaders who remained firm, exploiting the divisions within the government and the PML-N.

It was apparent that the so-called anti-blasphemy protests were well planned and had clear political motives. It was only on the Islamabad High Court's orders that the administration launched a half-hearted and ill-coordinated police action that was bound to fail with the protesters fully braced to take on a demoralised force. The statement by the interior minister distancing himself from the operation demonstrated the prevailing disarray in the government; no one was willing to take ownership of the action.

A botched operation inexorably emboldened the radical clerics fuelling the protests across the country. Taking advantage of the paralysis of the administration, the protesters went on a rampage blocking the main highways and hindering cross-country transport. The situation was worse in Punjab where the homes of ministers and leaders of the ruling party were attacked. It all seemed well orchestrated.

It was obvious that the military leadership was not willing to use force to clear the protesters in Islamabad, leaving the civilian administration with no choice but to resume negotiations with the protesters, this time with the ISI playing the role of arbiter. The military's decision to stay neutral in the crisis also seemed to have worked in favour of the violent protesters.

Not surprisingly, the agreement has completely endorsed the TLYRA's position, with the military's arbitration. That explains why the clerics leading the protests have been so grateful to the army chief. Indeed, the army's intervention has helped defuse the stand-off and restore normalcy in the country, but this policy of appeasement may have serious repercussions for the country's stability.

The sense of victory has given further stridency to a rising Barelvi militancy. The emergence of the TLYRA as a political force and the anti-blasphemy protests have dealt a huge political blow to the PML-N and have brought divisions within the party into the

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open. Predictably, some legislators have parted ways with the party and publicly supported the protesters.

A major worry for the party leadership is that its support among the Barelvi voters may split undermining its prospects in the coming general elections. The protests and its aftermath may also affect Nawaz Sharif's plan to address public rallies to mobilise public support in Punjab. It remains to be seen how quickly the party comes out of is shock and is able to successfully address the differences within its ranks.

The shameful capitulation has further reinforced the perception of Pakistan becoming hostage to violent extremists. The events of last week may encourage other extremist groups to bring the government under pressure. Parliament being rendered irrelevant and democratic forces divided may give greater space to non-elected groups and other institutions of the state. What is most perturbing is the stance of the military leadership staying neutral in the crisis. It is not just the government but the state that is being challenged by the extremist forces.

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Chapter 102

THE FLAMES OF BIGOTRY

22 Nov 2017

IT all started with just few hundred zealots blocking Islamabad's main highway. Now into its third week and with thousands more joining in, the blockade has virtually brought the administration to its knees. Pampering and pleading have failed to move the defiant clerics; even the court order to end the siege has fallen on deaf ears. The paralysis of the state has given the fanatics a greater sense of empowerment.

What is more troubling is that the flames of bigotry are sweeping across other parts of the country creating a dangerous confluence of religion and politics. The controversy over the missing oath that has apparently been exploited by the newly formed Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY) to whip up religious sentiments has turned into more of a political issue bringing the beleaguered government under severe pressure.

It is the fear of a blowback that seems to have limited the option of using force. The repeated extension of deadlines and seeking the help of religious leaders to end the stand-off demonstrate the helplessness of the administration in a midst of a political crisis. The political fallout of the 2007 Lal Masjid military operation and the 2014 Model Town police action keeps haunting the embattled government.

But giving in to the irrational demands of a political-religious group would further weaken the authority of the government and the state. The administration has failed to learn from the consequences of the policy of appeasement and the delayed action against the Lal Masjid militants. Undoubtedly, there would have been no need for such massive use of force had the then military-led government acted a year earlier when the vigilante squads organised by Lal Masjid clerics went on the rampage. The police could have easily tackled the matter then without much bloodshed.

It may not be appropriate to draw a parallel between the two situations. But it would have certainly been much easier for law-enforcement agencies to remove a few hundred protesters when they started to block the road earlier this month. There was certainly no groundswell of support for the unruly mob; in fact, there has been huge public outrage

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over the blockade. But that initial dithering on the part of the administration encouraged some other groups to join the siege, making the situation much more volatile.

It was certainly not a spontaneous move when the protesters led by Khadim Hussain Rizvi marched into Islamabad travelling all the way from Lahore. There seems to be a clear plan behind the siege. It is quite intriguing why the Punjab government did not stop the TLY supporters despite the fact that the issue of the missing clause about the finality of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had already been resolved.

It is quite evident that some senior members of the ruling PML-N also played a role by stoking the controversy because of political expediency. Some of the opposition party leaders have also jumped into the fray for their own vested political interests. Then questions have also been raised about whether the newly formed TLY enjoys tacit support of some intelligence agencies to undercut the PML-N vote bank. All these factors have created a monster and stoked the flames of bigotry that may burn down their own homes.

Notwithstanding the rise of religious extremism in the country, this new phenomenon spearheaded by clerics like Khadim Hussain Rizvi is more dangerous as it evokes wider emotional appeal among the less-educated populace. The filthy language used by these clerics and the open incitement to violence has made the lives of not only members of minority religious communities but also moderate Muslims more vulnerable to mob violence.

In his landmark report on the 1953 Lahore religious riots former chief justice Muhammad Munir wrote: "...[P]rovided you can persuade the masses to believe that something they are asked to do is religiously right or enjoined by religion, you can set them to any course of action, regardless of all considerations of discipline, loyalty, decency, morality or civic sense."

This applies to present-day Pakistan that has rightly been described as among the most intolerant nations in the world. In this overwhelmingly Muslim-majority country, everyone's faith is being questioned. The slightest perceived deviation or allegation of blasphemy can cost one his/her life. It reminds one of the Inquisition in mediaeval Europe.

Just listen to the speeches of Rizvi and his fellow clerics being live-streamed on social media to understand the kind of vitriol being spewed in the name of religion. The law of the land is certainly not applied to these merchants of hate who are holding the nation hostage.

It is pathetic that the law minister has to prove his allegiance to faith and beg forgiveness for an oversight for which he was not directly responsible. The demand for his resignation is not just about his person but the sanctity of parliament. Conceding to this demand would further strengthen these extremist forces that consider themselves above the law.

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For sure, efforts must be made to bring this blockade to a peaceful end. But the government must not allow any group to challenge the state's authority. One cannot understand the administration's dithering despite the order of the Islamabad High Court to clear the siege. The order declared that no group could be allowed to infringe upon the rights of the people or disrupt the administration.

Indeed, it is primarily the responsibility of the government to protect the rights of the people and uphold the rule of law. But the issue of extremism must also be the concern of the state and other stakeholders in the democratic setup. There is a need for a joint effort to deal with this rising menace that threatens the national fabric.

The use of religion as a policy tool by the state and its confluence with politics has divided the nation along sectarian lines and fuelled bigotry. The ongoing siege of the capital presents a serious challenge to not only the government but also the state.

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Chapter 103

THE CAPITAL UNDER SIEGE

15 Nov 2017

FOR the past one week, Islamabad has been virtually under siege with the followers of a radical cleric blocking the expressway connecting the city to the airport. The administration's move to enclose the Red Zone with containers has added to the chaos.

While the clerics blast the civil and military leadership with their highly inflammable harangue, inciting their supporters to violence, there is no sign of the government moving against them. Seldom has one witnessed such a state of inertia with the security agencies unable to act against even a small group of zealots paralysing the seat of government.

It is a case of a matter being blown out of proportion and used by the extremist clerics to whip up religious sentiments. It is all about an oversight, missing a clause in the Election Act related to the finality of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in an oath that was turned into a religious and political controversy. Although the omission was immediately rectified, it has failed to satisfy some radical clerics.

It is mainly the weakness of the administration and an increasingly divided state authority that has given these zealots complete impunity. The demand that includes the resignation of the law minister is certainly not acceptable. Although the hard-line clerics have failed to draw any significant public support on the issue, some vested political interests have joined in to keep the matter alive.

However small the number of those laying siege to the capital, the episode is a manifestation of a more serious problem related to the rise of a new and more radical Barelvi sectarian movement that publicly espouses violence in the name of its narrow view of religion. The siege has coincided with the emergence of a new political outfit, by the name of Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah, or TLY, whose members are spearheading the protest.

Led by a firebrand cleric, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, who is notorious for his vitriolic sermons, the TLY announced its appearance in the electoral politics by putting up candidates in the recently held National Assembly by-elections in Lahore and Peshawar.

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In both constituencies, TLY candidates received a significant number of votes, eating into the support base of old mainstream religious political parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami.

What is more worrisome is that its entire campaign revolves around the glorification of Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer. In fact, the group has gained momentum after Qadri's execution. The group that represents a new Barelvi militancy is now planning to go into the 2018 general elections using the highly sensitive blasphemy issue to mobilise votes. The Islamabad sit-in seems to be a part of its election campaign.

A major question is how these preachers of hate are allowed to participate in electoral politics in violation of the country's laws. It is likely to stoke the fires of violent sectarian extremism, threatening the democratic political process in the country. Not surprisingly, the Islamabad siege and the arrival of the TLY on the electoral scene have triggered a host of conspiracy theories about its backers.

Many in the ruling party smell a conspiracy to destabilise the government. There is, however, no substance to these wild theories imagining a 'hidden hand' behind everything. What is missing in the whole discourse is the stark failure of the state to contain the spread of religious extremism in the country. The National Action Plan has long been dead and buried, providing complete freedom to parties like the TLY to operate and hatemongering clerics to preach violence from the pulpit.

While the security agencies have been quick to take action against some bloggers espousing secular views and branded them 'traitors' for questioning the establishment's policies, no action is being taken against clerics like Rizvi who publicly instigate violence against the civil and military leadership. Their vitriolic speeches are freely posted on social media.

Now the monster is coming back to haunt us. Last year, the same group had occupied Islamabad's D Chowk for several days threatening to storm key government installations. The stand-off was defused through negotiations and with a promise not to take any action against the clerics. That further emboldened the group.

It is quite intriguing that the march that started from Lahore was allowed to enter Islamabad this time too. Instead of stopping the protesters on the way, the administration is playing ostrich and enclosing part of the city with containers. That has become a common practice of the Islamabad administration while dealing with such protest marches.

It is apparent that the country's civil and military leadership has never taken counter-extremism policies seriously. That may be either out of political expediency or a fear of backlash or both. It may be true that the situation is not yet completely out of control, but continuing with the current state of inaction could create a very dangerous situation and reverse the gains made in the battle against terrorism.

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The siege of Islamabad and the induction of the TLY into electoral politics are ominous developments. Not only will they add fuel to violent sectarian extremism, they will also cause the space for moderate Islamic parties to shrink. The results of the NA-120 and NA-4 by-elections showed a marked rise in electoral support for TLY candidates though at the expense of right-wing parties.

Its participation would cast a huge shadow over the elections, particularly in Punjab that has been the stronghold of sectarian-based politics — not a good omen for democratic politics in the country. The present political uncertainty and the worsening tension between the civil and military leaderships provide a favourable atmosphere for the extremist groups that have recently emerged on the political scene.

It is a tragic commentary on our state policy which gives such leeway to a group that glorifies a murderer and exhorts its supporters to follow his example. The siege of Islamabad gives some insight into the shape of things to come.

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Chapter 104

THE LONDON PLAN

01 Nov 2017

LONDON has long been a centre of activity for Pakistani politicians. It is often used as a venue for secret negotiations and deals that influence the course of Pakistani politics. The British capital is also the preferred destination for Pakistani politicians fleeing the country to avoid persecution.

Many political leaders have made the city their second abode and often summon the entire top party leadership for important consultations. Such activities invariably stoke all kinds of conspiracy theories. The term 'the London plan' has become part of the Pakistani political lexicon.

Predictably, the latest huddle of the top PML-N leaders in the city has set in motion the rumour mill once again. Many media persons described it as the launch of a new 'London plan'. Indeed, the meeting assumed much greater significance in the backdrop of the bailable arrest warrant being issued for Nawaz Sharif and his sons for failing to appear before the accountability court and the brewing revolt within the party ranks.

It is not for the first time that Sharif summoned to London the prime minister and several members of the cabinet for deliberations. But the issue this time was much more serious. The meeting was called to chart the future course of the ruling party and to demonstrate solidarity with the ousted prime minister.

Under the so-called London plan, Sharif will return to the country to face trial thus ending the ambivalence generated by his skipping the previous hearing. Most significant, however, is the decision to shun the policy of confrontation with other institutions and, instead, focus on the coming elections. It seems the party has also given a green signal to Shahbaz Sharif to work on reconciliation with the generals. That may be seen as a victory, at least for now, for those advocating moderation.

Whatever doubt there was about Nawaz Sharif's staying as president of the party has apparently been removed. The party's campaign in the coming elections will revolve around him. That certainly has strengthened Sharif's position as party supremo.

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According to some reports, the party has decided that the younger Sharif would be prime minister if the party returns to power in the elections.

It may help calm down the dissidents who are demanding that the younger Sharif brother be installed at the top. The meeting has categorically rejected what they called a 'minus-Nawaz Sharif' formula. But, does any such formula exist? That simply means that the party has not yet reconciled to the possibility of Nawaz Sharif being convicted by the accountability court.

It is apparent that the PML-N intends to go into the general elections in Nawaz Sharif's name notwithstanding the outcome of the trial. Indeed, there is no other option for the beleaguered party that is fighting back to keep its political hold especially in battleground Punjab.

Undoubtedly, Nawaz Sharif remains the vote puller and the party would like to use him. But the situation could dramatically change in the next few months following the court ruling in the corruption cases against the Sharif family. Until then, the ousted prime minister would effectively be controlling the Abbasi government and influencing key policy decisions.

That may create its own problems and could affect relations between the Abbasi administration and state institutions, especially the security establishment. It may add to the state of uncertainty. In the larger interest of the party, and for the democratic process to continue, it is imperative that the present PML-N government be allowed complete freedom to run the administration.

In an attempt to defuse the intra-family and intra-party conflict, the meeting has reportedly barred Maryam Nawaz from issuing policy statements. Her growing political profile and controversial statements have certainly been a major cause for the widening gulf within the family and have also antagonised some senior members of the party.

Maryam's recent interview with The New York Times, in which she said that the family had long decided that she be given a leadership role has irked her detractors. This sense of entitlement indicates her ambition that makes senior party leaders and her uncle uncomfortable.

Notwithstanding the criticism, she has built her own support base among the younger lot who see her as more dynamic and charismatic than anyone else in the party. For the past few weeks, Maryam has been on the mass contact trail raising her political profile. Her focus on her family constituency in Lahore is indicative of her plan to be a candidate from this seat in the next elections.

Her aggressive campaign may have added to the party's problems, but it has also helped mobilise the party workers. The reported restriction on her not to speak on party policy matters may not work given her determination to assert herself. But her ambition may not be fulfilled as there is the possibility of her being convicted by the accountability court.

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Despite the show of unity and solidarity with the ousted prime minister at the London meeting, all is not well within the party. Former interior minister Nisar Ali Khan's latest statement lamenting that the PML-N has been turned into a party to serve the interests of its leader is a direct attack on Nawaz Sharif.

His warning that Pakistan is facing a crisis even worse than in 1970, when the country lost its eastern wing, is quite meaningful. He has directly blamed the party leadership for the tension with the military, indicating that moves for reconciliation may not work in the existing atmosphere of distrust. The former interior minister may not be a popular figure in the party, but certainly enjoys close ties with the military establishment.

Sharif's return may change the political atmosphere in the country. The focus will once again be shifted to the accountability court. That may raise the political temperature. That will test the patience of the ousted prime minister and his daughter as the judicial noose tightens around them. It remains to be seen how the London plan works.

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Chapter 105

MAINSTREAMING THE MILITANTS

29 Oct 2017

The bearded men holding a green flag with white stripes at the launch of this new political party were all familiar faces, except for a handful of clean-shaven ones who were representing non-Muslims. Born out of jihad, the newly-formed Milli Muslim League (MML) presents itself as a moderate mainstream political party claiming to uphold the legacy of the founder of Pakistan and protectors of the rights of religious minorities.

But its campaign in last month's Lahore NA-120 by-elections exposed what lay behind the veneer. Banners with life-size portraits of Hafiz Saeed, the detained founder of the outlawed militant group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and radical slogans in violation of electoral laws bore testament to its real face.

Despite the Election Commission's refusal to register it, the party continued to campaign for the candidate it supported. Ultimately he bagged 5,000 votes — more than double the number that was received by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) candidate. More shocking was the performance of another newly-formed sectarian-based political party called Tehreek-i-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY) that owes its allegiance to Mumtaz Qadri, the convicted and executed murderer of former Punjab governor Salman Taseer. The party stood third behind the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI).

These two parties, the MML and TLY, accounted for 11 percent of the votes cast. Their sudden emergence on the electoral scene during a crucial by-election gave currency to all kinds of conspiracy theories. Some analysts and even senior members of the ruling party suspected a plot by the "deep state" to cut into the PML-N vote bank. Indeed, in the past, the vote of the religious right in most constituencies in Punjab had tilted more

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towards PML-N. Yet it is too farfetched to attribute the emergence of these parties to any grand design of the "establishment" to undermine the ruling party.

Intriguingly, no action was taken by the government against a banned militant organisation and followers of a convicted murderer seeking votes on their extremist agenda. Although there has not been a formal state policy regarding mainstreaming radical groups, it is quite evident that the new party has the blessing of the of the military establishment.

A recent statement by the military spokesman that every Pakistani has a right to form a political party gives credence to the notion that the formation of the MML is a part of the plan to legitimise the political role of old militant clients. Perhaps what we are witnessing is a policy by stealth of mainstreaming the "good militants" who once fought the state's proxy war and have not been directly involved in terrorist activities at home, though they had allegedly continued their " jihad" outside.

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) that has been operating under the banner of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) has certainly been more amenable to the security agencies. Though it never participated in electoral politics, the very formation of the JuD as charity organisation was seen as an attempt to provide a cover to the LeT's militant activities.

It failed to convince the international community that JuD is a benign charity organisation but the charity work allowed the group to expand its network across the country. Now the formation of MML seems to be a move to baptise it as a mainstream political force using the JuD's extensive support base.

Although the JuD traditionally relied on the support of Muslims belonging to the Ahle Hadith school of thought, in recent years the group and its charitable wing, Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF), has expanded their network to other communities including non Muslims particularly in Tharparkar district in Sindh. Hafiz Abdur Rauf, in-charge of the FIF has been chosen as president of the MML. The mainstreaming of the LeT started soon after the militant group was outlawed in 2002 with the formation of the JuD. The so-called charitable group continued to operate freely under Hafiz Saeed despite it being placed on the US list of terrorist groups.

The first Pakistani jihadist groups emerged in 1980 when thousands of volunteers, mainly students from religious seminaries, joined the anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan. By 2001, Pakistan had become home to 24 militant groups. Highly disciplined paramilitary organisations operated in every neighbourhood, pursuing their own internal and external agenda. All these paramilitary groups, originally from the same source, had similar motivations and goals, and recruited from the same segment of society — often unemployed youth from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Those militant organisations were not clandestine, nor had they sprouted surreptitiously. Their growth, if not actually sponsored, had certainly been looked upon with favour by the state. Their activities were not secret, and found expression in graffiti,

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wall posters and pamphlets all over the country, inviting all Muslims to join forces with them. The state's patronage helped the jihadists spread their militant agenda. The militant groups had developed a powerful propaganda machinery.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the objective of jihadist movements in Pakistan was not, like that of Arab Salafists, seeking to establish a global Islamic caliphate. Their objectives were more in line with the regional strategy of the Pakistani military establishment: the liberation of Kashmir from India and the propping up of pro-Pakistani forces in Afghanistan.

Almost all Islamist militant groups served as instruments of Pakistan's regional policy. The security agencies needed them as much as they needed the state's support. The Wahabi-inspired LeT, the most radical face of jihad in Pakistan, was also more amenable to the security forces than any other militant outfits.

Hafiz Saeed founded the LeT in 1990, soon after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, to wage jihad against the Indian authorities in Kashmir.

The LeT announced its arrival on the Kashmir jihad scene in 1993 with a series of ferocious attacks on the Indian military. Since then, the outfit has been responsible for hundreds of guerrilla raids in the disputed territory. Within a short span, LeT emerged as the fiercest militant organisation.

It possessed not only thousands of well-trained and highly motivated fighters, but also a huge propaganda network.

Its several publications in different languages had a circulation of hundreds of thousands. LeT was an extremely secretive organisation. Except for the top leadership, the identity of its members was not disclosed. Since its inception in 1990, it has produced thousands of highly motivated fighters, who have given a new dimension to guerrilla warfare in Kashmir.

LeT, unlike some of the other jihadist groups, drew its recruits from the universities and colleges as well as from among unemployed youth. The traditional Islamic madressahs provided only about 10 percent of volunteers. Influenced by radical Islamic literature, many university and college students joined the group.

The majority of LeT recruits came from Punjab, particularly from Lahore, Gujranwala and Multan, where Ahle Hadith had its strongholds. In some central Punjab district villages, LeT also had considerable influence because of support for the Kashmir jihad.

In recent years, LeT had started attracting an increasing number of volunteers from Pakistan's southern provinces of Sindh and Baluchistan where Wahabi influence has increased. Muslims from other countries including Britain have also joined the LeT.

After 9/11, Pakistan's support for the American-led war on terror forced the military government to act against jihadi groups. On 12 January 2002, the military ruler General Pervez Musharraf outlawed five Islamic extremists groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba.

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He strongly asserted that the state should exercise a monopoly over external policy and it should be determined not by Islamic solidarity, but by the country's national interests.

But this did not mean that support to these groups from the state security apparatus was completely withdrawn. It was hard to root out a deeply entrenched jihadist culture nurtured by the state for more than two decades. The ban affected the LeT's activities only a little. While an entirely new Kashmiri leadership was appointed to run the military wing, in Pakistan the outfit started working under the banner of its social welfare wing, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, with Hafiz Saeed as its head.

The new organisation ostensibly restricted its role to preaching, education and social welfare. But in reality it never ceased working in support of the Kashmiri jihad. LeT leaders admitted that the proscription slowed down their operation in Kashmir, but it certainly didn't stop it.

Instead of challenging the state, it agreed to work within new parameters and restrict its activities to a 'controlled jihad' in Kashmir while keeping a low-profile inside Pakistan. However, this tactical truce was a strained one. Islamist groups, even government-friendly ones such as the LeT, were becoming radicalised by the ideological currents of the region. It was apparent that the JuD was just a cover to avoid international scrutiny.

Under intense international pressure, the Pakistan government placed JuD on the 'terror watch list' in 2003, but the action did not affect its activities, which included running a huge network of hospitals and schools. While continuing to support the struggle in Kashmir, LeT had its own reason not to take on the government.

The case of the LeT was indicative of Islamabad's continuing flexibility towards those organisations which had restricted their activities to Kashmir and did not indulge in terrorism at home.

Pakistani authorities defended their stance saying that LeT did not present any threat to the country's internal security, so there was no need to crack down on it. According to them, the organisation strictly controlled its cadres and none of its members had ever indulged in any act of terrorism inside the country.

But some of its commanders did join the militants in the tribal areas and the insurgents fighting the American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. There had also been strong evidence of LeT activists providing shelter to al-Qaeda members. Abu Zubaydah, a close associate of Osama bin Laden, for example, was captured in 2002 in a house in the Pakistani central city of Faisalabad rented by a LeT member.

As well as the desire to avoid unnecessary confrontations, Islamabad's attitude towards LeT also reflected the thinking that controlled militant activity is necessary to keep the Kashmir issue alive. But the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks that killed more than 160 people brought the LeT under greater scrutiny and intensified pressure on Pakistan to act against the group and its leaders.

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It was quite evident that the attack was masterminded and carried out by some senior LeT commanders who were arrested and tried. But they were let out by the courts without conviction. No action was taken against Hafiz Saeed. In fact the LeT supremo has raised his public profile in the past few years leading rallies organised under the banner of "Defence of Pakistan" provoking intense international reaction.

The United States in 2012 declared him a terrorist putting a bounty of 10 million dollars on information leading to his arrest for his alleged involvement in Mumbai terrorist attacks that also killed six Americans.

Hafiz Saeed's activities became a red rag of sorts for the international community and it was used effectively by India to push for Pakistan's diplomatic isolation. The militant leader has finally been put under house detention, but it has not helped ease the pressure on Islamabad.

Predictably, the launching of the Milli Muslim League as a mainstream political party has stirred up a hornet's nest, provoking criticism from inside and outside the country. The party's motto of seeking guidance from Hafiz Saeed leaves nothing to the imagination about the MML's political orientation, though it tries to present itself as a "centrist" and "moderate" political forum unassociated with religious politics. But its entire campaign in NA 120 by-election had revolved around its radical jihadist ideology.

It raises some relevant questions not only about the rationale behind this undefined and controversial policy of mainstreaming the outlawed militant groups but also the way it is being done. There is surely no national policy in place, adding to the confusion about whether the integration of militant outfits into the mainstream is driven by security agencies. Such moves not only bring into question our national counter-extremism policy, but do not help satisfy the international community.

Yet another example of this arbitrary policy of mainstreaming the so-called "reformed militants" is Ehsanullah Ehsan.

The former spokesmen and a key commander of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, and subsequently of the TTP splinter group Jamaatul Ahrar, who had in the past claimed terrorist attacks killing thousand of Pakistanis, was recently declared "kosher" after he surrendered to the security agencies. The man who fits into the definition of "jet black terrorist" earlier this year was presented on a private channel as a "reformed" man. He has apparently been declared "white" or clean without even being tried for his crimes.

Some would argue that such treatment for Ehsan could help lure other militant leaders into surrendering, although it seems highly improbable that it would prompt other hardened terrorists to surrender their arms and reintegrate into society as law-abiding citizens.

A major question is whether there is any legal process through which the hard-core militants are allowed to go scot-free. Indeed, there are precedents where the state has given amnesty to insurgents giving up violence e.g. in the case of the IRA in the United

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Kingdom. But that option is mostly for fellow travellers or those who have not been directly involved in acts of terrorism.

The same rule cannot be applied to terrorists such as Ehsan. In any case, there is no state policy of across-the-board amnesty that has been announced.Ehsan is certainly not an ordinary militant or a misguided teenage foot-soldier brainwashed into fighting for a holy cause. He was one of the founding members of the TTP and part of the decision-making inner circle of the group. For almost one decade, he was the face of Pakistani jihadi groups. Any amnesty for him will reinforce doubts about the state's resolve to fight violent extremism.

There are certainly examples of various countries where insurgents are given amnesty after they lay down arms. But they have to go through a legal process before being allowed to become part of mainstream politics. In the case of the MML, no such process was followed. Indeed its leaders may not have taken up arms against the state, but they have allegedly been involved in terrorist activities outside the country. This raises serious doubts about whether we really are committed to our pledge of not condoning any kind of terrorism.

There is no denying that there has to be a national policy on how to allow the former militants repentant about their crimes back into the society. But arbitrary decisions about mainstreaming militancy could be extremely damaging.

Security agencies contend that it is imperative to reintegrate reformed jihadists into society. According to them there are thousands of well-trained former militants who are to be brought into the mainstream. Allowing them to be part of the political process will help de-radicalise them. It is better if they are involved in overt political activities rather than operate clandestinely, they say. The greatest nightmare for the security agencies is that former LeT militants disintegrate and join terrorist groups in fighting the state. There has also been some suggestion that those having renounced militancy should be accommodated in government and private-sector jobs.

Indeed there may be weight to some of these arguments. But there has to be a clear policy and a strict process of scrutiny before the re-integration of militants into society. Otherwise the dangers of allowing unrepentant militants to operate with impunity and spread their radicalised worldview within the rest of society are only too obvious.

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Chapter 106

NAWAZ SHARIF'S OPTIONS

25 Oct 2017

IN this political game of Chinese chequers, ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif seems to have been left with very few choices. He is returning home extremely beleaguered. Not only has he, and his family members, been indicted by an accountability court on a litany of corruption charges, he is also facing a brewing revolt in the party ranks with his brother leading the pack.

With the noose tightening around him, Nawaz Sharif may be reviewing his political strategy. The tenor of his loyalists against the 'establishment' has distinctly mellowed, though they are still questioning the fairness of the trial. Meanwhile, the younger Sharif has thrown caution to the wind and is getting more assertive. The rumbling among party dissidents is becoming louder.

It is all very ominous. With court proceedings on the fast track and with little hope of him and his family remaining unscathed, the options for Sharif are running out. Yet all is not lost for the former prime minister who returned stronger each time he was ousted previously. He may be down but is not completely out; he is still the most powerful political leader in the country at the moment. So what are the choices for the ousted leader facing further humiliation in the accountability court?

It is certainly a different situation for Sharif than what he had faced when he was ousted from power twice in the past. Both times he was removed with the military intervening directly. This time, the action has been more subtle yet extremely devastating. The ouster came through a legal process with the military staying in the shadows.

However, with the trial proceeding, the khaki shadows have gotten larger. The evidence against the Sharifs is strong enough to convict them hence no need for the generals to come out of the shadows yet and wind up the game. Sharif knew it too so he threw down the gauntlet hoping to stall the accountability court from indicting him.

His show of aggression may have worked initially to mobilise his supporters and win public sympathy. The ambiguous court judgement disqualifying him came in handy. He,

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however, miscalculated the power of the judiciary boosted by the backing of the security establishment. His indictment last week dealt a serious blow to the morale of his supporters. His desperate last-moment attempt to get the indictment delayed failed. He thought he could sit out the trial, but it would not happen.

The move by some elements to instal Shahbaz Sharif as party head has certainly weakened Nawaz Sharif's position. The message has been loud and clear: winning the coming elections is more important than taking the risk of the entire system being wound up which seems inevitable in the event of a confrontation with the security establishment and judiciary. The division between the confrontationists and those advocating moderation and reconciliation is becoming sharper. This internal strife is proving more ominous for the embattled former prime minister and has narrowed his options.

Sharif, however, still has some cards to play. Even those critical of his taking the path of confrontation need him to win votes in the coming elections. While Shahbaz could bring stability to the party and help maintain its unity, it is Nawaz Sharif who is the vote puller. The former prime minister can play this card to keep his hold over the party, but with the establishment determined to keep him out it would be hard for him to do so for long.

It is evident that the security establishment would not have any problem working with the younger Sharif and the current federal government. There are already rumours of some kind of a deal being negotiated between them. The recent statements made by the Punjab chief minister and his son Hamza Sharif rejecting the policy of confrontation gives credence to these speculations.

But the big question is whether Nawaz Sharif will accept any deal that keeps him out of politics. Even if he is willing to compromise, there is no surety that it would save him and his children from being convicted by the accountability court. There is a strong feeling among some of Sharif's close aides that matters are beyond repair. Yet there is nothing improbable in the political power game.

Some others may still believe that the only option left to Nawaz Sharif is to continue with his hard-line position and build public pressure on the judiciary. Despite his substantive mass support base, it is improbable his party can bring out the public on the streets and sustain this over a long period. It is extremely difficult for a divided party that does not have a history of resistance to take on the security establishment.

Meanwhile, the PML-N stands isolated with no political party willing to support it on the issue. The risk of the entire system being wrapped up has also been a factor that has caused the others not to stand with Sharif in challenging the security establishment. In fact, most of them have publicly been demanding his prosecution. There is also a paradox of the party being the government and playing opposition at the same time.

Indeed, it is a huge political mess that is hard for anyone to clear up. Seldom has the country witnessed such a fragmented political spectrum. Given this situation, it is not

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surprising that the military has once again assumed the role of sole arbiter of political power. It will have serious repercussions for the fledgling democratic process. The recent statement by the army chief expressing the military's concern over the state of the economy shows how deeply the security institution has gone into state affairs without formally taking over.

While the ouster of Nawaz Sharif has shaken the system, the outcome of his trial will change the political dynamic completely. Much will also depend on how Sharif deals with the challenges within his party and outside. The party is not yet over.

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Chapter 107

THE POLITICS OF HATE

18 Oct 2017

IT was too outrageous an outburst for anyone to defend. So it is not surprising that former prime minister Nawaz Sharif distanced himself from his son-in-law's hate speech on the floor of the National Assembly. The august house had perhaps never witnessed such bigotry targeting one of the most vulnerable religious communities in the country.

Equally troubling was the silence on both sides of the aisle, as no one found the courage to rebut Capt Safdar disrespecting national heroes because of their religious belief. If that were not enough, he led some of his supporters to raise slogans outside the hall hailing Mumtaz Qadri, a convicted assassin. But no action was taken against them for violating the sanctity of parliament.

It took days for the ruling party leadership to disown the rant though apologetically. The opposition leaders, who otherwise would not miss out on any opportunity to blast the government, remained largely quiet. Some even tacitly condoned the call for the expulsion of members of the community from the armed forces and other government departments.

All this shows how deeply entrenched religious bigotry is in our political culture. Even those aware of the consequences of this growing religious intolerance do not dare speak out, perhaps out of fear of a backlash. The increasing use of religion as a political tool is alarming. In fact, what happened in the National Assembly last week was a manifestation of a deeper malaise.

There appears a clear political motive behind Capt Safdar's tirade on the floor of the house. Although known for his extremist sectarian views that he has often demonstrated at public rallies, his remarks had more sinister connotations in the context of the present political crisis fuelled by the ouster of his father-in-law, with the MNA himself facing trial by the accountability court.

Perhaps his remarks were also meant to appease the religious right, which has been up in arms against the government for unwittingly omitting from the oath the article on

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the finality of the Prophet (PBUH) in the recently passed election law. The former captain went too far on the issue to the embarrassment of his own party that also saw some opposition leaders whipping up religious sentiments on the oversight that was immediately rectified by the government.

The use of religion as a propaganda tool against political rivals invariably comes back to haunt them — this is a lesson our politicians have failed to learn. Unfortunately, we have failed to define the limits of freedom of speech or action fuelling intolerance.

Provocative and hate speeches from the pulpits and even at political rallies are tolerated by the state that has increasingly become hostage to religious extremists. Even top government officials are threatened with death by extremist clerics for not conforming to their sectarian views.

One glaring example of hate-based political campaigns was witnessed in the recent NA-120 by-election in Lahore, that saw the rise of a new radical sectarian group Tehreek-i-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah. Led by a cleric notorious for his firebrand hate speeches, TLY ran its campaign in the name of Mumtaz Qadri. It vowed to take revenge for Qadri's execution and publicly justified murder in the name of religion.

But nothing was done to stop that hate campaign. Not long ago, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the founder of TLY, declared Nawaz Sharif a blasphemer for making a speech at the Hindu celebration of Holi. Rizvi's incitement to violence is still posted on social media.

The cleric was free to run the campaign for his candidate who received close to 8,000 votes, standing third after the PML-N and the PTI. Encouraged by the outcome in the Lahore by-election, TLY now plans to participate in the coming general elections.

If allowed to do so, it would strengthen an extremely dangerous sectarian-based politics that would threaten the democratic process in the country.

Ironically, the Assembly speech was not very different from the vitriolic sermons delivered by radical clerics like Rizvi. Electronic and social media, too, have hugely contributed to propagating extremist ideology and bigotry, thus serving the objectives of radical outfits like the TLY. But it is mainly the weakness of the state that has led to the non-enforcement of the law. It is also expected of mainstream political parties not to exploit religious sentiments for short-term political gains.

Finding itself at the receiving end in the NA-120 by-election, the PML-N may have forgotten that it also used the Lal Masjid operation to mobilise support for the 2008 elections. The incident and casualty figures were exaggerated to whip up religious sentiments. That may have helped the party gain a few more seats, but that also strengthened the violent narrative of the militant groups that are now challenging the state's authority.

Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, who has been leading the anti-government campaign on the matter of the oversight in the electoral act, must not forget that it was the Lal Masjid issue raised by his opponent that cost him his seat in the 2008 elections. The lesson to learn is

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that playing the religion and sectarian card is a double-edged sword that cuts both ways. The ultimate beneficiaries of this politics of hate are the extremist groups who present the greatest threat to the democratic process and national security.

Ahsan Iqbal, the interior minister, is right that the trend of issuing decrees and inciting violence against any group or individual will turn the country into a battlefield. He has also promised to take action against hate-mongers posting fatwas on social networking sites under the cyber crime laws.

But these solemn declarations are not enough; it is time for action now. As he said, there is a need for putting one's own house in order. However, it remains to be seen when that process will start. It was a positive move by the PML-N leaders to disown the speech. But it is also imperative to purge the ranks of bigotry.

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Chapter 108

ERODING DEMOCRATIC VALUES

04 Oct 2017

The controversial amendment in the election laws may have allowed Nawaz Sharif to retain the leadership of his party, but it has further dented democratic values. The government bulldozed the bill through, with a fractious opposition failing to block it despite its majority in the Senate.

Surely the government seemed to be in a big hurry to accord political legitimacy to the disgraced former prime minister who is facing indictment on a litany of corruption charges. Where the PML-N is concerned, he is back in the saddle running the ruling party in defiance of the Supreme Court ruling.

Indeed, Sharif's re-crowning will help maintain a façade of unity within the party ranks and prevent the possibility of the leadership passing to the other branch of his family's political dynasty. But can this also win him moral legitimacy? Just holding on to the party leadership will not clear him of the charges he is facing in a court of law.

Most worrying is that this person-specific amendment in the law and the manner in which it was railroaded has further eroded democratic norms. Now anyone condemned by a court of law can form and lead a political party. Ironically, a person barred from holding public office can still be kingmaker and continue to run the government through proxies.

Apparently, the reason behind this hasty passage of the amendment was to bring the courts under pressure. But the move may not work. Instead, it may trigger yet another round of legal battle as the amendment has already been challenged in the courts.

Undoubtedly, the military-led government of Pervez Musharraf used the law for its own ulterior motive of preventing Benazir Bhutto from leading the PPP. But, in this case, the objective of striking it down was certainly not to correct an unfair move; it was to benefit a disqualified leader.

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It also exposes the absence of a democratic culture within our political parties that have increasingly become family fiefdoms and a tool for the protection of the interests of a few. Democracy draws its strength from the rule of law and not from defying it. Democracy can work effectively only if political parties are able to censure their leaders for their wrongdoings and not wait for the court to decide their fate.

But it is completely opposite in the case of Pakistan where those facing corruption charges continue to hold high office and are eulogised by their supporters. For instance, how can a man indicted for money laundering remain in charge of the country's economy and finances? One can argue that Ishaq Dar has still not been convicted; one can even question the fairness of the trial. But would it not be better for him to step aside until he is cleared of the charges?

For sure, a tainted finance minister cannot fulfil his responsibilities effectively in running an economy that seems to be in free fall. Foreign exchange reserves are depleting at an alarming rate with falling remittances and declining exports. The record balance-of-payment deficit has made it almost inevitable that the government will return to the IMF. The debt burden is becoming untenable. It will be a serious problem for a finance minister under trial to negotiate with multilateral agencies. For months now, the finance ministry has been in a state of paralysis.

The government, which is preoccupied with the political rehabilitation of the former prime minister, is fast losing its governing space. The clash among institutions has made the situation extremely chaotic. The bizarre incident outside the accountability court on Monday during the appearance of the former prime minister is quite ominous. The controversy over the deployment of the Rangers reflects an anarchic situation.

It is, indeed, a serious issue that the interior minister did not know who called the Rangers. The situation turned weirder still when Ahsan Iqbal was stopped from entering the court premises. Surely the Rangers did not come there without orders from somewhere. His public outburst and remarks about a state within a state demonstrated his helplessness.

It is certainly not a good omen for the government. The incident reinforces the perception about the government's shrinking governing space while it is focused more on defending the ousted prime minister and his family. It is not enough to shout from the rooftop about the 'invisible hand'. It is the governance, stupid. We have already seen the establishment gaining greater space.

Nawaz Sharif has called for a grand national dialogue among political parties. One cannot disagree with the proposal. There is, indeed, a serious need for the main political parties to come to an agreement on some kind of framework to strengthen the democratic process. But Sharif's call may have come too late and at a time when he has been disqualified for not being honest and is facing trial. That makes the other political parties

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suspicious of his intent. There is scepticism that it is all about him being bailed out of his plight.

Sharif had a great opportunity to strengthen the institutionalised democratic process over the last four years. Instead, he rendered parliament ineffective and weakened other civilian institutions thus allowing nonelected elements to expand their space. He established his personalised rule with the help of close family members. Even the cabinet seldom met and was virtually turned into a rubber stamp. His current confrontational approach towards the judiciary will not inspire other political parties to gather.

Surely there is a need for a charter of democracy or grand national dialogue to establish civilian supremacy and remove the existing imbalance of power that has allowed non-elected institutions to undermine elected civilian governments. But personalised power is not an alternative for civilian supremacy. Democracy is not limited to winning the electoral mandate, it also means implementing the rule of law and democratic accountability. One wishes that Nawaz Sharif understood this.

More importantly, there is a need for an economic charter among political parties to guarantee the continuity of economic policies irrespective of whichever party is in power. Perhaps, this will become possible after the elections.

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Chapter 109

DANGEROUS TIMES AHEAD

27 Sep 2017

Defying all predictions, Nawaz Sharif is back in the country to appear before an accountability court. His return symbolises a defiant disposition. He appears determined to fight back to restore his honour. Despite having been stripped of his position he still holds sway over the government — the new prime minister is at his beck and call. With his brother at the helm in Punjab it appears to be business as usual.

For sure, Sharif's return has helped instil confidence into his party and maintain a semblance of unity in the ranks. Most importantly, now he may be able to retain his position as the head of the ruling party following the passage of a new public representation bill. It is surely an unprecedented situation for an ousted leader facing indictment on several counts — ranging from money laundering to misappropriation — to be still commanding such authority.

Interestingly, the former prime minister exudes more confidence now than when he left the country, though his tenor has mellowed. He may have been scathing vis-à-vis the judiciary, but there was no more mention of the 'hidden hands' conspiring against him.

Indeed, the trial has become more of a political spectacle bringing the court under pressure. Sharif's arrival at the court under a VVIP protocol sends a clear message that he is still in charge and not defeated yet. His decision to return has certainly gained the disgraced leader huge political mileage, putting his opponents on the back foot. But can he win this twin political and legal battle?

Surely the battle is far from over; in fact, it is getting messier. With the warrants of arrest against the Sharif children and the country's finance minister facing indictment for living beyond his means, the situation is fast becoming untenable. What happens next is not hard to guess — maybe, it is the unravelling of the entire system. The state has seldom been so fractured.

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The so-called accountability process targeting the country's most powerful political dynasty has widened the fault lines in the existing power structure. The judicial action against the Sharifs and the perceived backing of the security establishment in the matter has brought the clash of institutions to a head.

It is an extremely dangerous situation with no one really in charge. If not handled properly, it could bring down the entire political edifice. Surely, the conspiracy theory that a nexus between the judiciary and the military plotted Sharif's ouster sounds a bit wild. But as many point out, what appears to be the security establishment's tacit backing has provided spine to the judiciary. Otherwise, could the latter have taken on a three-time prime minister even though there is substantive evidence implicating Sharif and his family in those cases?

The controversial decision to include the MI and ISI in the joint investigation team has further reinforced the perception. Not surprisingly, PML-N supporters use this argument to lend credence to the allegation of a 'dark conspiracy' to destabilise the democratic system.

It also seems that NAB, pronounced dead by the same court, being brought back to life and ordered to reopen old cases against the Sharif family could only be possible with the backing of the security establishment. But the public criticism of it by the ruling party has heightened the challenge for the court monitoring the trial of the former prime minister by the accountability court. It raises the serious question of whether the trial can reach its conclusion and also be seen as fair.

Undoubtedly, the security establishment has already been sucked into the crisis with its apparent support for the judicial process, which becomes much more significant given the strains in the civil-military relations that had cast their shadow over the third Sharif term. The trust deficit that existed from the very outset persisted despite the change of the army guard twice. There have been some unresolved issues and Sharif's own style of personalised governance remains the major irritant.

Surely, Panamagate and the judicial decision to take up the case fuelled perceptions of it being prompted by the khakis. The gap widened with some cabinet ministers and senior party leaders publicly accusing 'that institution' — euphemism for military intelligence. That may have forced the army chief to issue a public denial that the military has been involved in the matter.

It is apparent that the political crisis stemming from the Panama scandal and the removal of Nawaz Sharif has allowed the military greater space. The generals seem much more comfortable working with the new prime minister who has established at least a semblance of the institutional way of governance.

Regular meetings of the National Security Council have also allowed the military to bring the civilian leadership onto its page in relation to foreign and national security policies. It is certainly in the military's interest to support the current political

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arrangement. That may be a compromise that both sides may find mutually useful. In the bargain, the PML-N is likely to stretch its rule to the next elections, giving the party a clear advantage.

It seems that senior party leaders may have been able to convince the former prime minister not to rock the boat. That may perhaps be the reason for Sharif's more cautious approach at his news conference the other day. There was not even an implicit attack on the 'establishment', a marked shift from his rhetoric before his departure for London. His daughter Maryam too had taken that position in her speeches during the NA-120 by-election.

But it may not be so simple. It all will depend on how the trial in the accountability court proceeds. There is no indication that it will not stick to its six-month mandate to complete the trial. There is also little probability of the family getting away unscathed. Sharif's probable conviction along with that of other family members will cause the situation to unravel and no one will be able to control it. Dangerous times lie ahead.

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Chapter 110

THE MARYAM FACTOR

20 Sep 2017

Victory for Kulsoom Nawaz in Sunday's by-election in Lahore was a foregone conclusion — but not by such a narrow margin. After all, NA-120 is the constituency that the party and the Sharif family had dominated for almost three decades. It was inconceivable that they could be defeated. However, it was a close call, and certainly not the result the embattled Sharifs had sought in order to redeem their political fortunes.

The Sharifs may have regained the seat that was left vacant after the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif as prime minister, but the close contest must be a cause for serious worry to both the ruling PML-N and the country's most powerful political dynasty. Interestingly, it all happened despite the advantage the party had in having a government both at the centre and the province.

The very fact that the margin of victory had shrunk to 14,647 votes from 39,345 in the 2013 general elections is a sign of the party losing ground in its bastion. For sure, this outcome of the NA-120 by-election may not change the political dynamics of the country, but it will certainly have a significant impact on the future course of politics.

Indeed, by-elections are not a credible measure of the general popularity level of a particular party. But NA-120 assumed greater political importance because the seat was vacant after the disqualification of a sitting prime minister for not being honest. Both the PML-N and PTI, the main opposition party, ran their campaign around the verdict.

While the PML-N pitched the vote as the rejection of the controversial ruling disqualifying the prime minister, the PTI described it as a vindication. Neither party was right in its assertion. Surely the Panama scandal did cast its shadow over the election, but it was not the determining factor. The fact that the turnout was low despite the frenzied campaign run by the ruling party led by Maryam Nawaz, with the ousted prime minister's wife being the candidate, is quite significant.

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Perhaps it is indicative of the fact that there has not been a groundswell of adulation for the disgraced leader even in his stronghold as had been depicted. It is clear that the sympathy card has not worked. Undoubtedly, Kulsoom Nawaz was the best bet for the party, but the move failed to generate the kind of fervour needed for a landslide. It is more surprising as the PTI campaign too was lacklustre. Dr Yasmeen Rashid was virtually left on her own with no senior party leader helping her in the campaign except in a couple of rallies at the end.

Surely various other factors may also have contributed to the narrow victory margin, eg the family feud and widening cracks within the party. Allegations of an invisible hand and conspiracy theories about too many candidates having been fielded by the 'agencies' do not hold ground. It is, however, valid to object to the participation of individuals linked to banned militant and extremist sectarian groups.

It was the responsibility of the Election Commission and the security agencies to stop them. No one would disagree that this so-called policy of mainstreaming the militant groups and allowing them to propagate their extremist ideology from a political platform is unacceptable and against the law.

Still, one wonders how the participation of these groups may have affected the PML-N vote bank. How come the party expected to get those right-wing religious extremist votes? Irregularities and the allegation by the ruling party that its supporters were intimidated sound quite preposterous.

There has been much talk about the Maryam factor in the election campaign. Many observers describe her participation as marking her formal entry in the succession and party leadership race, though she has been active in PML-N politics for quite some time now, mostly behind the scenes. Indeed, Nawaz Sharif has groomed his 'talented' daughter as his heir apparent.

But it was for the first time that she emerged on the political centre stage. She did indeed appear impressive and articulate. For a party with a conservative social ethos and very few women in senior party and cabinet positions, her taking charge has been a positive change. But being the daughter of the top leader surely makes a huge difference in a dynastic political culture.

Predictably, her rise has evoked a mixed reaction from within the party, the Sharif family and from outside. While she may have developed a significant pocket of support inside the party, many senior party leaders have strong reservations about her premature elevation. Party stalwarts and the old guard like Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan have gone overboard but some others are muted in their criticism.

Her aggressive tenor regarding the military establishment has scared particularly those who associate their political survival with the status quo. Most of them would not hesitate to jump ship at the slightest indication of the vessel hitting a rock. The situation has not come to this stage, but matters do not seem very encouraging with the Sharif

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family facing trial on corruption charges. Her no-holds-barred speech after the NA-120 election would not have gone down well with her critics.

Major resistance comes from within the family dynasty. It is apparent that her growing assertiveness has intensified the power struggle within the party. The cleavage between the two Sharif brothers and their children is no more a secret. The absence of Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and his son Hamza from the country during the election campaign has brought the differences into the open.

For sure, Maryam's ascendancy is perhaps more divisive at a time when the party needs greater unity in its ranks. What irks many critics inside and outside the party is her sense of entitlement and claim to dynastic power. Another point that may go against Maryam is her indictment by the NAB trial court on charges of forgery. All this does not bode well for the pretender to the throne.

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Chapter 111

A HOUSE DIVIDED

13 Sep 2017

There is some semblance of proactive governance and an institutionalised decision-making process under a supposedly stopgap prime minister — indeed, a pleasant change from the capricious ways of the ousted leader. The cabinet meets more frequently and so does the National Security Council, indicating a more inclusive approach. It is not just a matter of symbolism; it is also about a system-based regime that was starkly missing under Nawaz Sharif.

Surely Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has proved to be more than just a transient figurehead. However, notwithstanding his newfound dynamism, Abbasi knows that he owes his current position to Nawaz Sharif and he is just holding the post for the heir apparent. In deference to his ousted leader, he would not even move into Prime Minister House. Sharif's shadow still looms large over Islamabad's corridors of power despite his inglorious exit. Nevertheless, the new prime minster has created his own space and made his presence felt in spite of his modest ways and low profile.

But the situation remains highly tenuous as the former prime minister fights the second round of the legal battle to save himself from further humiliation. He and his entire family now face trial in an accountability court for a litany of corruption charges. Meanwhile, the widening cracks in the family and growing signs of dissidence in party ranks have made things increasingly untenable for the former prime minister and compounded the problems of the new government.

It was a most serious jolt for the ruling party, already reeling from the shock of Sharif's disqualification, when the estranged former interior minister threw down the gauntlet. One of the most senior party leaders, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan last week launched a blistering attack on his erstwhile leader with whom he has had more than 30 years of association.

Surely the maverick PML-N leader who is known for his mercurial temperament may have some personal grievances, but his outburst was also a manifestation of some

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deeper fissures in party ranks somehow linked to the internal Sharif family feud. Not surprisingly, his main target has been Maryam who is at the centre of the struggle within the family for succession.

Although Nisar has fallen out with the former prime minister, he has remained close to the younger Sharif brother, who is clearly unhappy at being ignored for the top leadership job. The cleavage seems to have widened with the growing perception of Nawaz Sharif putting his weight behind his ambitious daughter for the future leadership.

That may also have been a reason for the absence of the Punjab chief minister from the country for such a long period during the crucial election campaign for an ailing Kulsum Nawaz who is contesting on a Lahore National Assembly seat left vacant after her husband's disqualification.

While Maryam is holding the fort at home, the other members of the family including Shahbaz Sharif and his son are out of the country. Surely, the former prime minister has been in London essentially to look after his ailing wife, but for the past week, Shahbaz Sharif has been running the provincial administration from there through remote control. His absence from the scene has given currency to reports about the power tussle getting more serious.

It is apparent that the divide is not driven by an internal power struggle alone. It is also over differences on how to deal with the situation arising from the damning Supreme Court ruling that has not only removed Nawaz Sharif from office but also threatened the future of the political family dynasty. Shahbaz Sharif and Chaudhry Nisar are clearly apprehensive about Nawaz Sharif adopting a confrontational path that they believe is being pursued by Maryam and a few others in the party leadership.

The two are strongly opposed to taking on the judiciary and the security establishment perceived by hardliners in the party to be instrumental in Sharif's downfall. For them, any confrontation with other organs of the state could bring down the entire system.

What worries them is the growing stridency in the tenor of the former prime minister and his daughter targeting the judiciary as well as the security agencies. For Sharif, it is important to mobilise public opinion to keep him politically alive. This strategy may have been successful in winning public sympathy particularly in Punjab's heartland, but it is questionable whether it can help him get back in the saddle.

Interestingly, notwithstanding some muted criticism, there has not been any strong reaction from senior party leaders regarding Nisar's diatribe, though the former interior minister does not seem to enjoy much following in the ranks. It perhaps indicates a conscious decision by senior party members not to further fuel internal differences. Despite strong reservations regarding Sharif's confrontational approach, it does not seem to be in anybody's interest to split the party.

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It is apparent that it will be Nawaz Sharif and not Shahbaz Sharif who could win them votes in the coming elections. It is more political expediency rather than any principle that will keep the party united. But things could change dramatically if Sharif decided to rock the boat more and more.

That also raises the stakes for the interim administration still trying to find a foothold. A looming economic crisis coupled with some serious foreign policy and security challenges have compounded the predicament of an accidental leader. It is not just about the interim arrangement stretching itself to another eight months, but also leading the party into next year's general elections.

For sure, the system has not collapsed after the removal from office of a third-time prime minister notwithstanding dire predictions. The relatively smooth functioning of the new government is certainly a positive sign. But it is still a long and treacherous road ahead for the government and the ruling party that is facing internal discord. It will all depend on how the party leadership deals with the situation stemming from the new round of legal and political battles. Surely this is a tough challenge for a house divided.

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Chapter 112

EXPLODING POPULATION BOMB

30 Aug 2017

AMIDST intense political wrangling and a show of national indignation over President Donald Trump's threatening words, a more important issue affecting the future of this country has gone almost unheeded. The population time bomb that had long been ticking is now exploding.

While in other underdeveloped countries, the population growth rate has slowed down significantly, it is a different story in Pakistan. The latest population census has shown that Pakistan has moved up the ladder becoming the fifth most populous nation only behind India, China, the United States and Indonesia. It is an alarming situation, especially considering the extent of poverty in the country.

With a staggering growth rate of 2.4 per cent per annum, the country's population is around 208 million. That marks an increase of more than 57pc since the last population census in 1998, and is higher than what had been projected.

With abysmal human development indicators, this population explosion presents a most serious challenge to the socioeconomic stability and security of this country. With 60pc of the population under the age of 30 and fewer job opportunities, it is a disaster in the making. What is most worrisome is that this population explosion and its implications have drawn little attention from the political leadership that is engaged in a fierce power struggle.

Despite the gravity of the situation, the issue has hardly figured in the national discourse. It is not surprising that the decennial population count, a constitutional obligation, was delayed by almost two decades and was held only on the intervention of the apex court. Not surprisingly, the provisional results of the latest census too are being disputed.

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There are some questions regarding the methodology used and how the urban and rural divide is defined. It is Sindh that is up in arms over what is described by its government as a deliberate attempt to understate the population of the province. The fact that Karachi's population is less than what estimates showed gives some credence to Sindh's objections. Meanwhile, the population of Lahore has more than doubled in the same period of time, causing some eyebrows to be raised.

Indeed, there is some explanation to these discrepancies. While part of Karachi falls in the rural category, the Punjab government eliminated the distinction between rural and urban areas in its capital. Then there are also questions about the unexpected rise in the population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Similarly, the higher than average national growth of the population in Balochistan has also been questioned. Some believe it is largely due to the influx of Afghans in the province and that this could alter the ethnic balance between the Baloch and Pakhtun populations. But while this may sound plausible, there is still an urgent need for coming up with all the details and findings of the census. Surely, these are political problems that have arisen after each census.

Notwithstanding the political controversies, the point that is being missed in the entire discourse is the challenge that this uncontrolled population growth poses to our society and how to defuse this exploding bomb. It just shows what little priority we attach to population planning.

Remarkably, while so many parts of the world have seen a reduction in fertility rates and population growth, Pakistan's growth rate has increased. Pakistan's fertility rate is among the highest in the region. Indeed, this is a scary situation. But is anyone bothered?

Interestingly, other Muslim countries like Bangladesh and Iran have successfully controlled their population; that is also reflected in their improved human development indicators. With few efforts going into family planning, there is no sign of the population growth rate coming down significantly. At this rate, Pakistan may well become the world's fourth most populous nation by 2030, surpassing Indonesia.

Not surprisingly, Pakistan is ranked 147th in the Human Development Index with close to 30pc of the population living below the poverty line. Literacy rate remains dismally low at 58pc, though many dispute even this figure as too high. With thousands of newborns added to the population each day, even this ranking on the development index would be hard to sustain.

One other alarming development is rapid urbanisation testing the fragile infrastructure of megacities. Census data shows explosive growth in urban centres since the last census. The fact that Pakistan is witnessing one of the fastest urbanisation rates is not fully reflected in the census because of the skewed definition of urban and rural areas. Hence the urban population at 36.4pc of the total population appears unrealistic.

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This massive population growth is one of the factors contributing to environmental degradation. Major environmental challenges currently confronting Pakistan such as climate change, deforestation, pollution and waste management are rightly attributed to rising population density.

Pakistan, being one of the countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, has to bear the consequences of the increasing population. The existing environment management capacity cannot sustain such a large population if it is to provide a good quality of life.

Meanwhile, for a country confronting violent extremism, such a high population growth rate and huge youth bulge with apparently shrinking economic opportunities make it far more difficult to deal with the rising menace of militancy. There may not be a direct link between radicalisation and poverty but some studies show illiteracy as one of the major causes of youth being attracted to extremist religious groups. An illiterate and unemployed population provides readymade volunteers for militant groups of all hues.

All these problems faced by the country cannot be dealt with effectively unless the population growth is brought under control. It may be late but the situation can still be salvaged with the state taking the issue more seriously. The exploding population bomb has put the country's future in jeopardy. But is anyone paying heed to the approaching catastrophe?

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Chapter 113

A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

16 Aug 2017

In an unprecedented move, the Senate has decided to initiate an intra-institutional dialogue to prevent the collision of state institutions. For that purpose, the Senate chairman intends to invite the army chief and the Supreme Court chief justice for discussion with members of the upper house of parliament.

One cannot doubt the earnestness of the efforts of Raza Rabbani, the Senate chairman, and his desire to take the nation out of the current political turmoil and to stabilise the democratic process in the country. But the proposal of such a dialogue to resolve the crisis of democracy appears ridiculously simplistic.

What does the Senate chairman expect to achieve by calling the army chief and the chief justice to parliament? Does he really think that such an intra-institutional dialogue can remove the basic sources of tension among them? What he fails to understand is that the existing imbalance of power among the state institutions is symptomatic rather than the cause of distortion in the power structure.

Such naiveté is hardly expected from a seasoned parliamentarian holding such an esteemed position. While the entire discourse is focused on the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif by the Supreme Court under a controversial article of the Constitution, the real issues undermining the political system and the democratic process have been completely ignored.

One wonders whether the effort is really for the establishment of civilian supremacy. Surely, parliament must debate removing any provision of the Constitution that it deems inappropriate. But not for protecting one person.

It is not the ruling against the former prime minister but the relentless attack on the judiciary that is threatening the democratic process. The allegation that the judges have conspired to derail democracy is an obstruction of justice. In fact, it is the ousted prime minister who has taken the collision path. So what is the chief justice supposed to tell

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parliament? Must he assure parliament that elected leaders enjoy impunity even if they are found to be violating the law and committing perjury?

It is indeed the job of parliament, and not of the judiciary, to amend the Constitution. Being a member of the legal fraternity himself, the honourable chairman of the Senate must also know that the judiciary is a separate branch of the state and is not answerable to the executive or the legislature. Is there any precedent of the chief justice being called by parliament anywhere in the world?

Senator Rabbani is right that all institutions of the state must work within the constitutional framework. But what he must also realise is that it is a virtually dysfunctional parliament and the absence of an institutional decision-making process has caused the widening of the power imbalance.

It is highly inappropriate to blame the judiciary when political leaders approach the apex court even on issues that should have been settled in parliament. The Panamagate case is one such example. Instead of summoning the chief justice, parliament might want to focus on removing its own shortcomings.

Undoubtedly, civil-military relations have remained a major source of problems hampering the democratic process in the country. There is no denying the fact that civilian supremacy is essential in a democratic dispensation. Indeed, the existing imbalance of power in favour of the military is one of the reasons for political instability in the country.

But this situation cannot be changed without making some fundamental reforms in the political system itself in order to make the executive and legislature more effective. The issue cannot be resolved through a dialogue between the army chief and parliament. Sadly, the only focus is on matters related to the disqualification issue rather than reviewing the present crisis in its entirety.

Unsurprisingly, the ousted prime minister took no time in endorsing the Senate chairman's initiative, though one is not sure that he really believes the move could deliver any substantive outcome. Sharif is now trying to remould himself as a 'revolutionary'. He also vows to change the Constitution.

But no one knows what kind of revolution he is really talking about. He laments that five judges have thrown out the people's mandate. He described his show of political power on GT Road under full official protocol as the rejection of the court's verdict against him. Sharif's war on the judiciary is reminiscent of the storming of the Supreme Court by his own party men in 1997.

It was amusing to see the ousted prime minister sad at the fact that no prime minister in the country's 70-year history had been allowed to complete his or her term. What he is not telling the people is that he himself was instrumental in the removal of some of them over the past three decades.

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It is also true that no elected leader has been as responsible for undermining the civilian institutions as Sharif was during his three terms. What he is not accepting is that it is only he who has been removed — his party is still in power and functioning under a new prime minister.

It appears certain that parliament will complete its five- year term. It is the term of parliament that is enshrined in the Constitution and not of the prime minister. It is so apparent that all his talk about democracy and civilian supremacy is about personal political survival

Surely, there is a need for drastically reforming the political system to strengthen democracy. For that, we don't require any intra-institutional dialogue but a new social contract that would guarantee the rule of law and the strict adherence of all state institutions to the Constitution.

Most importantly, democracy must not become a means to perpetuate dynastic rule. The people's mandate does not give elected leaders immunity from the law. Democracy can only survive if the trust of the electorate is also respected by political parties and their leaders.

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Chapter 114

SHARIF AND THE FAMILY FEUD

09 Aug 2017

For Nawaz Sharif the battle is far from over. The former prime minister now returns to the masses before the start of the second and more critical phase of the impending legal and political battles. And for that he has chosen the heartland of Punjab, along GT Road, described as the bastion of political power.

It is, indeed, a calculated move intended to galvanise popular support in his political stronghold by playing the victim card. His tenor is becoming increasingly strident as the battle lines are redrawn. There is no more mincing of words about those he thinks plotted his ouster — the deep state. Nawaz Sharif is not willing to go down without a fight.

It is a completely different situation than what Sharif had confronted in his two previous ousters. He may be out, but his party still holds sway in both the centre and Punjab, giving him the political advantage he did not have in the past. It is not like an ousted leader braving a hostile state power.

Of course, Sharif knows that he may not be reinstated as prime minister, but he wants to defend his legacy and maintain his family's dynastic hold over power. And for the latter, the area along GT Road is absolutely critical. What gives the former prime minister hope is a divided and squabbling opposition unable to capitalise on his disqualification.

His main nemesis Imran Khan now seems to be trapped in a texting scandal affecting the PTI's campaign against the House of Sharif. The PPP appears marginalised in this war for the GT Road area. Moreover, there is a limit to the perceived powers of the security establishment to manipulate the entire range of emerging political dynamics. The Tahirul Qadri card has long been exposed and that spent force cannot deliver.

Indeed, as of now there is no serious challenge to the ruling party from the opposition forces within parliament and outside. But there are some serious fault lines

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that may threaten the unity of the party and, most importantly, put at stake the political future of the House of Sharif.

Surely it has been a smooth transition to a new government headed by Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, a long-time Sharif loyalist. A six-time member of the National Assembly and a suave politician, Abbasi was seen as the perfect choice for the interim period till Shahbaz Sharif took over.

Never considered a frontrunner, he was picked for a temporary job as he was acceptable to all factions within the party. Now it is almost certain that he is going to stay on till the elections following the decision to keep the younger Sharif in the province. The change of plan, in fact, underscores the growing chasm within the party and the inner power struggle within the Sharif family.

The formation of a huge cabinet, much bigger than the previous one, also seems to be a move to satisfy all pressure blocs particularly the backbenchers who had started raising their voice following the unfolding of the Panamagate scandal. Interestingly, some of those who in the past were associated with the PML-Q and had returned to the fold before the last elections have also been accommodated in the new cabinet.

Unsurprisingly, most of the new entrants belong to south Punjab where the ruling party appears more vulnerable. The huge size of the cabinet also seem indicative of the weakening hold of the top leadership on the party in the aftermath of the damning Supreme Court ruling indicting the entire Sharif family. Predictably, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan has not joined the cabinet as he had publicly articulated his grievances.

But his differences with the former prime minister have much deeper causes and also have a lot to do with the Sharif family feud. One of the major sources of tension is the Maryam factor in the party. Her growing influence and her father's desire to groom her as his heir apparent has widened the divide in the family over the succession issue.

Although Maryam Nawaz Sharif did not hold any formal position, her increasing involvement in the affairs of the government and the party worried many senior cabinet members including Chaudhry Nisar. She virtually took charge in the absence of her father when he went to London for weeks for medical treatment last year. According to party sources, Nawaz Sharif even considered appointing her as foreign affairs minister when he came under increasing criticism for not having anyone in charge fulltime of the country's foreign policy despite the fact that she has no experience in the field.

Many senior party members even blame her, and the cell she had formed for the media war was sometimes described as her 'attack dogs' responsible for heightening political tension and further straining the government's relations with the security establishment and the judiciary. She upped her public profile in recent months during the Panamagate investigations and the move caused eyebrows to rise.

Although Maryam's political future too is under a cloud along with other members of the family because of the references against them in the accountability court, there is

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no indication of her pulling back. Many believe that her insistence that the NA-120 seat vacated by her father should either be taken by her or her mother Kulsum Nawaz is a major factor in the change of plans to get Shahbaz Sharif elected prime minister.

A major concern of Nawaz Sharif's family appeared to be that had Shahbaz Sharif come to the centre, the chief ministership of Punjab would have gone to his son Hamza resulting in the transition of dynastic political power to the other branch of the family. This power tussle within the family, if not resolved, could seriously affect the unity of the party. It may be politically important for the ousted prime minister to go to the masses to boost the morale of his party members, but it is the family feud that could prove to be his Achilles heel.

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Chapter 115

DESCENT INTO CHAOS

02 Aug 2017

The gloves are off and it is a free for all. Politics is a dirty game in this country, but it has seldom been so ugly. In this no-holds-barred war of glib talk, the entire endeavour is to prove the rival more corrupt. While parliament is rendered dysfunctional, the apex court has become the battleground. The court, too, is subjected to criticism if the ruling is not in one party's favour.

It may appear that the fate of many political leaders now hinges on court rulings in the petitions filed against them by opponents. Meanwhile, the democratic process is descending into chaos. The order sending an elected prime minister home for a misdemeanour is not the cause of a political order devoid of any moral bearing, rather it is reflective of one.

While the opposition celebrates Sharif's inglorious exit, the ruling party is playing the 'victim of an inexplicable conspiracy' card. Sharif's supporters are also waiting to see the fall from grace of Imran Khan and other senior members of the PTI implicated in cases of financial wrongdoing. Every side is trying to rock the boat that they themselves are in.

All rationality is lost in the haze of the politics of revenge. There is much talk about democracy, public mandate and accountability, but one doubts that anyone is being taken seriously. The banality of these platitudes has been starkly exposed in the political soap opera that is being currently played out.

Indeed, the application of Article 62 of the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act, 1976, by the Supreme Court to remove the former prime minister has led to questions of how many public office holders and members of the National Assembly and provincial assemblies can come up to the standards enunciated in Articles 62 and 63 if strictly applied. Surely, there will be very few.

So, the opposition political leaders who are rejoicing in Sharif's unceremonious ouster must see whether their own accounts are in order before they too come under the

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axe. The cases against Imran Khan and Jehangir Tareen are already pending in the Supreme Court and the verdict is likely to come out soon. That may also open the floodgates of petitions that could overwhelm the top court. Given the extremely volatile situation stemming from the daily theatrics outside the court it could put the judiciary under pressure.

It was amusing to see lawmakers rushing to file their tax returns in the wake of the Panama case against the Sharif family. According to some reports, there has been a massive hike in taxes paid by lawmakers, from a 15 to 3,852 per cent rise in individual cases during this period. Indeed, it is a positive development. But the majority of the legislators still do not seem too bothered about what they believe is a temporary phase. They may be right given the lacklustre approach of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and other state institutions responsible for law enforcement.

The annual tax directories for parliamentarians shed some light on the level of tax compliance by the lawmakers. Surely, the lifestyle of most of them is in stark contrast to what their tax declarations indicate.

Few lawmakers are in the high tax bracket, notwithstanding their superior living standards. The money paid by most of them is peanuts despite the fact that many are believed to be among the richest people in the country. According to reports, some senators pay an income tax in the range of Rs17,000 to Rs50,000.

Such low tax compliance raises questions about the commitment of our political leaders to enforcing the tax laws they are supposed to oversee. Pakistan has a chronically low rate of income tax collection as tax evasion has become the norm and is hardly looked upon as a crime.

Thus it is not surprising that it is estimated that less than 1pc of the population files its taxes. Income tax evasion is particularly high among the wealthiest, leaving the country with one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in South Asia. One certainly cannot blame the people for that when our rulers and lawmakers themselves do not set an example to follow. Indeed, the problem is not limited to lawmakers but extends to the entire ruling elite. Senior civil and military officials too are seen as part of it. A major reason is that law enforcement is much weaker when it comes to the rich and powerful.

Surely, it is not just about low tax compliance, but also about politicians living beyond their known means. That applies to both the government and the opposition leaders.

There are many who conceal their wealth in a clear violation of ECP rules. Yet they, unlike the prime minister, might escape being penalised under ROPA and Article 62. Certainly, there must be stricter accountability rules applied to the holder of the top public office. But it must not be seen as a selective exercise. The process of accountability must not be perceived as a one-time action targeting a particular person or

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a party. It should be viewed as a normal process of law enforcement across the board and not just limited to politicians.

Corruption is deeply rooted in our society and one cannot blame only the politicians for it. The security establishment that has ruled the country for so much of its existence is responsible for most of its ills. Eyebrows are rightly raised if the generals remain untouched.

It is, indeed, an extremely depressing state of affairs when the apex court is seen as a venue for settling political scores. What is needed is the reform of the entire law-enforcement system to make it more autonomous and ensure that it remains outside the influence of the government. This is one lesson we must learn from the Panama scandal. The Supreme Court must not be approached for settling every issue. The main responsibility lies with the political leadership. Democracy cannot be sustained without the rule of law and without making parliament more effective as an institution.

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Chapter 116

END OF SHARIF DYNASTY?

29 Jul 2017

THE inglorious exit of Nawaz Sharif may have come as a serious blow to the country's most powerful political dynasty. The devastating ruling by the five-member Supreme Court bench has not only seen the former prime minister disqualified for life but has also indicted almost all the Sharifs who have dominated the country's political scene for more than three decades, whether in or out of power. But one is not sure if it marks the end of the family's political legacy. It is evident that the baton of leadership will now be passed on to Shahbaz Sharif, thus maintaining the dynastic hold over power at least for now.

Indeed, the unprecedented judicial action against a sitting prime minister is a watershed moment for the country's democratic evaluation and has been described as a step forward in efforts towards establishing the rule of law. Notwithstanding the scepticism over the judgement perceived as radical, the action came from within the system and not outside the constitutional framework. It also signifies a milestone in the development of an independent judiciary not subservient to the executive, though the perceived harshness of the ruling can rightly be disputed.

For sure, the ruling appears to have generated an upheaval and a period of political uncertainty — that is bound to happen when any entrenched political dynastic order is shaken. It also appears that the ruling has further deepened political polarisation in the country. But it certainly does not threaten the democratic political process as speculated by Sharif's supporters.

In fact, it is a serious blow to dynastic politics that has been the biggest impediment to the development of democratic institutions and values in the country. The Panama ruling has also broken the widespread perception that Sharif being a Punjabi leader was untouchable while leaders from Sindh and the other smaller provinces could easily be dispensed with.

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So this hue and cry over the fall from grace of Sharif and describing the events as a setback to democracy is beyond comprehension. The case against Sharif went through a whole legal process and cannot be described as part of a conspiracy or a judicial coup.

It became quite apparent that the prime minister was in deep trouble after the JIT report came out with a damning indictment of him and his family. It went beyond the family's failure to provide a money trail for the London properties and included charges of perjury and non-disclosure of some foreign financial assets. But such extreme action against the entire family and a consensus ruling came as a shock not only to the government but also to those outside.

Indeed, indictment of other family members and sending corruption cases against them to NAB has disrupted the dynasty's succession plan. While the court ruling against Maryam Sharif was expected after the allegation of forged documents, the inclusion of Shahbaz Sharif in the list was unexpected. That has exacerbated the PML-N's leadership predicament.

But many in the party appear confident that the junior Sharif can still lead them despite facing charges in NAB. There is a move by the PML-N to play the victimhood card and project the ousted prime minister as a 'political martyr'. But one is not sure that will work in the present situation. Sharif's influence over the party has become limited with his moral and political position weakened.

A child of the establishment Nawaz Sharif was politically baptised by Gen Zia's military government in the early 1980s as part of the plan to prop up an alternative leader to challenge Benazir Bhutto. His trajectory from Punjab chief minister to prime minister in the 1990s owed to the backing of the military and the powerful civil establishment of Punjab. That political power also saw a massive rise in the family's business fortunes. That financial scandal continued to dog him throughout his political career particularly after his ascent to the country's top position. It finally caught up with him after the Panama Papers named his family, and caused his downfall.

With his rise to the pinnacle of political power, Nawaz Sharif tried to break away from the influence of the military establishment that also brought him down in his previous terms. The former protйgй turned into the nemesis of the military establishment. It is not surprising that he remained locked in perpetual conflict with the military leadership throughout his third term in office.

Although the Muslim League has historically remained close to the military establishment, Nawaz Sharif tried to transform it into a mass populist party, though he may not have been fully successful in his endeavour. Still, over the years, despite ups and downs, Sharif developed a popular mass base that elected him to a record third term in office. The backing of the powerful Punjabi civil establishment, including the bureaucracy and sections of the judiciary, also appeared to have helped his family's stranglehold over Punjab.

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A big question is whether a disgraced Nawaz Sharif will be able to keep the party united. More importantly, will the Punjab establishment continue to back the PML-N under the younger Sharif's leadership after the damning indictment of the family? Previously, cracks showed up in adverse situations. The biggest example was the formation of the PML-Q after Musharraf's coup. Interestingly, many defectors returned to the ranks with a sizeable number on the treasury benches, even in the cabinet. That will be the most serious challenge to the Sharif family. Party unity will also depend on the ability of the PPP and PTI to make inroads in the PML-N stronghold in Punjab that remains the main political battlefield. The other provinces are not affected by Nawaz Sharif's downfall.

There doesn't seem much chance of his return to power, but one is not sure if the family rule is over.

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Chapter 117

GAME OF THRONES

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NAWAZ Sharif may have been disgraced, but he is not out yet. He has not given up hope of the Supreme Court stopping short of sending him home. He appears willing to face charges of financial wrongdoing in a trial court. Of course, there is no tradition in our political culture of any elected leader stepping down voluntarily on moral grounds however tainted he may be, nor is it a legal requirement.

More importantly, there is no such kind of public outrage that would bring millions out on the streets stepping up pressure on the prime minister to quit as witnessed in some other countries not that long ago. Another long-drawn legal battle in a trial court may take Sharif close to the end of his term, so believe his supporters who also appear confident of the party riding out the crisis and even of the possibility of sweeping the next elections. Sounds plausible? Perhaps, it does.

Yet this game of thrones being played out on the Pakistani political stage could take a more spectacular twist. It is not just about winning or losing a legal battle over the Panamagate scandal for the House of Sharif; it goes much beyond with so many other characters in the power play. Moreover, one must not rule out the possibility of the three-member bench delivering the ultimate humiliation to one of the most powerful elected leaders in Pakistan's history, thus completely changing the rules of the game.

Both possible scenarios — Sharif's disqualification or his facing trial — could unravel the country's existing political fabric. It may not only lead to the realignment of political forces, it can also intensify the power struggle within the ruling PML-N. Some broad contours of the political landscape have already emerged. But one has to wait for the Supreme Court ruling to be able to draw a complete picture.

While the gloves are already off as political parties run a sordid campaign against each other, post Panama matters could become dirtier still. Although it has mainly been a war between the PML-N and the PTI, the other political parties have also been sucked into the fray. Surely, all allies have so far stood by the Sharif government, but the

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situation is likely to change in the event of the prime minister's disqualification, or even if the case is sent to a trial court.

While the PTI and the PPP appear to be standing together in demanding the prime minister's resignation, it is very obvious that this tactical alliance may not survive for long. Interestingly, both the PPP and PML-N are bound by the common wish of seeing Imran Khan also being disqualified by the Supreme Court on the basis of a money trail leading to the purchase of his Banigala estate.

Although the cases against Sharif and Imran Khan are different, the two parties would be happy to see the PTI chief removed from the electoral scene. While the PTI presents the biggest challenge to PML-N's political domination in Punjab, the PPP sees it as an opportunity to regain some lost ground in the country's biggest and most powerful province. However, there appears a consensus among all political parties against early elections. It will certainly not help, were the PML-N to go to the polls with its leader in the dock.

On the surface, the party still appears to be standing united behind Sharif, but there are reports of some backbenchers raising their voices and showing their dissent as the government faces a crisis of moral and political legitimacy. The biggest jolt to the party came with reports of Chaudhry Nisar, the interior minister, threatening to quit the cabinet. It seems hard to believe that the minister, though temperamental, will break his long association with the PML-N. But any decision to quit the cabinet at this stage would encourage others in senior party positions to speak out as well. It may also intensify the battle for succession within the family. Moreover, the PML-N has the dubious reputation of becoming fragmented under pressure.

Another consequence of the Panamagate scandal is the changing balance of power among various branches of the state that may influence the future of the democratic political process in the country. Undoubtedly, the judiciary has emerged as an arbiter of power with the apex court becoming the main venue of settling political battles.

The role of the top court has further expanded with parliament becoming increasingly ineffective and Sharif's disregard of the institutional decision-making process. Given this situation, it is not surprising that the political fate of the country's two most powerful political leaders is now tied to the pending Supreme Court rulings in the respective petitions filed against them by the rival parties.

More significantly, the political crisis triggered by the Panama leaks has helped the military establishment expand its space. Interestingly, the scandal unfolded when civil-military relations hit a low despite the change of army guard. In fact, relations between the Sharif government and the military have remained strained throughout the government's four years in power. That may also be the reason behind suspicions of military intelligence agencies using the scandal to destabilise the government. The

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inclusion of members of the ISI and MI on the joint investigation team probing the matter further reinforced this conspiracy theory.

Whatever the Supreme Court ruling may be, there is no likelihood of civil-military relations getting back on track. In fact, a major concern is that the military could regain its position as an arbiter of power as the deepening political crisis creates a power vacuum. However, there seems to be no possibility of direct military intervention or derailment of the political process. The balance of power may tilt more towards the military, but not that drastically.

This game of thrones may prolong the political crisis in the country if the political forces don't clean up their act.

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Chapter 118

IS DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT?

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It may take days or weeks for the three-member Supreme Court bench to decide the fate of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. But the long-drawn-out legal battle over the Panama Papers scandal has left a significant mark on democratic political evolution in the country. Moreover, it has also exposed the fault lines hampering the growth of a democratic polity.

Even as the ruling party and the opposition fight it out in and outside the courtroom and during TV talk shows, parliament has appeared completely redundant. Surely there would have been no need for the apex court to intervene had the lawmakers demonstrated some maturity in taking up the issue involving the leader of the house, and if the law-enforcement agencies were allowed to do their job independently outside the influence of the ruling elite.

A split ruling in the case compelled the judges to take the rather controversial decision of setting up a joint investigation team (JIT) to investigate the charges of financial corruption against the prime minister and his family. There is no precedent in our legal history of the SC resorting to such action against the highest political authority.

Many hailed it as a positive step, making accountable the untouchables. But for the loyalists, it was nothing short of a 'global conspiracy' against their beloved leader for 'serving the nation selflessly'. 'His government was ousted for conducting nuclear tests in the past and now he is being punished for initiating CPEC,' is the most common line used by the cabinet ministers. Things have turned more bizarre as the court comes close to winding up the case.

Yet another conspiracy theory readily bought by some 'liberal' apologists is that the court action is a conspiracy to derail the democratic process in the country. The inference is that there exists an unholy alliance between the judges and the military. Some past

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examples are cited in support of the argument, conveniently ignoring the fact that it all happened under military rule. According to them, security agencies are still dictating to the judges. The mantra of 'democracy under threat' often comes in handy in defence of the status quo. Some even warn of tanks rolling on Constitution Avenue soon.

Indeed, the very composition of the JIT has sucked the military deeper into the fray. The inclusion of the members of the MI and ISI was bound to widen the cleavage in civil-military relations and should have been avoided. It may also be true that the participation of the two intelligence agencies could have provided further clout to the JIT's investigations.

But the implication that the court took action at the behest of the military is to stretch the conspiracy theory too far. Those conspiracy theorists conveniently evade the question why the Panama leaks should not have led to the call for an inquiry into the scandal. The holder of the country's highest elected office must be more accountable than anyone else. Sharif had ample opportunity to come clean on the issue in parliament, but the contradictions in his and his family's statements ultimately landed them in this situation.

Sharif still had a chance to defend himself before the original five-member bench and then in the JIT's presence. Now the case is back to a three-member bench — yet another lifeline thrown to him. Hence, the allegation of a witch-hunt targeting an all-powerful prime minister sounds preposterous. The victimhood card may get the House of Sharif some sympathy but will not help bail out the prime minister in a court of law.

Indeed, in the past accountability was used to victimise the political opposition. Military rulers used the slogan of accountability to overthrow elected civilian governments and force political leaders into submission. We have also seen how the NAB laws were used selectively by Gen Musharraf's regime against his opponents. Many of those who faced serious corruption charges were taken in the cabinet after they pledged allegiance to the regime. Not surprisingly, accountability became a dirty word.

But the ongoing judicial proceedings against the prime minister and his family members named in the Panama Papers must not be equated with past cases of victimisation. In fact, the court action could provide an opportunity for the political leadership to rationalise the accountability process and strengthen investigation and law-enforcement agencies by giving them more autonomy. The democratic process will remain fragile without the rule of law. And it must start now with a sitting prime minister before the court of law.

Yet another common contention is that only civilian leaders are targeted while the generals remain outside the sphere of accountability. Surely one cannot dispute the argument that no one should be above the law. This question about the impunity enjoyed by former generals and other powerful groups is valid. But there is no substance in the argument that either all or none be held accountable for any misdeed.

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Indeed, accountability is a process and must not be seen as a one-time action or part of a campaign selectively targeting the civilian political leadership. A major problem in this country is that the investigation agencies have been rendered completely ineffective, and fail to do their job freely. Same is the state of affairs in other government institutions.

These fault lines in our political and justice system became more pronounced during the Panama saga. Most of the cases against the Sharifs had been put on the back-burner; no investigation agency would dare touch them. The other political leaders too remain untouchable.

One is not sure that things will change after a sitting prime minister is brought to a court of law. But this unprecedented action could provide an opportunity to reform the system and strengthen the process of accountability. There is certainly no threat to the democratic process with the judges performing their role independently. In fact, democracy cannot work if the judiciary and other institutions fail to deliver.

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HYBRID RULE IN PAKISTAN

Since its creation as an independent state in 1947, Pakistan has alternated between authoritarian military regimes and ineffectual civilian rule. For most of its history, the country has been ruled by powerful military with short spans of elected civilian democracy in between. But since 2018 Pakistan has experimented with what many have described as hybrid rule. The system has been unique for many reasons.

The security establishment has always been the determiner of national security and foreign policy in Pakistan but that role has become more pronounced under the Imran Khan government. Its extending shadow can be discerned in all dimensions of the state. In this book, collection of his columns, Zahid Hussain examines Pakistan's experiment with a hybrid rule and its consequence.

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