

JANUARY - FEBRUARY - 2024

DISCOURSE

MEDIA MODERNISATION

NEWS ♦ JOURNALISM ♦ INFOTAINMENT



Pakistan Institute of Development Economics



EDITORIAL



Founder
Nadeem ul Haque
Vice Chancellor



Founder
Durr-e-Nayab
Pro-Vice Chancellor



Managing Editor
Abbas Moosvi
Research Fellow
abbas@pide.org.pk



Visual Designing
Manhal Zainab
Graphic Designer

January 2024

Board

Discourse is a bimonthly magazine from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. Themed around public policy and political economy, it aims to offer insight into social, economic and political issues on both domestic and global levels.

The publication provides a general overview of the latest developments in Pakistan's economy, identifying key areas of concern for policymakers to suggest policy interventions. The publication is a hands-on and precise go-to document for the policymaker, academic, journalist, researcher, corporate/development sector professional, and/or student seeking to remain updated and informed. Discourse has recently been enhanced in scope, with various new sections added to the publication in order to broaden its subject matter and encourage rigorous, creative, and interdisciplinary analyses that cover a more expansive range of topics and appeal to lay audiences. In this vein, we have a) opened up submissions from the general public, and b) added several new sections to the bimonthly magazine, including: Opinion, Business, History, Arts and Culture, and more!

In light of the recent electoral cycle, which saw major clampdowns on journalists nationwide as well as the close monitoring of print and digital media to exclude certain viewpoints, this issue of Discourse is themed around Media Modernisation: News, Journalism, and Infotainment. The media landscape forms a crucial cornerstone of functional democracies the world over, and it is of utmost necessity that it not only be free to operate, but also adheres to the highest journalistic standards to deliver timely, fact-based content that can serve as a check on entrenched interests and institutional overreach.

Featuring the top minds from the media sector – including but not limited to Raza Rumi, Amber Shamsi, Marvi Sirmed, Matiullah Jan, Nadeem F. Paracha, and others – this issue covers regulatory frameworks, television rating systems, the pervasive culture of fear and intimidation, privatization and the perverse incentives of the profit motive, the rise of new media technologies that are disrupting the sphere, and how higher education institutions may play their role in training a new generation of journalists and equipping them with the tools to revivify the political ecosystem through informed debate and exchange.

We hope you enjoy this issue of Discourse!

TABLE OF CONTENTS



COVER PIECE	1
MEDIA MODERNISATION - News, Journalism, Infotainment	4
State Control, Corporate Interests, and Media Independence in Pakistan - Raza Rumi	5
Restoring the Arbitrator - Amber Rahim Shamsi	9
Reshaping Media in Pakistan - Matiullah Jan	12
The Precarious Path of Pakistan's Media Landscape - Marvi Sirmed	15
Walking the tightrope of Journalism in Pakistan - Bismah Mughal	19
Concerns of Intelligentsia in Pakistan: Content Analysis of Newspapers - Nadeem Ul Haque	21
Climate and Media: Reporting Based on Conflict Theory of Structural Functionalism - Khalid Waleed	28
Media Manipulation: Terrorism, Corruption, and the Shifting Sands of Perception - Nadeem F. Paracha	31
The Cult of Digital Media - Tahir Dhindsa	34
CURRENT AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS	
What Matters Most - Votes or Numbers? - Sarwar Bari	37
Default: Incentivising Cooperation Between Creditor - Ahmed Jamal Pirzada	40
Unending Crises of Unending Hybridity - Rasul Bakhsh Rais	43
Making Sense of Pakistan's Retaliation Against Iran - Syed Ali Zia Jaffery	46
Grassroots Politics: The Only Way Forward - Shahnaz Khan	48
DEBATE	
Is the Politics of 'Electables' Over in Pakistan?	52
Electables: The Unsung Losers of The 2024 Elections - Bilal Lakhani	54
2024 Elections: The End of Electables? - Hassan Javid	56
OPINION	
Empowering the Lowest Strata: A Vehicle for Socioeconomic - Nasim Beg	60
How the IMF's Structural Adjustment Programmes Violate ILO Conventions in Pakistan - Shahzeb Usman	64
Political Reform: Constitution Sans Implementation - Naqi Akbar	67
Countertrafficking & Counterinsurgency: A (Counter) Productive Relationship - Hammad Bilal	69
Strategic Leadership & Statecraft - Ashraf Jehangir Qazi	72
HISTORY	
The Significance Of Oral Histories In Pakistan - Anam Zakaria	78
Half human: The Bastardisation Of Science Via Standardisation - Subas Amjad	80
BUSINESS	
The Silent Crisis: How Climate change is Driving Food Inflation in Pakistan - Bilal Hussain	83
Monumental Shifts in Pakistan's Startup: For the Better or Worse? - Ahtasam Ahmad	85
ARTS AND CULTURE	
Olomopolo: Ten Years of Drive, Discourse, and Dialogue - Vicky Zhuang Yi-Yin	88
Abstraction in Art: Aesthetic Excellence or Elitist Farce? - Abbas Moosvi	90
PIDE BI-MONTHLY ROUNDUP	94

COVER PIECE

MEDIA MODERNISATION
NEWS • JOURNALISM • INFOTAINMENT



The media landscape plays a pivotal role in democracies across the world – serving to educate, challenge, and entertain viewers about current affairs, economic developments, and sociocultural considerations. As a key component of civil society, journalists bear an ethical and political responsibility to check power and ensure that ordinary citizens are engaged in the various decision-making processes affecting their lives, serving as a medium of communication with governing elites. In Pakistan, the media sector rose to prominence as a formidable player in the political ecosystem following its privatisation under the Musharraf regime. With the state's monopoly over public communications disrupted, large swathes of new organisations began entering the fray and engaging in cutthroat competition with one another for views and ratings. For a while, it seemed as though viewer preferences were the single most important consideration in terms of content generation – signaling a potentially radical restructuring of power relations and governance dynamics in Pakistan. This was evidenced by the central role of the media in the Lawyers' Movement of 2007-09, largely responsible for the dismantling of the military administration of the time.

Despite all the promise of that time period, it seems strange – bordering beyond belief – how the media landscape in Pakistan today is shrouded in censorship, intimidation, and explicit top-down control in a carrots-and-sticks modality. Journalists are routinely 'missing' following the coverage of contentious issues, news channels are frequently taken off air if they refuse to toe the line, and even social media is casually – and without explanation – blocked when it is perceived that discussions are creating a less-than-favourable impression of the powers that be. This is a grave concern because the quality of governance in the modern age is directly contingent upon information flows: specifically, feedback mechanisms that can be tapped into to signal needs, desires, and grievances through the various platforms that civil society is composed of – not least of all the media. In the absence of such facilities, politics risk reverting back to authoritarian regimes which Pakistan was officially downgraded to by *The Economist* in light of the events leading up to and immediately following general elections.

Of course, not of this takes place in a vacuum: since the proverbial 'Charter of Democracy' in 2006, the security establishment has reoriented its approach to influencing public opinion. This is done through the various regulatory bodies – most saliently the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) – to restrict the parameters within which coverage may take place, as well as the strategic funneling of mone-

tary awards to media corporations in an effort to 'nudge' them towards certain events and political figures over others. This was observed most glaringly in the lead up to the 2013 election cycle, whereby Imran Khan and Tahir-ul-Qadri's collective long march (also known as the Inqilab March) were granted virtually limitless airtime after an 'understanding' between the PTI and security apparatus was formalised. During this period, media groups themselves became increasingly subsumed by the profit incentive: strictly abiding by the preferences of their 'donors' for a quick buck. A lot of this naturally had to do with the Television Ratings System (TRP), a non-transparent process that seems to be captured by certain power centres, which produced calculations on viewership for each channel and thus controlled advertisement revenues. The resulting effect was political coverage that resembled reality television, whereby symbols and rituals came to replace real material concerns such as poverty, inflation, unemployment, climate change, and economic underdevelopment most broadly conceived. Perhaps most concerningly, the media sector has inadvertently played a central role in the incubation of political populism as a result of these pathologies.

Alongside all this, however, new media technologies have rapidly emerged as a decentralised domain leveraging the ubiquity of cellphones and the internet to produce real time coverage by 'non-professional' citizens – thus enhancing its level of inclusivity and spontaneity. Entire organisations have propped up that only have a presence on the digital domain: whether it is their own websites or on platforms such as YouTube. Examples of these are Wajahat S. Khan, Imran Riaz Khan, Mubasher Lucman, Asad Ali Toor, and the Naya Daur Media. Furthermore, long-form discussions in podcast form have exponentially rising viewership rates and allow for more detail, nuance, and complexity to be explored by individuals that are well-versed on specific topics but may not have access to traditional (legacy) media platforms due to opinions or stances that go against the grain – popular examples being *The Pakistan Experience*, *Thought Behind Things*, Junaid Akram's Podcast, *Mooroo's Podcast*, and *Pakistanomy*, to name a few. Most of these mediums are financially sustainable via a combination of crowdsourcing on platforms such as Patreon, Google AdSense revenues, and corporate sponsorships – each of which engage with the broadcaster on their terms and in the absence of any influence on content production. This has meant a fostering of journalistic independence in a manner that is not 'controllable' by the powers that be – although even here, self-censorship does prevail to a considerable extent and will continue to do so as long as the threat of 'disappearance' is present.

Despite the multilayered and multidimensional nature of the media landscape, there is little to no formal training journalists – or aspiring journalists – can hope to receive within the various higher education institutions of Pakistan. The ‘Mass Communication’ and ‘Media Studies’ programs that a handful of universities offer do not, unfortunately, even begin to scratch the surface in terms of journalistic ethics, the various kinds of journalism, the political history of journalism in Pakistan, best practices across the world, deep study of established (global) investigative journalists in terms of their theories and approaches, or even written/verbal communication. For all intents and purposes, journalism is – for most – a fallback option in case more ‘traditional’ degree choices such as in the medical or engineering domains fail to work out. In this way, there is scant ‘passion’ seen in the journalistic landscape of Pakistan: and the word ‘journalist’ is for most the equivalent of ‘TV anchor’ – a major travesty.

This issue of Discourse aims to explore how the media landscape of Pakistan can be rethought, restructured, and revived in order to correct its overarching incentives, reform regulatory frameworks, ease authoritarian controls, and enhance journalistic ethics and procedures – incubating and fostering high quality content production and dissemination that serves the interests of the democratic republic. We hope this issue encourages a wide ranging conversation and educates you on the most pressing concerns facing journalists and media organisations nationwide.

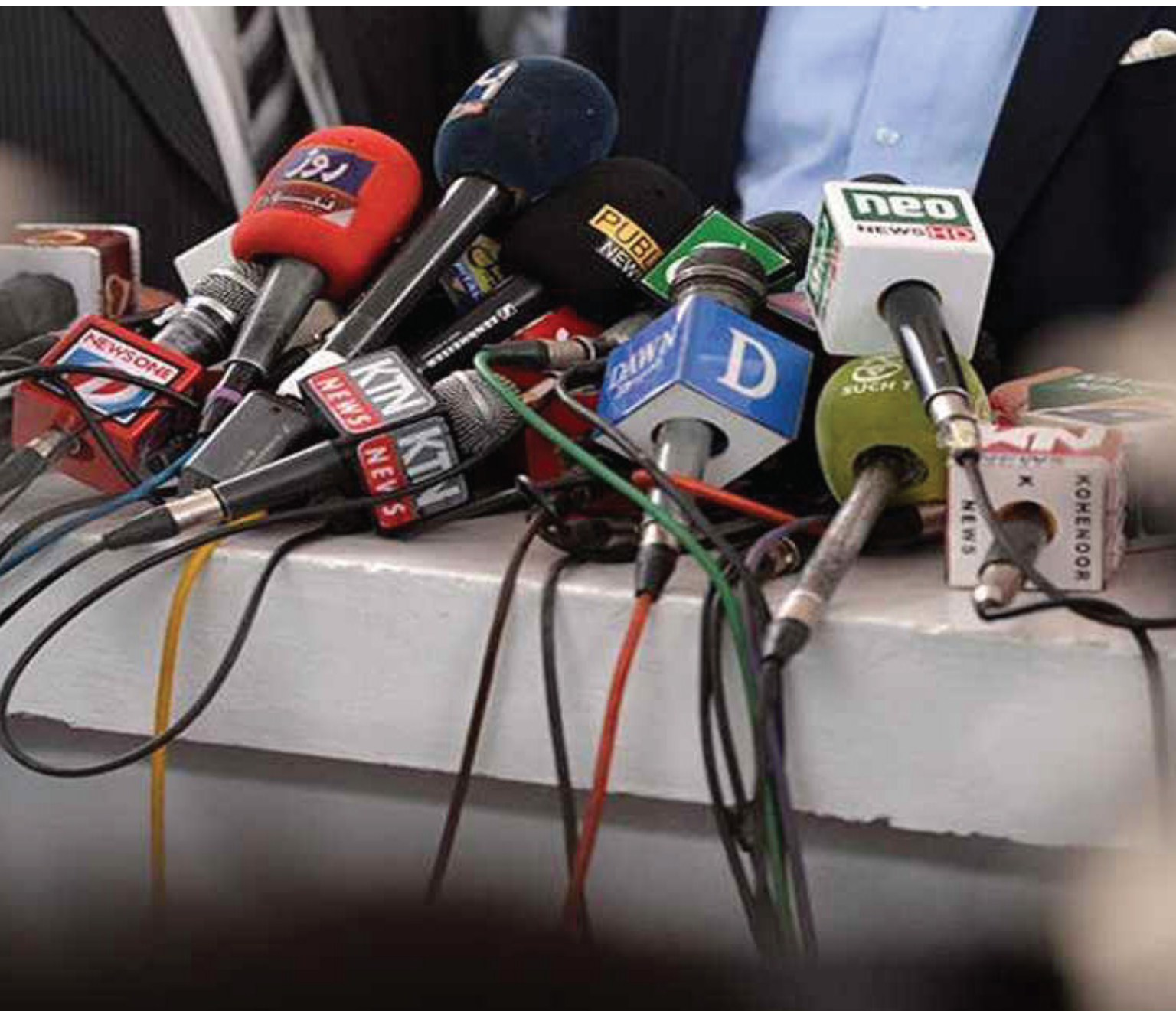
Yours Sincerely,

Editorial Board
Discourse Magazine
Pakistan Institute of
Development Economics



MEDIA MODERNISATION

NEWS, JOURNALISM, INFOTAINMENT



State Control, Corporate Interests, and Media Independence in Pakistan

Raza Rumi

During the past two decades, the media sector in Pakistan has grown immensely in terms of scale and influence. With the deregulation policy and emergence of private TV channels in the early 2000s, electronic media became a power broker and a marker of public sentiment. Corporate entities have since engaged in a frantic war over occupying public attention. News cycles, after decades of state control on information, turned into a real-time, 24/7 process.

This sudden explosion has had implications for the quality, impartiality, and accuracy of the media landscape. With the gradual dwindling of print media and legacy editorial filters, TV channels have had a field day in not just reporting on the power politics of the country but also acting and engaging as power brokers and kingmakers. However, the rise of the internet and social media—popular amongst a largely adult but mostly young population in Pakistan—is now overtaking TV as one of the key sources of news and information. After the decline of print, the electronic media industry and its business model are under stress. The digital age has shaken the country and its traditional power structures as it gives a direct voice to the netizen and is increasingly 'uncontrollable' by the state.

Yet, the issue of state control remains. And when it intersects with corporate imperatives, the results are toxic for the goals of upholding the public interest or creating a fair environment for citizen access to information.

REGULATION AND CONTROLS

The electronic media is regulated by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which is responsible for licensing and overseeing TV and radio channels. Print media falls under the Press Council of Pakistan, which works to maintain journalistic standards. However, the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few conglomerates has raised concerns about pluralism and independence. According to a report by the Center for Media and Democracy Pakistan, this concentration has led to a lack of diverse viewpoints and a focus on commercial interests over public welfare or journalistic integrity. To multiply their wealth, media corporations ensure sustainability by relying on advertisements, sponsorships, government ads, and affiliation with political parties.¹ The top 8 owners (Jang Group, ARY Group, Express Group, the Government Group, Nawa-i-Waqt Group, Samaa Group, Dawn Group, and Dunya Group) reach 68 percent of the audience share across television, radio, print, and online. All of them have a significant presence in more than one media sector.²

In Pakistan, many journalists believe that the traditional media ownership model, where a single investor or family holds control, has utterly failed.

¹Zahra, Noreen et al. Analysis of issues and challenges of Media and its Sustainability: A case study of Electronic Media in Pakistan, Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, Vol 5, Issue 2 (2022).

²GOP 2021.

This failure has harmed not only the financial stability of media outlets but also the freedom of journalists and the quality of journalism. Financial challenges have led media owners and management to succumb to increasing pressure from the state, including the government and security agencies, which are becoming less accepting of critical media coverage. As a result, advertisement revenues have diminished, and many prominent journalists and talk shows have been silenced or asked to self-censor. The Pakistani media outlets cling to outdated models of information and news cycles, disregarding the changing consumer behaviours and the fact that people are drifting to online sources in droves for news and information.

Furthermore, the television world is giving way to an even clamorous, anarchical world of social media, where, according to Arifa Noor, “vloggers and YouTubers have taken over from the anchors and analysts who replaced the writers and reporters”.³ In Pakistan, as elsewhere in the world, governments are figuring out ways to tame it. And as the battle continues, there are instances when the state seems to have scored a victory or two, while at others, social media triumphs over the state.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) regulates telecommunications and internet services, indirectly affecting the digital media landscape. It has the authority to block online content deemed inappropriate or against national interests. The most recent evidence of this practice is a nationwide Twitter (now X) ban that has been going on since mid-February 2024. The internet monitor Netblocks has confirmed a nationwide disruption to X ostensibly to quell the public discontent over allegations of election fraud. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has clearly warned that shutting down the internet or any social media platforms “bleed online businesses and commerce and adds to the misery of an already fragile and struggling economy”. Not to mention that such a ban “infringes on people’s right to democratic decision making, information and expression”.⁴

DEMOCRACY IN DECLINE

According to the Freedom House 2023 report, both the civilian authorities and military in Pakistan have curtailed media freedom in recent years. The PTI government (2018-2022) accelerated this trend, but it has become worse in recent years. Media outlets are facing interference with distribution and broadcast, the temporary disappearance of journalists, a ban on specific television presenters, physical attacks, and withdrawal of government advertising.

The media sector faced similar dangers under the PDM government (April 2022-August 2023). In August 2022, media regulators took the ARY News television channel off the air after a PTI official criticized the role and involvement of the military in Pakistani politics on a broadcast. “The official was arrested and charged with sedition and abetting mutiny”⁵. In October 2022, a gunman killed ARY News anchor Arshad Sharif in Kenya in an apparently targeted attack. Sharif fled to Kenya after receiving death threats.⁶ The military also prohibits movements and access to militancy-and insurgency-affected areas, impeding coverage of issues there. Authorities have ordered local journalists to refrain from discussing the separatist activity in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while rebel or militant groups threaten them when allegedly siding with the government, Freedom House notes.

The traditional media’s financial decline is because of two prominent reasons: declining money flow and censorship of political dissent. The second half of 2018 brought bad tidings for the media industry; even big and stable media groups have been forced to shut down their publications, removing journalists from their employment due to withdrawal of government subsidies and dwindling advertising revenue. It should also be noted that the pay cuts are widespread now and even traditionally reliable employers such as the Dawn Media Group have also induced them. Adnan Rehmat notes that The Express Media Group and Dunya Media Group also reportedly “laid off over 200 journalists, apart from cutting the salaries of the remaining workers by 15 to 35 percent in recent months”⁷. Only a few channels still manage to pay salaries to employees on time. An estimated 15 percent to 20 percent decrease in sales has been recorded by the newspaper industry in Pakistan, notwithstanding the emergence of new titles as non-legacy media groups have brought out newspapers. Due to the declining readership of English-language newspapers, telecom companies are investing their remaining ad-spends to Urdu-language TV channels.⁸ This also explains the closure of two English-language news channels since 2015.

⁴<https://www.dawn.com/news/1758241>

ibid.

⁵<https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2023>

⁶<https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2023>

⁷<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495230>

⁸<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495230>

The television rating points (TRP) system, simply put, is manipulated and non-transparent. First, PEMRA's control of rating marks a question on the independence of rating agencies. The rating is used to award advertisements to the channels. Five companies are licensed to conduct the electronic media rating business in the country but the company named MediaLogic has a monopoly on the rating service business, which calculates overall TRPs daily using people-metres. The sample size is just 2,000 households in over 30 cities to represent the whole population, which is itself not statistically representative. A report by PIDE on the issues and challenges of electronic media further addresses the challenges with the rating systems in Pakistan as they operate "just like a mafia in which big players set the stage, lacking reasoning".⁹ The business model of rating companies is dependent on media houses that depend on the advertisers. The model has resulted in the monopoly of advertisers under the name Pakistan Advertisers Society, which binds the members to buy ratings from the approved rating company. This can be further exploited by cable operators who could place a channel far below so that it is difficult to access and gets less view. Lastly, ratings are just representations of urban Pakistan – they exclude rural areas, resulting in a disproportionate coverage of rural issues.¹⁰

As noted earlier, censorship or controls by the state are further choking media credibility and survival. The country's long and arduous history with martial law and the subjugation of representative governments by the deep state have been facilitated through media control mechanisms. The government remains a big advertising client for the media and these adverts are used as a censorship tool that brings short-term gains for corporate media. Due to this brutal domination by the deep state, the existence of media independence has been mostly fictional, diluting the relationship with media consumers and hence contributing to the crisis of slowly killing off the media. "The media industry is collapsing not just because the money is being squeezed from government coffers but because the media legal regulatory regime, already not very supportive of media independence, is being used to muzzle the media," says Aftab Alam, the executive director of the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA), which campaigns for civil liberties.¹¹ Most of the media has become significantly less critical of government authorities compared to the past few years. During the PTI government's first year in power, it resorted to the continual suppression of media and wanted to bolster the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) which was passed during the earlier government of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). In this context, both political parties have

displayed an anti-democratic attitude towards media industry.¹²

Besides censorship, the lack of adherence to journalistic ethics has emerged as a major challenge in recent years. The political economy of the media suggests that economic and political elites use the media for their vested interests. Politicians and media owners exploit working journalists. Journalists are underpaid, and they are forced to indulge in unethical practices. Sensationalism, biased reporting, and the blurring of lines between news and propaganda have eroded public trust. There is a "race to cover breaking news has replaced the practice of news verification and source validation".¹³ There is an evident need for stronger ethical guidelines and training for journalists to ensure accuracy, impartiality, and responsible reporting. Furthermore, the age of digitisation is intensifying the perception amongst the masses that journalists are not performing their professional and ethical duties and responsibilities properly. The journalists, or anchors, on television screens may seem to discuss the problems of the country on their talk shows, but these have no productive outcome because they mostly discuss the issues with warring politicians and their divisive, polarising politics. Experts and professionals find little space on the mainstream, and this is why the media sector has been unable to inform public opinion on the huge challenges faced by the citizens of Pakistan. The coverage on education, health, climate change, and exploding population growth remains almost non-existent. Researchers have observed how mainstream TV debates resemble entertainment shows where guests, mostly politicians, insult opponents; some anchors even add fuel to the fire to attain scandalous fame.¹⁴

⁹<https://pide.org.pk/research/the-electronic-media-economy-in-pakistan-issues-and-challenges/>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495230>

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ali, S. W. (2021, June 16). Pakistan's electronic media-credibility crisis. Daily Times. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/773586/pakistans-electronic-media-credibility-crisis/>

¹⁴<https://www.ajpor.org/article/27243-perception-of-electronic-news-media-of-pakistan-in-the-digital-age>

CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Social media has transformed the media landscape, enabling real-time information sharing and public participation. Citizen journalism has been instrumental in covering social movements and protests in Pakistan. This is facilitated by the widespread use of smartphones and social media platforms. It has empowered ordinary citizens to report on events and issues in real-time, providing alternative perspectives to mainstream media narratives. For instance, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which advocates for the rights of the Pashtun community, received significant attention through citizen-reported content on social media, highlighting issues that were often under-reported in mainstream media. Social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube, offer opportunities for diverse voices to have political involvement and take part in knowledge production. They contribute to the accountability of those in power, especially when traditional media outlets are heavily censored and limited due to their financial models. In addition, they give coverage to dissenting voices, a case in point being the reach of the recent Baloch March amongst the general public through social media campaigns and hashtags.

However, decentralised media has also led to the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and online harassment. During the recent election period and post-election period, Pakistan has seen a proliferation of misinformation aimed at influencing public opinion and discrediting political opponents. False news stories, doctored images, and manipulated videos have been spread through social media platforms, leading to confusion and polarisation amongst voters. Anonymity on social media platforms gives the purveyors of false stories and trolls the comfort that they will not be held accountable for the lies or hate messages they disseminate. According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Risks Report 2024, the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, and tools to disseminate them, may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments in countries that are heading to polls in the coming months, including Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Mexico, the UK, and US¹⁵.

The state has been unable to engage with the rise of social media in a positive manner. Its playbook remains old-school: impose curbs and use coercive agencies to punish vloggers and social media users. It is, therefore, imperative for the incoming Parliament to initiate a debate on this and more importantly review PECA and other draconian laws to chart out a new path for a healthier media environment. In fact, coercive tactics would not fix the fake news issue. What is urgently needed in Pakistan and many other countries of the world is to launch media literacy campaigns. Schools and higher education curricula ought to address this issue. Citizen journalism is here to stay and there can be no alternative to creating an informed citizenry. Traditional and new media owners, the parliamentarians, and civil society at large all have a role to play in this direction. Otherwise, further polarisation and misinformation chaos might just tear apart Pakistani society.

The author is Editor-at-Large, The Friday Times and founder of Naya Daur Media. Earlier, he was Editor, Daily Times and a broadcaster with Express News and Capital TV. His writings are archived at www.razarumi.com.

¹⁵<https://www.dawn.com/news/1804883>

RESTORING THE ARBITER

Amber Rahim Shamsi

“Give me one authentic source of information?” I asked a group of students studying media studies at a university in Balochistan.

“Chat GPT,” was the reply.

“What’s wrong with AI-generated photos?” asked a few students in two different universities in two different provinces. One of them was an MPhil student.

If identifying authentic sources of information and news is hard for young people enrolled in higher education institutions who comprise a fraction of the population, imagine the scale of the problem.

For four months, I went to public universities across Pakistan trying to understand news consumption habits and teach information, digital and media literacy. The first question I would ask – sometimes to over a hundred graduate and undergraduate students – is where do you get your news? In 2024, it should be obvious that a vast majority got their news from social media, mostly YouTube, Facebook, X (Formerly Twitter) and to some extent Instagram. A couple of students still read newspapers, and a handful watched television. Most did not distinguish between mainstream news channels and individual journalists or news influencers.

This experience goes to the heart of the crisis of journalism, globally and in Pakistan. Information is abundant, information is currency, and information drives public opinion, but journalism and the news media are no longer the arbiters of the accuracy of that information.

The cynical amongst us would snigger. Mainstream news media is not wholly credible or independent, given how it is hostage to state, commercial and political patronage. But consider the replacement. Social media platforms profit off of misinformation and disinformation. As do news influencers and newstuffers, who are not bound by regulation or the old-school codes of authentication. The line between opinion and fact has become so blurred that the result is often information chaos.

Two years ago, BBC presenter and editor Ros Atkins issued a sort of clarion call for how journalism needs to evolve in a speech¹ to the Society of Editors in the UK. “News is not a given in people’s lives,” he said. “It can’t be assumed people will seek to learn about our world via journalism.” He’s not the only one who has raised this concern.

Every year, the Reuters Institute of Journalism at the Oxford University publishes a digital news report based on surveys with news managers across the world. Every year², news leaders have to find creative ways to tackle news fatigue, falling revenue, and rapidly changing methods of distribution. As Atkins described it, “It can’t be assumed that the way we tell stories is the way people want to hear them. Our place in people’s lives is not a guarantee.”

¹Ros Atkins, X. <https://twitter.com/BBCRosAtkins/status/1526286397207891975>

²Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2024. Reuters Institute. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2024#header-7>

Pakistan is amongst 40 democracies with scheduled elections this year. For the news media, elections are akin to the wedding season for clothes designers – viewership and readership spikes for TV and digital outputs, political advertisements and ratings contribute to revenue, and journalists at media organisations work over-time to feed the appetite for 24/7 election news. A few major media organisations hire and train a network of interns to assist with the vast amounts of work needed to gather and process news.

The 2024 election was no different. Like the 2018 election, new news channels looking to make a mark and make some money were launched prior to the elections. There are already 30 news channels in Pakistan, according to PEMRA's 2019-2020 annual report³, a few of which invest in reporting, news product development for different types of audiences or diverse programming. The only way to claim attention with so many channels is to hire expensive and recognisable anchors with a brand following and political influence. In other words, more of the same. Several TV channels have also changed ownership in the last couple of years, with new owners looking to peddle influence rather than out of a commitment to credible and creative journalism.

The election 2024 experience has yielded new promising trends, however, compared to 2018. For instance, digital advertising is now at par with or exceeding TV and print advertising (although it is unclear what proportion of ads are through private rather than government or political funding; for years, the news media has been dependent on government or political-influenced advertising for financing). As a result, TV output has adapted to new information delivery methods, by using reels on Instagram and YouTube for current affairs news shows. Major news websites have also ramped up social media lives, using TikTok to deliver news, or curate news through live pages or blogs with multimedia content.

Meanwhile, digital news and current affairs content as an alternative to traditional TV is on the rise. Reporters are increasingly finding acceptance and viewership on digital-first news and commentary shows. Of course, viewership for sensationalist peddlers of misleading or false information is still higher – the difference is often millions of views versus thousands – but at least there is some competition in the marketplace of information.

Serious podcasts hosts who provide depth and diversity have also come into their own in the three years leading up to the election. This is why politicians such

as Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Shahbaz Sharif or Imran Khan prior to his incarceration – ever savvy to where their constituents are watching them – chose to be interviewed by podcasters to pitch their election campaigns or propaganda. These podcasters may have a niche audience, but it is clearly an influential audience.

Clearly, the Pakistani news media landscape is adapting to changing audience preferences and digital-led revenue streams. But there are resource constraints. I asked one news editor how many people run their live blogs. She looked almost embarrassed when she replied, "It's just the two of us." Bad faith actors exploit the audience's emotional vulnerability and the media's ability to respond. So where there is hope, there is also chaos.

With audiences getting their information first on social media or unregulated digital spaces, it is easy to create confusion and doubt. In his book *Outrage Machine*, Tobias Rose-Stockwell writes, "The enemy of democracy is not necessarily an ambitious loud man. The enemy is actually confusion. As Steve Bannon said, referring to his political strategy, 'The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.'"

For example, when the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf chose to upload thousands of pages of election forms to its website or on social media to provide evidence of election rigging, not a single media organisation had the capacity to parse and verify their authenticity en masse. The system just couldn't cope.

Meanwhile, the state does not seem interested in election integrity or the consequences of controlling information. The Election Commission of Pakistan missed its deadline to compile and announce results the day after the election. It also missed another deadline to upload election forms within fourteen days of the elections. Continued censorship of various kinds only adds to the confusion. By suspending mobile phone services on election day or shutting down Twitter (X), the state doesn't just violate the rights of citizens to freely access information, it is an assault on independent journalism.

³Annual Report, 2019-2020. PEMRA. https://pemra.gov.pk/uploads/pub-rep/pemra_annual_report_19-20.pdf

How can media organisations and journalists try to recapture space lost to state interventions, and attention economics?

1. Digital first newsrooms. Pakistani news organisations need to invest more in full-scale and planned multimedia convergence. Convergence should not just be approached as a cost-cutting measure forced by external circumstances, but a profit-making strategy that privileges new ways of telling stories, and reaches less news literate or news-engaged audience groups.

2. Independent bodies. Media managers, unions, associations and development organisations should collaborate to resolve digital-age ethical dilemmas such as who is a journalist, should journalists be licensed, etc. and develop media bias ratings and independence certifications.

3. Innovation. AI does not need to be a bogeyman that causes job loss. It is already being used by newsrooms to generate human-assisted content, accelerate distribution, gather news and develop news products. Pakistani news management interested in good journalism should recognise this as an opportunity to use technology to cut costs so that resources can be diverted to original and investigative journalism. In addition, media organisations should invest in research and product development to reach audiences with weaker ties to traditional sources of information and boost the reach of public interest journalism.

4. Transparency. Journalism requires a certain set of skills such as investigative capabilities or communication abilities, in addition to an adherence to core journalism ethics and values. Media organisations should be open to showing their journalism process, to enhance trust and the value of journalism.

It may seem like a lot of work to restore journalism's place as an arbiter of accurate information. But the consequences of doing nothing are far greater than the effort it would take to try.

The author is the Director of the Centre of Excellence in Journalism at the IBA University, a professional development centre which combines industry experience with academic rigour to try and raise journalism standards.





RESHAPING MEDIA IN PAKISTAN

Matiullah Jan

In 1999 soldiers had to climb the iron gates of state-run Pakistan Television (PTV) only to overthrow a government. In 2002, dozens of private TV channels were licensed to operate in Pakistan. Many analysts would gleefully predict that dictators would then not be able to climb up the entry gates of so many TV channels and hence military takeover had become difficult if not altogether impossible. Subsequent events have proved otherwise. The whole private media industry was legally and commercially structured in a way that it could not act, grow or compete freely with quality content whilst remaining dependent on government largesse. Thanks to the so-called cross media ownership permission in 2007 the traditionally independent newspaper industry also got dragged into the arbitrary broadcast regulatory regime. As resourceful newspapers launched their capital-intensive private television projects, they readily compromised their historic independence in order to remain afloat.

Ironically, a dictator like General Musharraf was compelled by strategic level doctrine of necessity to allow private television channels. Two incidents were the proverbial last straw on the camels back, the 1998 Kargil adventure and Indian plane hijack in the year 2000. Dozens of English and Hindi channels in India gave a bloody nose to Pakistan's narrative on both occasions. This led to the establishment of Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) through a presidential decree wherein initiatives from traditional deep thinking print editors shifted to quick thinking television directors with feet of clay.

In order to save their huge financial investment in television channels and the higher returns on the same, the cross-media owners started grate-crashing editors' rooms, ultimately occupying the chairs to defend their business interests instead of the people's fundamental right to free speech and information. It is this legacy of steel structured regulatory mould that keeps Pakistani media industry a hostage to state institutions; which is besides the problem of obvious extra-constitutional and extra-judicial coercive and intimidating tactics that are employed with impunity. The advent of digital/social media has on the one side weakened state control on information flow but has also led to more coercive measures and intimidating tactics by state institutions.

With the above political/legal/professional history of Pakistani media and its regulatory framework we cannot ignore the extra-constitutional military takeovers and their lingering hangovers on our power and media regulatory structures today. No matter how many legal or logical reforms we introduce to our media industry to ensure freedom of press and access to information, these are rendered redundant when the lives or livelihoods of journalists and the businesses of their employers solely depends on the whims and wishes of the powerful state institutions – some of whom have become powerful business monopolies in themselves.

In this context, the following suggestions about media reforms are proposed – which will inevitably be contingent upon the overall state of democracy and fundamental rights of citizens in Pakistan.

INTENTIONS OF REFORMS

Starting with the question of reforms in media, it is needless to emphasise that such reforms can only be introduced with the sole objective of promoting democracy and a free press in Pakistan. The purpose of all such reforms should be to enforce Article 19 of the Constitution with its true intent: first promoting freedom of speech and thereafter imposing reasonable restrictions by law (not unlawful intimidating measures). Only with this intent of the government can any media reforms take place.

STRUCTURAL REFORMATION

The current media regulatory structure gives more controlling powers to the state through arbitrary business allocation to media houses, stringent control of regulatory bodies like the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), and illegal intimidating/coercive measures adopted by state institutions against the media in general and journalists in particular. The lack of self-regulatory structures has disabled the media industry from learning and building its own capacity for internal accountability over a long period. Some state institutions, including military business enterprises, now have immense influence on private businesses, which are a major source of media income. The government and the state ought to loosen their regulatory stranglehold over media and allow for greater ownership of organisations like PEMRA and the PTA to ensure press freedom and fair competition in the media industry. The PEMRA law needs to be amended to make the forum more independent and autonomous in its relationship with the government. PEMRA and PTA board members from all segments of society, including government officials, should be sufficiently qualified to make important decisions in protecting freedoms and national interests. The government should not have veto power unless the same is exercised through legislation in extreme circumstances. The reformed regulatory bodies should develop non-intrusive and non-punitive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to publish an annual credibility index of media outlets to raise public awareness and build public pressure on the media for the enforcement of ethical standards. This will automatically weed out undesired and substandard sources of public information over time. Such credibility index evaluations can become a basis for the distribution of government and even private business advertisements. Scores of substandard dummy print publications, allegedly owned by some corrupt elements in the government's information department,

need to be immediately removed from the government's advertisement list.

SOCIAL MEDIA REFORMS

The perception about social media being the biggest enemy of society needs to be revised; particularly considering that the state has been deliberately developed to curb free speech. Social media platforms provide an instantaneous expression of thoughts without the filters of traditional and professional content creators. Now, should we as a society ban it or adapt ourselves to the new realities of the Information Age? The current thinking of introducing stringent social media rules is retrogressive. Pakistan cannot afford to become a social media outcast in the digital world. Instead of being afraid of our own youth and their ideas, we should channelise their energies and enable them to forcefully counter propaganda. Mere blacking out of the information will not only push them back to a primitive and obsolete mindset but also obstruct them from competing with new future trends. The youth in Pakistan should be trained and empowered to compete in the digital media industry around the world through a revised syllabus in our educational institutions. There shouldn't be any ban on social media platforms due to the fear of some state institution being exposed with its unconstitutional acts. With such blanket bans, the counter-narrative of the state may prevail for a while, but it will push back the society and its youth by many years on the world stage. The powerful state institutions must set their own house in order instead of perpetuating disorder through the shortsighted policy of silencing the youth. Social media platforms are not just a source of information but are now fast becoming a source of income and business for the people and their countries. The state institutions must not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

GOVERNMENT ROLE

The only role of a government in dealing with the media is to ensure free speech and access to information. In doing so, they cannot arrogate to themselves the so-called right to control media in the name of 'reasonable restrictions' referred to in Article 19 of the Constitution. The government ought to protect the lives and liberties of its citizens from threats and intimidation. Particularly, journalists under threat, being the eyes and ears of the society, ought to be granted constitutional protection, as also mentioned in Article 19 that "there shall be freedom of the press." The federal and provincial governments must operationalise their existing law on Journalists Safety by establishing respective bodies therein. The government

also provides financial support to journalists and media organisations, due to which it has leverage upon them. This leverage is, however, used for personal and political purposes instead of ensuring quality information. The journalists' bodies and press clubs across Pakistan have become a bottomless pit for government funds, which are dished out without ensuring that these only reach professional journalists. The government-sponsored subsidised plots and housing schemes for the journalists have added another dimension to the crisis of credibility in the media unions and press clubs.

A large number of press clubs give out thousands of memberships to non-journalists to qualify for public funds and government land. The government ought to force such media bodies and press clubs to introduce biometric and other educational qualifications for their memberships before they could be given access to public funds. Such filters will ensure not only the fair utilisation of public funds but also filter out undesired and unprofessional elements in the media industry. In the end, I must warn the reformists that unless countries like Pakistan are fully democratised and media and judiciary made independent, no amount of reforms can help the media sector. Reforms under hybrid regimes can only lead to a short-term gain for the governments but a long-term loss for the society – which will become a social media outcast on the world stage.

The author is a Chevening scholar, court correspondent, media law expert, anchorperson with Neo TV and host of the YouTube channel, MJtv.



THE PRECARIOUS PATH OF PAKISTAN'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE:

Navigating Freedom, Regulation, and Sustainability

Marvi Sirmed

In the 75-plus years since Pakistan's independence, its media landscape has witnessed dramatic transformations. From the tightly controlled state narratives of its early decades to the explosion of private channels in the early 2000s and now the rise of the digital sphere, Pakistani media navigates a complex terrain marked by both vibrant freedoms and persistent constraints.

WEAPONISING THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AGAINST FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Pakistan's legal and regulatory framework presents a complex web of restrictions that can be used to silence dissent and curtail freedom of expression. Whilst a recent court decision struck down a colonial-era sedition law¹, stringent defamation laws are also used to silence criticism of powerful individuals or institutions. The threat of lengthy legal battles and hefty fines often deter journalists and activists from speaking out.

Additionally, Pakistan's blasphemy laws are highly controversial and often misused by zealots who instigate vigilante violence on mere accusations. This creates a climate of fear and discourages any expression deemed even remotely offensive to religious sensibilities. In the past, allegations of this kind have been used against dissenting voices² to criminalise criticism of the government or military, effectively chilling dissent.

Most importantly, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has broad powers to regulate electronic media content. It can take punitive actions like fines or suspensions against outlets deemed critical of the government or military.

Pakistan's cybercrime laws grant authorities broad powers to monitor online activity and restrict content.

Despite the fact that these laws are often used to target online dissent and activism, the regulatory frameworks lag behind the rapidly evolving media environment. Laws developed for traditional outlets struggle to address issues like online harassment, disinformation, and hate speech.

CENSORSHIP AND SHRINKING SPACES FOR DISSENT

In Pakistan, censorship manifests in various forms, ranging from direct intervention by state authorities to more insidious methods such as economic pressures exerted through advertising revenues and threats of violence against journalists and media houses for reporting on sensitive issues such as corruption, military influence, and human rights abuses. According to a report by Freedom Network³, Pakistan ranked as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, with numerous instances of attacks and harassment reported annually.

The shrinking space for dissent is further exacerbated by legal instruments, such as the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), which has been criticised for its broad and vague definitions that enable arbitrary restrictions on online speech. The introduction of new regulatory measures targeting digital media platforms has raised alarms about the potential for increased surveillance and control over digital discourse.

¹AlJazeera Staff. (2023, March 30). Pakistani court strikes down sedition law in win for free speech. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/30/pakistani-court-strikes-down-sedition-law-in-win-for-free-speech#:~:text=A%20court%20in%20Pakistan%27s%20eastern,declared%20the%20sedition%20law%20unconstitutional> accessed on March 3, 2024

²Pakistan: widening crackdown on dissent. (2024, January 17). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/pakistan-widening-crackdown-dissent> accessed on March 5, 2024

³Freedom Network. (n.d.). Women in Media and Digital Journalists in the Crosshairs of Threat Actors in Pakistan. <https://www.fnpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/FINAL-Pakistan-Press-Freedom-Report-2022.pdf> accessed on March 5, 2024

IMPACT ON QUALITY OF JOURNALISM

Threats, harassment, and, in extreme cases, even violence against journalists critical of the military establishment create a chilling effect on the entire media industry. Journalists choose to self-censor or avoid reporting altogether to protect their safety. Fear of reprisal leads journalists to avoid critical investigations, especially those touching on sensitive topics like human rights abuses, military involvement in politics, or corruption within powerful institutions.

The pervasive culture of self-censorship, where journalists and editors pre-emptively avoid topics that could attract reprisal, leads to underreporting on critical issues. This not only deprives the public of necessary information but also limits the media's role in holding power to account, a fundamental pillar of democratic societies.

This creates blind spots and hinders the ability of journalism to hold power accountable. The case of journalists Ahmad Noorani and Shahid Aslam is eye-opening in this regard. In an investigative report in November 2022, Noorani, who contributed to the platform from exile, published the details of the assets held by Qamar Javed Bajwa (General, Rtd), then Chief of Army Staff, and his family. Following which, the Pakistan government blocked⁴ domestic access to FactFocus⁵, and later arrested Shahid Aslam, the journalist who had allegedly contributed to the story from ground, which Aslam vehemently denied⁶. During his incarceration, he was psychologically tortured, blackmailed⁷, and coerced to confess his involvement in leaking COAS's data, or he would face charges under the infamous Official Secrets Act⁸ 1923 (the colonial era law, which after its amendment in 2023 granted excessive powers to the intelligence agencies to arrest civilians with impunity⁹). His laptop and cell phones were confiscated¹⁰, which were never returned to him, putting his sources in danger. Aslam remained in custody for over nine months, which left him jobless, ostracised, and under severe depression¹¹.

This is just one example of how journalists are coerced, tortured, and blackmailed into submission. The ultimate victim in this and all such cases is not just the journalist in question; it is also the investigative journalism that gets closer to its painful death with every such case. When journalists self-censor, they withhold crucial information or tailor their reporting to appease certain groups. This undermines the credibility and objectivity of journalism, making it difficult for the public to trust what they are being told.

Self-censorship, then, leads to a homogenisation of content, with journalists avoiding controversial topics and focusing on safe, uncritical reporting. This reduces the diversity of viewpoints available to the public.

Despite these challenges, Pakistan's media is far from monolithic. There remain courageous journalists and outlets producing critical, investigative work, often at great personal risk. The public's appetite for diverse perspectives fuels a degree of pluralism, particularly in the urban centres. Yet, this also produces a fragmented media landscape, with audiences retreating into ideological echo chambers that limit meaningful public debate.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

In addition to all of the above, other factors like the Government's restrictions on access to information make it difficult for journalists to gather facts and report on critical issues. This is further complicated by the way political parties and the deep state have weaponised disinformation and deliberate distortion of facts for their own advantage. Civilian governments and pro-democracy forces, instead of utilising resources to debunk conspiracy theories and bust the disinformation by easing journalists' access to information, use legal framework, regulatory mechanisms, executive power, and state-owned media outlets to promote their agenda and control the narrative.

⁴Connection, D. (2022, November 28). Pakistani website blocked after investigating the country's army chief | Digital Watch Observatory. Digital Watch Observatory. <https://dig.watch/updates/pakistani-website-blocked-after-investigating-the-countrys-army-chief>

⁵Fact Focus website censored for investigating Pakistan's army chief. (n.d.). RSF. <https://rsf.org/en/fact-focus-website-censored-investigating-pakistan-s-army-chief> accessed on Feb 29, 2024

⁶Journalist Shahid Aslam denies involvement in leaking ex-Army chief's tax data. (n.d.). <https://www.journalismpakistan.com/journalist-shahid-aslam-denies-involvement-in-leaking-ex-army-chiefs-tax-data> accessed on Feb 29, 2024

⁷Ahsan Wahid. (2023, January 16). I was being mentally tortured. Journalist Shahid Aslam [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcLRVkr_Hlk accessed on Feb 29, 2024

⁸Official Secrets Act, 1923 (Pakistan). (n.d.). Pakistan Code, Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of Pakistan. <https://pakistancode.gov.pk/pdf/files/administrator46c9a3c62acc16428e73999e7d30ba2a.pdf> accessed on March 3, 2024

⁹Baloch, S. M. (2023, August 2). Pakistan government faces backlash over 'draconian' arrest powers. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/02/pakistan-government-faces-backlash-over-draconian-arrest-powers#:~:text=The%20Pakistan%20government%20is%20facing,and%20arrest%20citizens%20with%20impunity> accessed on Feb 29, 2024

¹⁰Zake, A. F. (2023, January 16). Bajwa data leak: Journalist Shahid Aslam sent on physical remand. The News International. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1031281-bajwa-data-leak-journalist-shahid-aslam-sent-on-physical-remand> accessed on Feb 29, 2024

¹¹Desk, W., & Desk, W. (2023, September 28). The 9-month-long trial made journalist Shahid Aslam suffer from depression -. Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF). <https://www.pakistanpressfoundation.org/the-9-month-long-trial-made-journalist-shahid-aslam-suffer-from-depression/> accessed on Feb 29, 2024

The resultant unavailability of unbiased information distorts public perceptions about the political processes and even democracy on the whole. A lack of critical reporting on the security apparatus' role in politics and society and its actions has led to a lack of transparency and accountability, which has proven bad not just for democracy but has also tarnished the public image of the security forces of Pakistan. In the absence of credible information and quality journalism, citizens are deprived of crucial information that they need to make informed decisions and hold their government accountable.

When journalism is compromised, public trust in media outlets and journalists erodes. Citizens may turn to unreliable sources of information, succumbing to the dangers of information malfunction (disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, fake news), further hindering a healthy democracy. The threat of violence and loss of employment and revenue, one of the most pervasive factors in media over the last decade, has also been a major factor in dictating the editorial policy of major media platforms. Hence, important issues facing Pakistan, like human rights abuses, corruption, or social problems, may go under-reported due to these pressures.

The curtailment of freedom of expression/information and erosion of civil liberties undermines the foundations of democracy, as a well-informed citizenry is crucial for democratic participation and accountability. Despite the factors mentioned above creating a significant challenge to free and independent media in the country, it is important to note that courageous journalists in Pakistan continue to report critically.

TOWARDS A RESILIENT MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Addressing the challenges faced by Pakistan's media requires a multi-pronged strategy that involves all stakeholders, including the government, media organisations, civil society, and the international community. Key to this endeavour is the establishment of a regulatory environment that protects rather than penalises freedom of expression alongside reforms that ensure the economic sustainability of media houses.

Outdated models for broadcast licensing and outdated advertisement-based revenue systems strain the economic viability of media organisations, especially smaller or independent outlets. Those willing to challenge powerful interests find themselves further squeezed by withheld government advertising or pressure on private advertisers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

Although learning from the best practices is important, it must be kept in mind that each country has a unique context. So, reforms must consider historical legacies, legal frameworks, and the current political climate. Taking into account our peculiar track record of democracy and state attitude towards fundamental freedoms, Pakistan can work on the following in order to strengthen independent media and fulfill constitutional guarantees of freedom of information and expression to its citizens:

For Policy Makers:

1. **Legal Reforms:** Amend or repeal restrictive laws, such as PECA, to ensure they are in line with international standards on freedom of expression. Decriminalise defamation to protect journalists from punitive legal actions.
2. **Beyond Laws:** Reform involves changing power dynamics, building public trust, and cultivating journalistic professionalism. Therefore, there is a need to look beyond laws and create an overall environment for ethical discourse, strong democratic attitudes, respect for law and constitutional guarantees, the rule of law, and holding unfettered and absolute power of state institutions accountable. This means true media freedom would require sustained pressure from civil society, media organisations, and international partners.
3. **Independent Regulatory Bodies:** Establish or reform existing media regulatory bodies to ensure their independence from political influence, focusing on promoting media freedom and diversity. Revise PEMRA's powers, ensuring greater transparency and limiting its scope for arbitrary censorship. Restrict Pakistan Telecommunications Authority's (PTA) role in arbitrary blockages of the internet and suspension of websites/digital platforms. This power, if it is necessary to keep, must be conditioned with court orders.
4. **Protection Mechanisms:** Create an independent body with clear mandates to investigate threats against journalists and hold perpetrators accountable. Establish a rapid response system for journalists facing harassment.
5. **Institutional Independence:** Guarantee the autonomy of public broadcasters and regulatory bodies and insulate them from political interference.
6. **Access to Information:** Improve the existing RTI law to ensure it facilitates investigative journalism and greater government transparency.

7. **Economic Support for Independent Media:** Introduce measures to support the economic viability of independent media, such as tax incentives, grants for investigative journalism, and subsidies for media training programs.

For Media Organisations:

1. **Solidarity and Self-Regulation:** Develop industry-wide standards for ethical journalism. Establish collective legal defence mechanisms to support journalists facing harassment.
2. **Investigative Focus:** Invest resources in investigative units to produce public interest reporting, even with a smaller volume of output. Build partnerships for cross-border collaborations to navigate censorship.
3. **Alternative Revenue Models:** Explore membership-driven models, foundation grants, and non-profit structures to diversify income sources.
4. **Digital Literacy and Safety:** Invest in digital literacy campaigns to empower citizens and journalists to navigate digital spaces safely and critically whilst enhancing their resilience against misinformation. Train journalists in digital security, verification tools, and adapting content for online platforms.
5. **Diversifying Ownership:** Whilst difficult, encouraging less concentrated media ownership can make outlets less susceptible to takeovers or financial pressure tactics from actors aligned with the military establishment. Enact regulations that require full disclosure of media ownership, including any affiliations with political or military entities, to combat conflicts of interest and ensure editorial independence.
6. **International Collaboration:** Engage with international bodies and learn from global best practices in media reform, adapting successful models to the local context.

For Civil Society:

1. **Coordinated Advocacy:** Form broad coalitions with human rights groups and professional associations to amplify the pressure on policymakers. Leverage international human rights mechanisms to spotlight Pakistan's media crisis.
2. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Educate citizens on the importance of a free press, how to identify disinformation, and how to support independent media.
3. **Journalist Support:** Provide legal aid, temporary relocation assistance for high-risk journalists, and psychosocial support services.
4. **Documentation:** Rigorously document attacks on journalists and media restrictions to bolster advocacy efforts.

As is evident from the above-listed recommended measures, addressing the current problems facing Pakistan's media sector requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including the government, civil society, media organisations, and the international community. Implementing comprehensive media reforms is not only critical for enhancing the quality of journalism but also for safeguarding human rights and strengthening the democratic fabric of the country.

In conclusion, the media landscape in Pakistan stands at a critical juncture, reflecting the broader struggles of a society striving for democratic ideals in the face of enduring challenges. The path forward demands not only resilience and adaptation from media practitioners but also a commitment from the state and society to uphold the principles of freedom, transparency, and diversity that are essential for a thriving democracy.

The author is a freelance journalist, human rights defender, and Visiting Professor at the University of Connecticut, USA.



WALKING THE TIGHTROPE OF JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN

*Picture Credits: DAWN

Bismah Mughal

Growing up in Pakistan, a land where the daily back-drop involves navigating through chaos and encountering injustice at every turn, my youth was shaped by these omnipresent challenges. These were not just distant issues discussed in the news; they were realities that unfolded in the streets around me, in the lives of people I knew.

This early exposure to societal disparities didn't just ignite a spark of activism within me; it compelled me to channel my energy into writing. Writing wasn't just a way to express my growing angst but it became my protest, a means to connect with, understand, and bring to light the stories and complexities of the world I lived in.

RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF RATINGS

When I entered the field of digital media at the age of 21, filled with idealistic visions of what journalism was and could be, I was quickly acquainted with a different reality. I found myself amidst a dichotomy that split the newsroom: those who upheld the tenets of journalism on one side and those who would willingly bend them for monetary gains on the other. As time passed, I watched the group of idealists diminish as they were either outnumbered or overwhelmed by the financial imperatives of the industry.

This shift was symptomatic of a broader trend in Pakistani media, where the battle for ratings often overshadows the quest for truth. With more than a hundred channels competing for the audience's attention, the essence of journalism—informing the public and safeguarding democracy—began to erode. The once revered pillars of our profession were now being undercut by a system that prioritised sensationalism and controversy over substantive reporting.

FROM WATCHDOGS TO MOUTHPIECES

Today's media landscape often favours spectacle over substance. The once sacred space of news broadcasting has been invaded by theatrical displays of political confrontation. The formula is straightforward: two opposing politicians, a live broadcast, a contentious issue, and an anchor to fan the flames. The ensuing debate is seldom about reaching a constructive conclusion; instead, it's a performance where the loudest and most provocative soundbites win the day.

Such broadcasts, though lucrative for the channels, do little to advance public understanding or contribute to meaningful discourse. They serve to entertain rather than educate, to provoke rather than inform. As a journalist, reporting on these exchanges felt redundant, as the same talking points and arguments were recycled in a seemingly endless loop, devoid of any real insight or progress.

MORE CHANNELS, FEWER FUNDS

In an environment where new channels emerge with the regularity of the seasons, the economic pressures on existing media houses intensify. Shrinking budgets mean that corners are cut, and one of the first casualties is often the quality and depth of journalism. Investigative reporting, with its demands for time, resources, and expertise, becomes a luxury few can afford.

The resulting shift in content is stark. We've moved from journalism that probes, questions, and enlightens to one that settles for the expedient and the economical. Yet, whilst it may be cheaper to produce, this brand of journalism comes at a significant cost to society. The real, pressing stories—those of the common man, the struggles of the marginalised, the

tales of triumph and tragedy that form the fabric of our nation—are increasingly eclipsed by facile content designed for easy consumption and quick returns.

OBJECTIVITY IS A THING OF THE PAST

In this climate, the traditional journalistic pursuit of objectivity is often called into question. Can journalists truly remain neutral arbiters in the face of social and political upheaval? Is it possible to detach from one's own perspectives and prejudices when reporting on issues that are deeply intertwined with the fabric of our society?

Amongst the younger generation of journalists, there's a discernible shift in attitude. Objectivity is seen not just as unattainable but also potentially harmful, a guise of fairness that can obscure truth and perpetuate inequality. The growing consensus is that perhaps we need to redefine what it means to be a journalist in Pakistan. Instead of striving for an impersonal detachment, we might aim for a journalism that is rooted in honesty about our viewpoints and is forthright about the positions from which we report.

In grappling with these challenges, it's clear that the answer doesn't lie in discarding the principles of our profession but in adapting them to the realities of our times. This adaptation doesn't mean surrendering to subjectivity or allowing our personal biases to dominate our reporting. Rather, it calls for a more nuanced approach to journalism—one that recognises the impossibility of absolute neutrality and seeks instead to provide context, understanding, and a multiplicity of perspectives.

CROSSING INVISIBLE LINES

In the years I've spent in Pakistani newsrooms, I've felt the pulse of press freedom, its ebbs and flows, its palpitations and pauses. There were instances that stood out, moments when the autonomy of journalism seemed less like a right and more like a concession, granted or retracted at someone else's whim. I've seen the invisible red lines drawn by unseen hands, and the cautionary tales of those who dared to cross them. I've witnessed the quiet editing of stories, the softening of headlines, and the selective silences that speak volumes of the stories left on the cutting room floor.

Censorship in Pakistan often wears a cloak of subtlety. It rarely needs to raise its voice when a whisper will suffice. Despite not having worked in the industry as long as many of my colleagues, I remember being gently nudged away from topics that were too sensitive,

or finding that certain angles on a story were discouraged. There was always this undercurrent of understanding that to play it safe was to keep the peace, to ensure the continuation of one's work, albeit within confines that were never formally outlined but always keenly felt.

My experiences are not isolated; they form part of a collective narrative of restraint that many Pakistani journalists know all too well. The restraint isn't just about what gets reported, but also about what doesn't. It's the interviews that are never aired, the investigative pieces that are indefinitely 'pending approval', and the news segments that are abruptly pulled off the air. The reason given is often 'editorial discretion', a phrase that has become all too familiar, a mask for the underlying pressures that guide such decisions.

There's an economic undertow to this censorship, too. Like many of my colleagues, I've seen how financial imperatives can also lead to compromises in coverage. Media outlets reliant on advertising by certain powerful figures must navigate the tricky waters between reporting the truth and maintaining a revenue stream. It's a balancing act that often tips in favour of economic survival over editorial independence.

The true challenge before us is not the abandonment of journalistic tenets but their evolution to suit the era we live in. This evolution isn't about yielding to biases or compromising the accuracy of our narratives. It's about embracing a journalism that appreciates the complexity of our world, a journalism that's not shackled by the illusion of perfect neutrality but is instead anchored in the rich soil of context and diverse viewpoints.

In our pursuit, we must forge a media landscape that prioritises substance over spectacle, champions the stories that dive deep into the essence of Pakistan, and treats its audience with intellectual respect. We must hold up a mirror to society that does not flinch from the reflection it shows, one that portrays the multitude of colours and contrasts that define us.

This is our mandate: to build anew the trust that has been eroded between the public and the press. It is only with this trust that our democracy can thrive. As members of the Pakistani media, we carry the weight of this responsibility. It is a weight we must bear with honour and a steadfast commitment to the truth, for it is the truth that will ultimately set us free.

The author is a multimedia journalist based in Vancouver, Canada and currently pursuing her Masters in Journalism at the University of British Columbia. She is associated with Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and has previously worked for The Express Tribune and Geo News in Pakistan.



CONCERNS OF INTELLIGENTSIA IN PAKISTAN: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPERS

Nadeem Ul Haque and Arif Sheikh

A content analysis of a sample of daily newspapers in Pakistan reveals that they devote extensive space to international news. Domestic news is usually entirely confined to the statements of politicians and political parties with very little space given to economic issues or court proceedings.¹

Modern-day society relies on the media, an important component of which is newspapers, to disseminate information. In order to perform this role well, the media has to be comprehensive in its coverage. It has to inform the citizenry efficiently on the diverse matters that affect Pakistani society. Modern scientific, economic, and social development depends to a large extent on such diffusion of knowledge by means of the media. Such an argument is often cited in support of the drive for mass literacy in many planning and intellectual circles.

Although the media comprises radio, television, and newspapers, there are two reasons why we have chosen to concentrate this study on newspapers only. First, like many other developing economies and emerging democracies like Pakistan, the audio-visual media, radio, and TV, are controlled by the government. Consequently, like most public sector-owned enterprises, one cannot take this section of the media to be operating according to well-defined market principles. To the extent that they are being run on non-market lines, market preferences cannot be deduced by means of content analysis. Second, all academic jobs as well as academic journals too, are in the public sector. Moreover, these journals tend to be very specialised and do not encourage academic debate. As a result, most Pakistani academics publish in newspapers and the few monthly and weekly magazines. The content analysis,

especially of the editorial/opinion page, therefore, reflects, in some sense, the opinions of the intelligentsia. The debates and opinions expressed on these pages are important to study as they eventually shape the country's policy agenda. Syllabi of elite training institutes such as the civil service academy, where senior civil servants are trained, draw upon the writings on the opinion pages of newspapers. The columnists and writers of these columns are often the main lecturers at such places. It is, therefore, important to determine the areas that this intellectual elite considers worthy of attention.

This paper attempts to determine, albeit a little crudely, the extent to which newspapers fulfill their role as informants of society and watchdogs for the interests of the people. For this purpose, we attempt to develop some quantification of the coverage of newspapers. Such quantification is an important source for discovering and informing the newspaper readership on editorial preferences and decisions. If enough such information is made available, perhaps the readers and editorial interests will be better mediated. It is, therefore, hoped that this line of research will be pursued by others and perhaps even on a continuous basis to keep everyone on their toes.

Unfortunately, because of the lack of resources, our research had to be quite restricted. We were, however, able to cover six major newspapers, four English and two Urdu, but were unable to undertake a study of the news magazines.

¹An extended version of this article originally appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29 – June 11th, 1994.

For the selected papers, we covered only the more important sections such as the main headline, the opinion page, the editorials, and the letters to the editor. Our intention was to classify the news, opinion, and analysis appearing in newspapers into categories that are meaningful. The primary intent of this research was to determine the priority that editors and opinion-writers give to international versus domestic issues. Furthermore, within domestic issues, what weights do they lay on economic, social, and court-related issues.

Bearing these considerations in mind, we attempted a classification into five main categories: international news, current political situation, social news, economic news, and court-related news. International news represents views and events on issues such as Bosnia, Kashmir, Afghanistan, the new world order, central Asia, etc. All political statements and announcements of the politicians in the government as well as in the opposition, including rallies and press conferences of all prominent political parties and leaders, are classified in the category of political pronouncement. The conjecture is that statements by these leaders are only made for the promotion of their own careers. Within court decisions too, a distinction was made between those of an economic and a political nature. Since religion remains an important item for discussion in Pakistan, a classification for pieces that focused on religion was also maintained. In ideal circumstances of well-funded research, perhaps all the sections of the newspaper would be classified on a daily basis in terms of the actual space that was devoted to each category. Such research would be able to develop many more categories and could even assign pieces to multiple categories.

Within these main categories, we attempted some form of quality judgment. In the social and economic categories, we attempted to define three sub-classifications. In the course of the analysis, it appeared that there were too many pieces that were quite full of platitudes like 'Pakistan as an Islamic State', 'declining moral values', 'corruption', 'lament on poverty or illiteracy', 'exhorting self-reliance', etc. We termed such pieces 'conventional wisdom/dogma'.

The quality pieces that we were looking for were either investigative pieces on any current economic or social phenomenon, or an interesting facet of government policy or administration as it affected those areas, or analytical informative pieces in the economic and social areas. Pieces that fell into this category were classified into a category termed as 'investigative or report of public complaint'. Consequently, factual reporting of an event such as a seminar or a government policy

announcement was termed just that, 'Factual reporting of a significant event'.

We have randomly selected about 156 newspapers (from January to October 1992) for data collection. As mentioned above, our analysis included four English newspapers (i.e., The Nation, The News, Frontier Post, Dawn) and two Urdu newspapers (Jang and Nawa-i-Waqt). The attempt was to draw randomly about 25 issues from each of these newspapers from the 10-month period, January to October 1992. Even for a limited exercise such as this, the sampling ratio is not bad. We were able to sample about 8 percent of the population which, by most standards, is quite reasonable.

Because of resource constraints, no attempt was made to cover the entire newspaper. Instead, four areas that are probably the most important in the paper were covered: (i) the main headline, which reports what the editor considers most important; (ii) the editorials, which present the views of the editor on issues that the editor considers important; (iii) the opinion page, which reflects the views of the elite, columnists, thinkers, and the well-known; and (iv) letters to the editor, which reflect the concerns of the ordinary reader. We are therefore able to contrast the views of three important actors in this business: the editors, the intellectual elite, and the ordinary reader.

MAIN HEADLINE

The most important part of a newspaper is the main headline. The main headline is what is printed in the boldest and largest letters. It is what the street hawkers used to shout out in bygone days to attract buyers. The achievement of a headline story remains the dream of many a reporter and the stuff of which many Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Cagney, and Edward Robinson films were made. Headline and headline stories also reflect the preferences of editors and/or owners of newspapers, and many an owner like the famous William Randolph Hearst used them to considerable political advantage. Crusader-editors have been known to use headlines for their favourite cause.

Unfortunately, third-world governments have learnt this lesson well and have attempted directly, as well as indirectly, to control the headline in favour of the incumbent regime. Editors are persuaded by many means, which include both the carrot and the stick, to favour the incumbent for headline space.

Our analysis of the newspapers in Pakistan focused on the headline in view of its importance to public

perceptions. We analysed all the stories in the main headline and categorized them according to their content as discussed above. Table I presents the results. Evidence suggests that the editor's favourite topics for headline news are international topics and political pronouncements of our politicians. They devote roughly 35 percent of all headline space to international events and some 33 percent to political pronouncements. Although data on newspapers from other countries were not immediately available to us, our hypothesis would be that our newspapers are perhaps more international than they need to be. Moreover, given the attention that political pronouncements receive, newspapers seem to be either under the influence of the government, or remain in anticipation of some benefit from politicians. Some factual reporting of some social event or happening is what can be termed the third favourite, receiving about 27 percent of the total headline space. However, judging from the evidence of the content analysis, the economy or court-related stories are certainly not what headlines are made of in Pakistan.

As per our findings, there is a clear divide in the treatment of issues between English and Urdu newspapers. Perhaps in keeping with the desires of their Oxbridge-educated and influenced audience, English newspapers devote a lot of their headline space to reporting international events. Of the total English-newspaper headlines sampled, about 52 percent related to some international event. In contrast, Urdu newspapers devoted only 19 percent of their headline space to international news. The largest category to which headline space was devoted in Urdu newspapers was 'political announcements'. About 42 percent of sampled headline space was given to the reporting of announcements, press conferences, etc. of political figures from both sides of the spectrum. This was the second largest category for the English newspapers, using up about 23 percent of total headline space.

The next most important contender for headline space is the category of factual reporting of an event of a social or political character. This is the second-most important category that editors of Urdu newspapers like to use for a headline. About 33 percent of headline space in Urdu newspapers is devoted to it. English editors, however, are not so generous in their assessment of this category and give it only 21 percent of their headline space. For them, this is third in importance after international news and politicians' announcements.

Interestingly enough, both economic matters and news related to court proceedings receive more attention in Urdu papers than English newspapers. Whilst Urdu newspapers devote about 3 percent of their headline space to economic matters, English newspapers allow only 2 percent of their space to be used for economic affairs. Similarly, Urdu newspapers and English newspapers devote 3 percent and about 1 percent respectively to court-related matters.

Perhaps reflecting the desires of their editors, there appear to be significant differences amongst individual newspapers. For example, Dawn seems to concentrate far more on international events, devoting some 79 percent of headline space to this category. Of the English newspapers, The Nation devotes the least space to international events but gives the largest weight to political pronouncements. The analysis also suggests that The Frontier Post devotes more headline space to economic news than all other newspapers. The News gives court-related news the most coverage out of English newspapers. Whilst the favourite subject of both Urdu newspapers is political pronouncements, the second favourite topic for Nawa-i-Waqt appears to be international news, whilst for Jang, it is social events. Interestingly, in the weighting scheme of Nawa-i-Waqt, economic matters receive a higher priority, whereas in that of Jang, court proceedings receive more attention.

Table I. What the Front Page Headline Covers (As percent of all headlines sampled for the concerned newspaper)

	International	Political Announcements: Both Government and Opposition	Social		Economic		Court Proceeding	
			Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Political	Economic/Social
The News (26)	44.83	20.69	31.03	0	0	0	1.72	1.72
The Nation (27)	36.6	32.68	27.45	0	1.96	0	0.65	0.65
The Frontier Post (25)	43.4	25.47	25.47	0	4.72	0	0.94	0
The Dawn (26)	78.57	12.86	7.14	0	0.71	0	0.71	0
Nawa-i- Waqt (25)	29.72	40.57	2358	0.47	3.77	0.47	1.42	0
Jung (26)	10.34	42.53	41	0	1.53	0.38	3.45	0.77
English newspapers (104)	52.08	23.41	21.23	0	1.97	0	0.88	0.44
Urdu newspapers (51)	19.03	41.65	33.19	0.21	2.54	0.42	2.54	0.42
All newspapers (155)	35.27	32.69	27.31	0.11	2.26	0.22	1.72	3.43

EDITORIALS

The editorials convey more directly than any other segment of the newspaper the views of the editor. The editorials are supposed to be directly written by the editor on subjects of his choice. Though based on fact, the editorial is not supposed to be factual and informative. By intention, they represent the views and opinions of the editor. Editors use the editorials for issues of common weal and public interest. By means of 'editorialising', the editor attempts to influence public opinion and policy. The subjects that editors pick for editorials, therefore, reflect very clearly the orientation of the newspaper. Table 2 presents the results of the content analysis of the editorials for the four major English newspapers and two Urdu newspapers. Interestingly enough, as in the main headline, the favourite topic of editors of English newspapers and the second most frequent topic for editorials in Urdu newspapers is international events. Court-related matters continue to be the least topic of interest for editorials.

In all, about a third of all editorials are written on international news. English newspapers are devoting about 32 percent of their editorials to international events, whilst Urdu newspapers commit 24 percent to this category. Surprisingly, whilst The Frontier Post was devoting the least amount of headline space to international events, it takes the lead in terms of editorials on international news. For Urdu newspapers, the category of conventional wisdom or dogma is the most important category for which editorials are written. Indeed, this is the second most important category for all newspapers, with about 21 percent of all sampled newspaper editorials being devoted to it. Amongst the Urdu newspapers, Jang gives the highest weightage to editorialising on subjects that can be interpreted as conventional wisdom. However, even in this category, the received wisdom in economics receives less attention than in the social area.

The current political situation is surprisingly the subject of only 8 percent of all editorials. The Frontier Post and The Nation write the most editorials on the current political situation, with about 13 percent of each of their editorials being written on this subject. Public complaints or investigations of some social or economic phenomenon are also made subjects of editorials. Urdu newspapers are more concerned about social events, whilst the English editorials are treating more economic complaints and investigations. Whilst religion appears to be editorialised about 4 percent of the time, Nawa-i-Waqt takes it up as an editorial subject more often than Jang. Amongst English newspapers, The Frontier Post is writing most editorials concerning religion. Perhaps a fair conjecture would be that the Nawa-i-Waqt editorials are probably more pro-Islamisation, whilst The Frontier Post represents the opposing viewpoint.

THE OPINION PAGE

In many ways, the opinion page is the most interesting aspect of a newspaper. The opinion page represents informed opinion on important subjects. This is an area that allows newspapers to move away from the daily grind to strike a chord on longer-term issues. The opinion page is occupied mostly by the glitterati: well-known people from all walks of life including famous columnists. In that sense, the opinion page represents the views of the elite of its audience. Newspapers seek to distinguish themselves by means of their opinion pages. Of course, the editor chooses what to put on the opinion page. The editor, therefore, has the final choice of the themes on the opinion page. Thus, this page reveals information on the themes that are important to the informed readership of the concerned paper as well as the editor. The opinion pages in Pakistani newspapers appear to concentrate on international events and on delivering homilies on platitudes or what we term as conventional wisdom/dogma.

Table 2. Editorials and their Content, 1992 (As percent of total coverage on this page)

	Social						Economic			Court Proceeding	
	International	Current Political Situation	Religion	Conventional Wisdom/Dogma	Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Conventional Wisdom/Dogma	Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Political	Economic/Social
The News (26)	23.08	5.73	0	23.08	28.21	2.56	5.13	10.26	0	2.56	0
The Nation (27)	30.95	13.1	2.38	11.9	9.52	1.19	17.86	4.76	8.33	0	0
The Frontier Post (25)	39.47	13.16	11.84	9.21	7.89	7.89	7.32	2.63	6.58	0	0
The Dawn (26)	34	0	2	20	16	8	4	8	8	0	0
Nawa-i-Waqt (25)	28.57	5.88	5.04	20.17	4.2	12.61	11.76	3.36	7.56	0	0.84
Jung (26)	20.18	11.01	2.75	39.45	13.76	2.75	3.67	3.67	0	1.83	0.92
English Newspapers (104)	31.88	7.85	4.06	16.05	15.41	4.91	7.08	6.41	5.73	0.64	0
Urdu Newspapers (51)	24.38	8.45	3.9	29.81	8.98	7.68	7.72	3.52	3.78	0.92	0.88
All Newspapers (155)	29.38	8.05	4	20.63	13.26	5.83	7.29	5.45	5.08	0.13	0.29

As before, opinion pieces in English newspapers concentrate on international news, whilst Urdu newspapers are more 'preachy'. Amongst the English newspapers, Dawn and The News carry more articles on international events than others, whilst Amongst Urdu papers, Jang likes to preach more. Within the category of conventional wisdom/dogma, all newspapers favour social and political themes more than economic. Economic issues, in general, receive little attention. The Frontier Post and The Nation devote the largest space to economic issues on the opinion page. The Frontier Post leads in carrying more analytical and investigative pieces on economic issues on the opinion page. Most newspapers, however, are disappointing when it comes to their economic coverage. For both Urdu and English newspapers, religious themes tend to be more important. For both Urdu and English newspapers, religious themes tend to be more important than the current political situation. There is hardly any comment on the opinion pages on court decisions or court proceedings to the extent that the matter is not sub judice.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The 'Letters to the Editor' section of a newspaper is the opinion page of the ordinary reader. These are written by the common people who are not well-known and who have a viewpoint but do not wish to write lengthy pieces to air their viewpoint. The views range from grandiose thoughts about the destiny of the country to complaints about the everyday problems of ordinary people. For example, all of us are familiar with the perennial plea in the letters to the editor section regarding government overbilling for services such as electricity or telephone, or the pleas for postponement of examinations. Given the lack of an efficient system of justice and the consequent reliance on bureaucratic arbitrariness for redress, writing a letter to the editor remains an important means for attempting to seek justice.

As a result, it would be an important area for future research to study this section of the newspaper in some detail. For example, the editorial selection process could be studied or the follow-up, if any, could be investigated. The attitudes of the bureaucracy to the complaints that are voiced by this means should be examined.

Despite the editorial selection that takes place in determining what gets printed in this column, this section perhaps reflects best the concerns of the ordinary reader. In that sense, content analysis of this section should provide an interesting contrast to the opinion page dominated by the intellectual, social, and economic elite, and the editorial page which is purely at the discretion of the editor. Such a comparison would serve to illustrate how well the editors are complying with the needs of their readership.

The results show that the writers of these letters do not share the internationalist perspective of editors and their elite clientele. Only about 6 percent of all the letters covered in our total sample from all newspapers are related to some international event. Of these, the English letter-writers tend to have a more internationalist perspective than Urdu writers. International perspectives constitute about 7 percent of all English letters and only about 1 percent of all Urdu letters.

It seems the letter writers in Pakistan are quite fond of pontification. About 34 percent of all letters, 43 percent of Urdu letters, and 32 percent of English letters are focusing on some platitude, which is what we call conventional wisdom or dogma. Much of this pontification is of a socio-political nature. Economic pontification constitutes only about 6 percent of all letters, 4 percent of Urdu letters, and 6 percent of English letters.

Table 3. Opinion Page (As percent of total news on the page)

	International	Current Political Situation	Social				Economic			Court Proceeding	
			Religion	Conventional Wisdom/Dogma	Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Conventional Wisdom/Dogma	Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Political	Economic/Social
The News (26)	43.18	2.27	4.55	22.73	21.59	0	1.14	2.27	2.27	0	0
The Nation (27)	28.57	6.12	6.12	23.47	8.16	7.14	8.16	3.06	9.18	0	0
The Frontier Post (25)	35.06	3.9	14.29	16.88	9.09	7.79	1.3	0	11.69	0	0
The Dawn (26)	41.77	6.33	10.13	20.25	11.39	5.06	1.27	1.27	1.27	0	1.27
Nawa-i-Waqat (25)	21.62	6.76	8.11	51.35	5.41	2.7	1.35	1.35	1.35	0	0
Jung (26)	15.38	3.08	5.38	63.08	3.85	2.31	3.85	2.31	0.77	0	0
English Newspapers (104)	37.15	4.66	8.77	20.83	12.56	5	2.97	1.65	6.1	0	0.32
Urdu Newspapers (51)	18.5	4.92	6.75	57.21	4.63	2.51	2.6	1.83	105	0	0
All newspapers (155)	27.83	4.79	7.76	39.02	8.59	3.75	2.78	1.74	3.58	0	0.16

Furthermore, Urdu writers are more concerned with economic issues or complaints since 14 percent of their letters are concerned with economic issues, whereas the comparable figure for English newspapers is only 6 percent.

An element of editorial discretion is also worth commenting on. It seems that The Frontier Post is a newspaper that clearly appears to favour the publication of letters that relate to investigating, analysing, or complaining about economic, social, or political issues. Dawn appears to favour economic pontification, whilst the Nawa-i-Waqt appears to have a strong bias for publishing letters related to the complaints of, or analytical issues relating to, the economy.

Our simple content analysis has yielded some interesting conclusions

- Newspaper editors as well as elite columnists and opinion page writers are very internationalist in their perspectives. It would be interesting to make an international comparison to see if our hypothesis is borne out that we devote an inordinately large amount of newspaper space to international issues.
- The easiest approach to journalism appears to be to follow politicians for statements. A large fraction of the newspaper space is made available to political newsmakers and their various press conferences and rallies.
- Opinion seems to be quite cliché-ridden with very little informative or analytical content. Most of the writers in the country appear to be comfortable in their notions. There is little that is written that challenges the priors of society.
- Very little attention is paid to economic issues or court-related proceedings. Hardly any reporting of these serious issues in the main pages takes place.

Some newspapers have business pages and even a weekly legal page. However, given the gravity of economic and judicial matters, there is no reason to not give them a larger space in the more important areas of the paper that we have analysed.

- Hardly any analytical or investigative work is printed. Issues of public concern or public maladministration do not receive the attention that they merit.
- As evidenced by the letters to editor, it would seem that the ordinary reading public does not share the views of the editors. Very little is written on international matters and on politicians. The people appear to be more concerned with airing their views and voicing their complaints in the vain hope that they will be heard.

Why is it that the newspapers in Pakistan reflect these biases that alienate them from their readers? Certainly, they are not irrational and are responding to certain incentives. Three hypotheses can be suggested as possible explanations:

1. Perhaps the easiest course is to print international wire services and politicians' statements.
2. It is more profitable to print this innocuous international material and that related to press conferences and rallies of politicians. The bulk of the advertisement is that of the government as well as the bulk of the subscription. Moreover, most economic favours such as plot licenses and preferential credit are also doled out by the government. Thus, why reflect socio-economic concerns and perhaps incur the wrath of the most important patron.

Table 4. Analysis of Letters to Editor Columns (As percent of the total number of letters sampled)

	Social						Economic			Court Proceeding	
	International	Current Political Situation	Religion	Conventional Wisdom/Dogma	Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Conventional Wisdom/Dogma	Factual or Coverage of Significant Event	Investigative or a Report of Public Complaint	Political	Economic/Social
News (26)	7.38	1.64	9.84	31.15	27.05	13.93	3.28	4.1	0.82	0	0.82
The Nation (27)	3.28	1.64	6.56	38.52	10.66	22.13	7.38	3.28	5.74	0	0.82
The Frontier Post (25)	10.78	3.92	4.9	26.47	11.76	24.51	2.94	1.96	12.75	0	0
The Dawn (26)	6.59	2.4	5.39	31.74	15.57	17.96	10.78	5.99	3.59	0	0
Nawa-i-Waqt (25)	1.27	0	6.33	43.04	12.66	16.46	3.8	2.53	13.92	0	0
English Newspapers (104)	7.01	2.4	6.67	31.97	16.26	19.63	6.09	3.83	5.72	0	0.41
Urdu Newspapers (51)	1.27	0	6.33	43.04	12.66	16.46	3.8	2.53	13.92	0	0
All Newspapers (155)	5.86	1.92	6.6	34.18	15.54	19	5.63	3.57	7.36	0	0.33

3. The old McCaulay tradition of creating men of letters of us colonial gentlemen has left a deep-rooted mark on the Pakistani intellectual. These intellectuals are now more internationalist in perspective. Their love for the aesthetic and the more poetic makes them romantic and fond of truisms. Certainly, as a society, we have placed no premium on the development of analytical or investigative skills. Consequently, it is not surprising that newspapers in Pakistan do not reflect any such skill.

We have been able to develop a simple but meaningful classification for categorising news, opinion, and analysis appearing in newspapers. In ideal circumstances of well-funded research, perhaps all the sections of the newspaper would be classified on a daily basis in terms of the actual space that was devoted to each category.

Such research would be able to develop many more categories and could even assign pieces to multiple categories. The database that would be developed in this manner would, with the help of personal computers and sophisticated statistical packages, allow many interesting trends in newspapers to be analysed.

Perhaps if someone is able to develop this database on a continuing basis, we could play watchdog on the newspapers in Pakistan. Maybe by exercises such as this, it will be possible to reorient the journalistic community from their currently excessive global or internationalist perspective to a keener interest for domestic concerns. In the same manner, such quantification might help to show that hard information, evidence, and analysis of society and its problems are needed for developing ideas for social change. In that sense, opinion and cliché cannot be expected to substitute for hard work.

The author is the current Vice Chancellor of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad.



CLIMATE AND MEDIA:

Reporting based on Conflict theory or Structural Functionalism

Khalid Waleed

Climate change represents a formidable challenge for Pakistan, a nation already confronting a plethora of political, economic and environmental issues. The escalating frequency of extreme weather phenomena, such as floods, heatwaves, and droughts, highlights the pressing need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change's impacts. In this scenario, the media and journalism play a crucial role. Effective reporting can significantly contribute to sensitising the public and policymakers, fostering climate-aware leaders, and shaping informed decision-making processes.

In this context the theoretical framework for understanding the media's role in environmental communication is rooted in the concepts of agenda-setting, framing, and the social construction of reality, alongside insights from Marx's conflict theory and modern structural functionalism.

Firstly, the agenda-setting theory posits that the media has the power to influence the public agenda by selecting the issues that receive coverage. In the context of Pakistan, this means that media can prioritise climate change as a critical issue, thereby increasing public and governmental awareness. Framing theory explains how the media presents issues, shaping the audience's perceptions and interpretations. The way climate change is framed can influence public understanding and attitudes, either by highlighting its urgency or by downplaying its significance.

The social construction of reality theory suggests that media constructs societal perceptions of reality, including environmental issues, through the dissemination of information and narratives. In Pakistan, media narratives can shape public perception of climate change, either as a distant problem or as an immediate threat requiring action.

Marx's conflict theory can be useful in understanding the power dynamics within environmental reporting. The media, often influenced by political and economic elites, might underreport or misrepresent climate change issues to serve the interests of the powerful, rather than the needs of the vulnerable populations most affected by climate change. Nevertheless, highlighting the climate injustice is a must for effective climate reporting.

Lastly, in this context modern structural functionalism, which emphasises the role of societal institutions in maintaining stability and order, can be applied to the media's role in climate change communication. From this perspective, the media serves as a crucial institution that disseminates information, educates the public, and promotes social cohesion by rallying collective action against climate change. Moreover, media also acts as a watchdog to keep a close eye on institutions developing policies for mitigation, adaptation and resilience – as well as coordination among the institutions so that they are not acting in siloes of their own. The media can choose to opt for an activist approach, the structural approach or a combination of these two.

The current state of climate change in Pakistan presents a dilemma for Pakistan. Pakistan is amongst the top ten countries most vulnerable to climate change, despite contributing less than 1% to global CO₂ emissions. In terms of methane emissions, however, Pakistan is amongst the top ten emitters. The country faces severe challenges, including water scarcity, agricultural distress, and a high frequency of natural disasters. The 2010 and 2022 floods, the 2015 heatwave in Karachi, and the ongoing desertification in Sindh and Balochistan are stark reminders of the climate crisis at Pakistan's doorstep.

In terms of the aforementioned activist approach,

Karl Marx's conflict theory comes to mind. These climate challenges can exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, leading to conflicts over scarce resources. On the other hand, structural functionalism would suggest that addressing these challenges requires a coordinated response from all societal institutions, including the media, to maintain social stability and promote adaptation and resilience.

The media can play effective role here. One, the media serves as a bridge between scientific communities and the general public. By reporting on climate change impacts, research findings, and expert opinions, journalists can raise awareness amongst citizens and policymakers. This awareness is crucial for fostering a sense of urgency and responsibility towards adopting sustainable practices and supporting climate policies. From a theoretical perspective, raising awareness aligns with the agenda-setting function of the media and the social construction of reality. By prioritising climate change in their coverage, media outlets can shape public perception and understanding of the issue.

Second, media coverage of climate change can influence public opinion and behavior. Positive stories about renewable energy, conservation efforts, and community resilience can inspire action and encourage sustainable lifestyles. Conversely, highlighting the consequences of inaction can motivate demand for policy changes and environmental protection.

In terms of conflict theory, the media has the power to challenge the status quo by highlighting the societal impacts of climate change and advocating for policies that address the needs of the marginalised. Structural functionalism would view this as the media's role in promoting social cohesion and collective action through highlighting the importance of climate-sensitive policy making.

Third, journalists have a responsibility to hold leaders accountable for their actions or lack thereof concerning climate change. Investigative reporting can uncover negligence, corruption, or inefficiencies in government initiatives, prompting public demand for accountability and transparency.

Accountability reporting is essential in the context of conflict theory, as it exposes the power imbalances and vested interests that may hinder effective climate action. From a structural functionalism perspective, the media's watchdog role is crucial for maintaining the integrity and accountability of societal institutions.

Four, media can play a critical role in ensuring that policymakers have access to accurate and up-to-date information. By disseminating research findings and expert opinions, journalists can contribute to informed decision-making processes. This is particularly important in a country like Pakistan, where climate policies need to be based on sound science and local context. The role of media in policy decision-making reflects its function as a key institution within the framework

of modern structural functionalism. By providing a platform for informed debate and discussion, the media facilitates the development of policies that are responsive to the needs of society.

In Pakistan, the task of climate reporting is fraught with difficulties, despite its critical importance. A significant barrier is the lack of awareness and expertise amongst journalists, many of whom are ill-equipped to report accurately on the complexities of climate change. Compounding this issue is the tendency of some media outlets to prioritise sensationalism over factual accuracy, leading to the spread of misinformation and public confusion. The challenges are further exacerbated by resource constraints, as limited funding and resources hinder media organisations' ability to conduct thorough investigations or cover remote areas affected by climate change. Access to reliable information is another stumbling block, with journalists often struggling to obtain data and secure comments from government officials. Additionally, reporting on environmental issues carries inherent safety risks, particularly in regions where conflicts over natural resources are prevalent.

To effectively enhance climate reporting, it is imperative to combine the theoretical approaches of conflict theory, which emphasises the activist approach, and structural functionalism, which focuses on the institutional approach. Here are the recommendations outlined with a consideration of these theoretical frameworks:

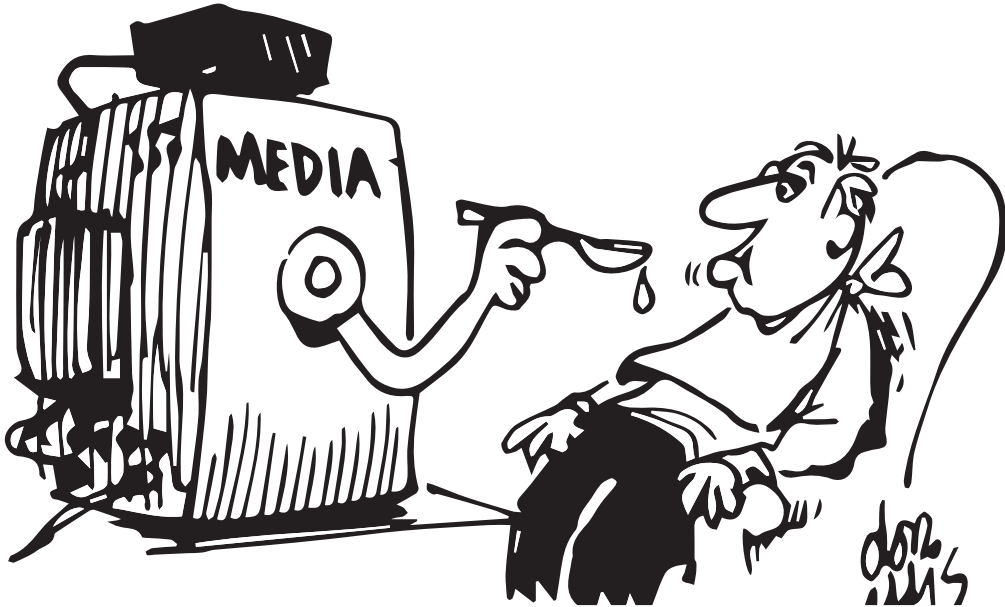
1. **Training and Capacity Building.** Media organisations should initiate comprehensive training programs aimed at bolstering journalists' grasp of climate science and environmental reporting. This initiative aligns with structural functionalism, as it seeks to strengthen the institutional capacity of the media to disseminate accurate and informed content, thereby promoting societal equilibrium.
2. **Collaboration with Experts.** Journalists should foster partnerships with scientists, researchers, and environmental organisations to ensure the precision and depth of their reporting. This recommendation embodies the conflict theory perspective by encouraging an activist approach, where journalists actively engage with various stakeholders to challenge misinformation and advocate for environmental awareness.
3. **Diverse Storytelling.** Embracing various formats and platforms, such as documentaries, interactive web stories, and social media campaigns, can help engage a wider audience. This approach should be reflective of both Karl Marx's conflict theory through climate injustice and structural functionalism, as it leverages the diverse functions of media formats to enhance societal integration and understanding of climate issues around inequalities.

4. Focus on Solutions. Whilst it is crucial to highlight environmental challenges, reporting should also emphasise solutions, innovations, and success stories to inspire action. This recommendation aligns with both theoretical frameworks; it fosters an activist approach by motivating change and supports the institutional role of the media in providing balanced and constructive narratives.
5. Ethical Reporting. Journalists must adhere to ethical standards, avoiding sensationalism and ensuring balanced and accurate coverage. This principle is rooted in structural functionalism, emphasising the media's role in maintaining social order through responsible and credible reporting.
6. Policy Engagement. Media should actively engage with policymakers, offering a platform for dialogue and debate on climate policies and strategies. This recommendation integrates both theoretical approaches; it reflects the activist role of the media in influencing policy and the institutional function of facilitating informed decision-making and accountability.

The media and journalism play a critical role in addressing climate change in Pakistan. By raising awareness, shaping public opinion, holding leaders accountable, and facilitating informed decision-making, effective reporting can contribute significantly to the country's resilience and adaptation efforts. However, overcoming the challenges in climate reporting requires concerted efforts from media organisations, journalists, and stakeholders. Investing in training, collaboration, and ethical reporting practices will be crucial in ensuring that the media can fulfill its role as a catalyst for change in the face of the climate crisis. From a theoretical perspective, addressing these challenges requires an understanding of the power dynamics within society (conflict theory) and the strengthening of the media as a key institution (structural functionalism) to effectively communicate and address climate change issues.

The author has a doctorate in Energy Economics and serves as Research Fellow in Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). He can be reached at khalidwaleed@sdpi.org and tweets at [@Khalidwaleed_](https://twitter.com/Khalidwaleed_).





MEDIA MANIPULATION: Terrorism, Corruption, and the Shifting Sands of Perception

Nadeem F. Paracha

Between 2007 and 2013, over fifty thousand Pakistanis had been slaughtered by militant Islamist groups. The dead included politicians, soldiers, cops and common men, women and children. Most died in suicide attacks in mosques, shrines and in congested markets. Pakistan was under attack by ruthless forces who were killing people almost every day with utmost brutality.

The country was facing an actual existential crisis which the state and the government were struggling to address and resolve. Pakistan had become a state that was close to failing — just as the state in Somalia, Yemen and DR Congo had. Yet, the most serious crisis on the minds of most electronic media outlets and

certain major political figures in Pakistan at the time was ‘corruption’.

A major percentage of the discourses in TV talk shows revolved around the pitfalls of corruption. I remember seeing a questionnaire on the website of a popular news channel just before the 2013 elections. It asked people to state the most pressing problems faced by Pakistanis. One had to tick one or more boxes in front of the stated issues: corruption; unemployment; street crime; and drug addiction.

Terrorism, or the militant Islamism that was leading to terrorism, weren’t even mentioned in the ‘survey’, despite the fact that by the time the May 2013

elections were held, over 250 people had already been killed in terror attacks during the immediate months before the polls. What's more, even during the campaigning stage of the elections, terrorists were ruthlessly cutting down workers and leaders belonging to the outgoing coalition government that was headed by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and also included the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and the Awami National Party (ANP).

Yet, these attacks were just mentioned in passing in the media. The media's focus and energies remained to be invested in discourses revolving around corruption in general and the 'corruption' of the outgoing government in particular. What was going on?

Years later, or from late 2021 onwards, when the so-called 'Imran Khan Project' (IKP) shaped by the military establishment (ME) began to crumble, some prominent TV journalists decided to spill a few beans. They confirmed something which many folk already suspected. Between 2011 and 2021, a large section of the populist electronic media was integrated into IKP. Many journalists willingly bought into the narrative which the ME had moulded for IKP, but there were also journalists who just happened to go with the flow in which the hot topic and main talking point was 'corruption'.

Corruption became the mother of all evils in Pakistan. PMLN's Nawaz Sharif raged against the corruption of PPP's Asif Zardari and Imran Khan was permanently outraged by the corruption of Nawaz as well as Zardari. This went on even after Nawaz won the 2013 election. Nawaz and Khan competed against each other to prove that they were more anti-corruption than the other as suicide bombers continued with their daily carnage.

The media became a battleground packed with excitable anchors and talk-show hosts encouraging proverbial punching bouts between PMLN and PTI leaders denouncing each other as corrupt. Not much was said, however, about the elephant in the room: suicide attacks, assassinations, destruction of girls' schools and kidnappings for ransom. All done by militant outfits.

Then, the new military chief General Raheel Sharif began to slightly change the narrative when the intensity and frequency of terrorist attacks increased. One began to see 'experts' on TV discussing terrorism. General Raheel declared that the greatest threat that Pakistan was facing was internal instability caused by 'non-state actors'.

The media got the message. But since a large part of it was still tied to the line of thinking that it was important to build the IKP, terrorism too became an outcome of corruption, even though many leaders of political parties who were being demonised as being corrupt, had become targets of militant groups.

The media also played a major role in giving space to those whose job it was to actually justify the violence of the militants. Apparently, those, who by 2014 had killed thousands of Pakistanis, were 'noble but misguided brothers' who, due to them suffering from poverty and having a deep love for Shariah laws, were being pushed into a corner (because of corruption, of course) to pick up arms against corrupt rulers.

But at least this part of the farce suddenly collapsed when the militants attacked a public school in Peshawar, murdering over 140 people, including students and teachers. However, once the Panama Papers scandal materialised, things came back to square one. This time, though, since the state was finally looking to be winning the war against the militants, the narrative of corruption being the core crises in the country grew in intensity — especially as the 2018 elections approached.

The media plays a major role in developing narratives. But on various occasions, the narrative can include manufactured crises, shaped by certain forces to attain political or economic benefits. The manufactured crises are not necessarily entirely cosmetic, but sensationalised and exaggerated in such a manner that they start to look like existentialist threats. This was how the matter of corruption played out in the media in Pakistan, at the expense of ignoring an actual crisis (extremism/terrorism) which ultimately took the lives of thousands of people.

The corruption 'crisis' was largely manufactured by those who were formulating the IKP, but it also benefited populist media outlets who enhanced it to bag ratings by providing viewers punching bouts between politicians, and the spectacle of 'political analysts' and so-called 'clean' politicians such as Imran Khan lambasting the corruption of established parties.

Khan's regime was ousted in April 2022 by an act of Parliament. It was a thoroughly incompetent government which eventually had a falling out with those who had painstakingly constructed the IKP. Khan's ouster was quickly followed by allegations of corruption against him. His reputation was only saved by record-breaking inflation and certain missteps by the

coalition government which succeeded his fallen regime and by a caretaker set-up.

Consequently, the media, that had by then become increasingly populist, began to echo the narrative cleverly weaved by the precocious social media teams associated with Khan's party. The narrative claimed that Khan had become 'the most popular political leader in the country'.

Indeed, Khan is extremely popular, but mostly in certain large segments of the urban and peri-urban middle-classes. In surveys conducted by notable research organisations before this year's controversial elections, Khan's possible vote-bank never crossed the 40 percent mark. This means the rest 60 percent of the electorate were not willing to vote for him. His 'popularity', once manufactured by the media on the behest of the pilots of IKP, became the doing of the media alone once his backers in the ME started to dismantle IKP.

Largely, the media, too, is staffed and consumed by members of the social class in which resides Khan's core support. With rising inflation and the hands of the ME becoming a lot more visible in dismantling the IKP, any comment or commentary on this began to enjoy a surge in views, ratings, 'likes' and reposts on TV, YouTube channels and the social media.

A narrative about a new 'crisis' began to take shape and, of course, this one too is being presented as an existentialist threat: the country is on the verge of bankruptcy, there are dangerous divisions within the military, millions of Pakistanis are leaving the country, democracy is in danger, etc. These are alarming talking points that guarantee attention and keep the media rolling. But the actual crisis that Pakistan is facing is one that has been haunting even the most established democracies for almost a decade: severe polarisation and an unchecked rise of populism.

In Pakistan, this polarisation is being widened and exploited by folk who benefit from it. And unfortunately, this also includes the media. But the danger in this is that this may lead to an actual crisis within the media as well when a bothered state might begin to seriously initiate a clampdown on print, electronic and social medias. One can already see this coming.

The author is a Pakistani journalist, author, cultural critic, satirist and historian. He is a columnist for Pakistan's largest English-language daily Dawn.

THE CULT OF DIGITAL MEDIA



Tahir Dhindsa

Aldous Huxley's writing may not explicitly detail his personal use of deductive and inductive reasoning, although we use both every day in the 'Brave New World' of media. In fact, the global change with the advent of the first printing press was based on these two reasons, which partly obstructed the first industrial revolution – which was fueled by facile material, not reason.

Today, at the confluence of the fourth and the fifth industrial revolution, information travels not only through highways and seaways alone but also on the wings of digital conduits of media, primarily because of the digital revolution, which itself is the 'Fifth Industrial Revolution'. It determines how we harness, employ, and use the workforce and reward labour. It will determine how we can continue colonialism, based on direct rule, to global institutions after the second world war, whereby an assimilation is observed as 'The Bretton Woods Institutions' or a novel new form without the benefit of sovereign, the so-called national state.

The twenty-first century has brought the 'Great Convergence' in media—print, radio, terrestrial, and satellite television—which has become digitally available on the palmtop cellular device that we recognise as a mobile phone.

Every day we consume news, its analyses and subsequent syntheses. The analysis is called opinion, and the synthesis is often termed editorial - quite a judgment. The opinion and editorial clubbed together and termed 'OPED' have a central presence in news publications. Television is run on the same editorial architecture. News, its analysis in prime-time current affairs' programs and editorial judgments, often involving exclusive interviews of experts. This is true for terrestrial (PTV) and satellite television, also known as cable television, which forced a sunset on terrestrial setups. Just before the sunset, however, the digital era brought satellite television to its twilight zone.

The digital era is here and transcending previous eras of

the 20th century. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say.

The General Elections of 2024 in Pakistan have been fought on digital platforms, not in open arenas packed with thousands produced by the bureaucracy to favour the favorable. The election result is a telltale, and there is no going back. The conventional media took everything with a pinch of salt, forced upon them – whereas digital media was either bitter or sweet, a largely binary affair. This time, one did not require a tin of margarine or a honey trove to say it, just a few plain, bitter and honest words were enough to appeal to the sensibility of youth: constituting about 65 percent of the demography in the country. The digital media is creating larger than life personalities and establishing their prowess not as thoughtful movements but cult enterprises. This time, the media has reserved the cult portions and proclivities for itself.

This is quite a role reversal. The media, hungry for revenue, would sell a story and build a tale in the hearts and minds of viewers. It shows them what they want to get eyeballs. In the digital era, citizen journalism is dictating terms. Some presence of 'shock and awe' dictates editorial selection. Now it is the viewer who is drawing out the content. Inspired by this trend, Cambridge Analytica allegedly helped Mr. Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin in rigging the US elections, only to grab victory for Donald Trump – who was tied and tangled with a thread in Moscow, perceived as controllable. The method has been in vogue since then, and we have a plethora of our own 'Analytics' funded through taxpayer money.

With the decline of traditional advertising revenue, media outlets are adopting subscription-based models to for their income streams, directly from audiences. This improves the quality of content, earns loyalty, and engages readers and viewers in a better way. The new media has its own appetite and new ways to quench revenue thirst.

To extend the lifespan of the dwindling niches, conventional media is beginning to deploy new tools. Aata analytics is used for audience targeting and to understand audience preferences and behavioural patterns. The data-driven method helps in tailoring content, advertising, and distribution strategies to optimise viewership and revenue. Social media platforms have empowered content consumers to create and share, enabling citizen journalism. Media outlets are integrating user-generated content into their reporting, enhancing diversity and expanding coverage. And there are quite a few interesting developments.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation in general are amongst them. These employ media production and distribution, content creation, curation, and recommendation systems – forming the basis of generating autonomous content. AI even helps in already established automation tools by streamlining workflows and reducing the cost of video editing, transcription, and social media management.

Virtual and Augmented Reality are another budding discipline. They enhance storytelling and immersive experiences. This is particularly the case in scientific fields, like medical teaching, where they offer an alternative to performing surgical practice on the actual human body.

This is a one-stop-shop, and that too at the wholesale level. No more does the manufacturer control the wholesaler, who in turn would influence the retailer.

All these developments have brought generic changes, causing tectonic movements at social, economic, and political levels. The so-called Westphalian national state is facing erosion at the highest level, compromising fiscal sovereignty. The heat is felt at the global level, figuring prominently in the arena of superpower competition. The American lawmakers have pushed the U.S. House Energy and Commerce committee to approve a bill that would grant China 165 days to divest its ownership of TikTok — or effectively face a U.S. ban. TikTok has ties with China's communist regime, as they call it. In response, TikTok says "This legislation has a predetermined outcome: a total ban of TikTok in the United States. The government is attempting to strip 170 million Americans of their constitutional right to free expression. This will damage millions of businesses, deny artists an audience, and destroy the livelihoods of countless creators across the country." It is worth thinking about: entire livelihoods are dependent on a social media platform in the most advanced country in the world.

In essence, this is the formation of a new global society – demanding a new social contract and new ethical standards to ensure trustworthiness in authority at the topmost level. This is a must for an orderly transformation that sidesteps the prospect of war and conflict, as was the case in the previous century. But are we going to learn from history? One of the greatest systematic thinkers in the history of Western philosophy, Friedrich Hegel, says "we learn from history that we do not learn from history." It is even more difficult to do so now: the digital media and its impact on society have no parallel in history.

Perhaps the 'Autonomous Media' is here to subjugate and rule its creator.

The author is a senior journalist and currently serving as Director, SDTV. He tweets at @tahirdhinsa and can be reached at tahirdhinsa@gmail.com.



CURRENT AFFAIRS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONŠ



WHAT MATTERS MOST – VOTES OR NUMBERS?

Sarwar Bari

Every ‘elected’ government that was cobbled together after a rigged election in Pakistan could not survive full term: simply because creators had enough of their own creation within a few months of its birth. Interestingly, the same creators committed the same blunder once again in the aftermath of the 8th February election. The creators even didn’t bother to sell the old wine in a new bottle. What else could insanity be! Visibly, the coalition government at the centre is the result of a ‘stolen’ mandate, non-inclusive electoral process, and the most controversial election of Pakistan’s history. Moreover, the international community and civil society have also been demanding a thorough investigation into the alleged rigging. Will it survive even for a year as it lacks legitimacy and public support? I would respond with a resounding no. Here is why.

First, oppression and resistance are two sides of the same coin, and the higher the oppression, the greater the resistance and defiance. And if the cause is just, defiance is likely to perpetuate. This is one of the lessons of human history as well as recent political uprisings across the globe and in our own neighbourhood. Pakistan can’t be an exception. Since 1988, no mainstream party had ever posed resistance to the security establishment in the aftermath of its dismissal from power. Seemingly, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is the first mainstream party whose leadership refused to yield to the ruthless and constant oppression of the caretaker government and [un]law enforcement agencies. Many commentators believe it was developed and implemented diligently and ruthlessly by the security establishment.

The architects of this oppressive policy have turned a clearcut mandate into a ‘stolen’ one. No wonder Pakistan is the only Asian country that has been downgraded from a ‘hybrid regime’ to an ‘authoritarian regime’ by the Economist Group Democracy Index 2023. The same report notes that Pakistan registered the greatest deterioration of any country in Asia, throwing her 11 places down in the global ranking to 118th. It also noted that due to ‘meddling in the electoral processes and government dysfunction, the independence of the judiciary has been severely curtailed’ in the country. However, unprecedented oppression has given birth to a widespread awakening and resilience, though it is still very raw. PTI has to channelize it into an

organised energy and strategy if it is interested in meaningful structural reforms.

Second, it is important to understand the causes and forms of rigging. Seemingly the oppressors and exploiters knew very well that mere violence would not be able to achieve ‘desired’ results through free, fair and transparent elections as the victims could always silently vote against them. Therefore, rigging and manipulation strategy was developed and implemented ruthlessly over the course of the past 22 months. Consider this. The moment the security establishment realised that the ‘unwanted’ party was leading in more than two-third constituencies and its ‘favourite’ leaders were likely to lose with huge margins, the announcement of results was abruptly stopped for a few days. During that time, Form 47s¹ were forged without aggregating the Form 45s² of each constituency. The mandate was stolen; but it was too late to hide the blunder. Many contesting candidates had already received Form 45s.

In 2022, PATTAN with whom the author is associated, had calculated 163 means of rigging that were being used in Pakistan’s elections. Since then, the establishment has introduced dozens of new means, but we had never thought that the Election Commission could go to an extent that it would allow the administration to forge Form 47s without considering the Form 45s. Moreover, in 2018 only the Result Transfer System was stopped from working. In 2024, on the polling day the citizens were deprived of internet and cellular services for a prolonged period, and it was done in the name of security threat. That created massive anger in the country and to suppress the spread of the rage, authorities shut down X – formerly Twitter.

¹Provisional consolidated statement of results of the count of all polling stations of constituency.

²Result of the count at polling stations.

“Why are you making a spectacle of yourself in front of the world?” This is what the Sindh High Court Chief Justice would say on the 22nd of February. He also warned the government, “Let the whistle of the pressure cooker blow lightly, the more you try to clamp it down the larger the explosion.” At the time of writing (26th February), almost every party is on the street protesting against the mega rigging. Some of them have genuine reasons and proof, whilst those who had ‘stolen’ the mandate are gearing up to form governments.

Bertolt Brecht, famous theatre practitioner and playwright, once said, ‘In the contradiction lies the hope’. Instead, our security establishment with the collaboration of corrupt elite has in fact sharpened the contraction with the citizens. Logically it will lead to conflict unless reversed. The best way to resolve it peacefully is to audit the whole paper trail of polling, counting and result announcement – from Form 42s to Form 45s, 46s and 47s. Or be prepared for prolonged uncertainty as our peoples’ trust in the social contract and state institutions has already been massively eroded.

Third, the higher the dependence on the security establishment, the lower the political parties’ need for grassroots presence and support. A strong correlation between the two has developed in the last four decades. In the ‘70s and early ‘80s, many parties – especially the People’s Party – had a conspicuous presence at the local level. It would have party chapters and offices even at the mohallah level. Since 2002, local party chapters disappeared. That was the beginning of elite capture and so-called electables. On the other hand, PTI managed to establish party structures at the local level during 2008 and 2013. But in the last 22 months it has penetrated through to the once-diehard support base of PPP and PMLN, even JUI-F and most of the apolitical sections of society. This means if parties invest time and energy on spreading their programme, the people are likely to respond positively. And the parties who relied heavily on electables (often local tyrants and exploiters) and state machinery (often on the side of the powerful tyrants) are likely to lose people’s support. No wonder most of the traditional parties whether secular or religious massively lost their vote bank in many parts of the country including Islamabad.

Despite being the most watched and observed region of the country, Islamabad and Rawalpindi witnessed massive rigging in almost every constituency. PATTAN audited Form 45s of the following four National Assembly constituencies, and we found that thousands of ‘votes’ were shifted from PTI to PMLN candidates. For instance, in NA46 alone, PMLN’s numbers were increased from 42,048 to 81,958 with the stroke of a pen. Shamefully, authorities didn’t hesitate to shift 41,476 votes of the PTI supported candidate to PMLN’s candidate. See table below. If it can happen at this level in the most observed and watched cities, it has most likely happened tenfold across the rest of the country. Simply, an unwanted party is being deprived of millions of votes. And this has turned losers into winners. Only state officials could provide this kind of

quick service. In such circumstances, why bother having party chapters at the local level? But the beneficiaries of the rigging must know that this kind of support could evaporate in the air as quickly as it appeared on paper. It has happened many a times in the past between 1988 and 2018, and could always happen again.

Difference in polled votes between Form 45s and Form 47s				
Constituency	Party	Form 45s	Form 47	Variance
Islamabad NA-46	PTI/IND	85,793	44,317	-94%
	PMLN	42,048	81,958	+49%
Islamabad NA-47	PTI/IND	101,596	86,794	-17%
	PMLN	49,678	101,397	+51%
Islamabad NA-48	PTI/IND	74,425	59,851	-24%
	IND	30,345	69,699	+56%
Rawalpindi NA-53	PTI/IND	81,330	58,476	-39%
	PMLN	38,982	72,006	+46%

Source: Based on ECP documents including Form 45s and 47s.

Fourth, mere numbers on Form 47s have little value in the face of real voters as they express opinions through social media, in neighbourhoods and workplaces, etc. They influence the public as well as policymakers. The upcoming government should know, therefore, its weaknesses and vulnerabilities and be aware of the threats and risks that are likely to cause social disaster sooner or later. I wish time proves me wrong, but wishes can’t be horses.

Here are some of the risks and vulnerabilities of PDM 2.0.

1. Inherently, this is going to be one of the most paranoid coalition governments of Pakistan’s history as it lacks confidence (its major ally has already distanced itself from governance affairs) and a tangible support base.
2. Whose interests will dominate in decision-making in the coming days – the public or those who added the additional numbers on Form 47s for the coalition, helping form the government?
3. How long before the lack of trust turns into internal ruptures?
4. Does it have the confidence and the strength to face a sustained resistance movement, as is likely to happen in the near future?
5. Will it be able to protect Pakistan’s strategic interests whilst the opposition is protesting within the Parliament as well as on the streets?
6. How will it revive the economy whilst people are demanding social support?
7. Will the PDM 2.0 repeat the same blunders that its first iteration had committed? It consists of the same parties, same leaders and has been gelled together by the same actor.

Finally, the people of Pakistan have deepened my faith in democracy. This is my takeaway from Pakistan's recent general election. However, as in the past, our civil and military elites once again tried to rob the mandate of the people, but unlike in the past, they appear to be failing in their unholy venture because this time around the people appear to be more aware, more determined, well connected and more assertive – and the victim party refuses to submit to the whims of the powerful actors. Surprisingly, voters also managed to frustrate every attempt of the mighty establishment until the polling and ballot count. However, they failed to prevent it from tampering the results in many constituencies. The establishment was caught red-handed as rigging was done extremely clumsily. Moreover, it appears the politicians who had been assured of certain shares in upcoming assemblies performed too poorly; and the gap between them and the unwanted winner was too large to fill, and too big to hide. But many of the losers blamed someone else to satisfy their ego, gain sympathy, or to pave the way for future alliances. No wonder they were also found agitating somewhere in the country. And that has deepened the political uncertainty and made it extremely difficult for the establishment to manage the crisis and to form the governments. All because a few individuals wanted to impose their will over 250 million people.

Despite all the oppression and economic hardships that the decision-makers and law-enforcers unleashed in the country, people remained peacefully defiant and lawful throughout the last 22 months. Moreover, the caretaker governments left no stone unturned to manipulate the electoral process at every step as well as using every method, including violent ones, that they had in their playbook to knock out the unwanted party and its leadership from the race. This atmosphere of fear and injustice continued to build up anger in the country and resultantly transformed the public. And this is likely to persist in the coming days. The anger may even turn into rage if the government fails to lower poverty and inequality.

The way forward is to conduct a thorough audit of the paper trail of the election before it is too late to manage.

The author heads Pattan Development Organisation and can be reached at bari@pattan.org.



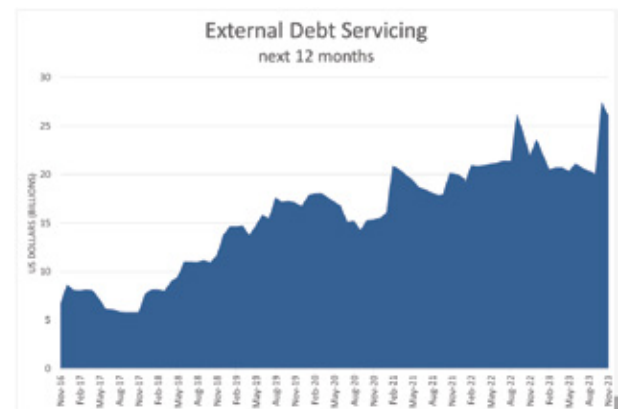
Default: Incentivising Cooperation Between Creditors

Ahmed Jamal Pirzada

The sharp increase in current account deficits together with a large external debt servicing burden led to one of the highest default risks for Pakistan during 2022 and 2023. As costly as it has been, the subsequent collapse in economic activity driven largely due to the drying up of external financing to sustain domestic demand and contractionary policies implemented by fiscal and monetary authorities has helped address some of the imbalances. In the last 15 months, Pakistan's imports have been less than the sum of its dollar income – exports and remittances – by almost \$6 billion. As a result, the country's default risk has also decreased substantially. The CDS spreads have declined from close to 60 percentage points to less than 30 percentage points. This is still incredibly high, but the trend is encouraging.

On the face of it, one may believe that maintaining the current set of policies for long enough is the right way forward. This is indeed what the IMF advocates. Whilst considering Pakistan's debt to be sustainable, it notes, "If the SBA is implemented consistently and macroeconomic prudence continues for the medium term, the debt path is expected to remain on a downward trajectory." However, this is far from what we see in data. Pakistan external debt servicing burden over the next 12 months – the immediate reason for the ongoing economic crisis – remains as high as it was two years ago. This is despite the economic cost its citizens have paid during this period in the form of austere policies and the ongoing collapse in economic activity. In fact, in the last two months, the external debt servicing burden over the next 12 months has increased further from close to \$20 billion to \$25 billion. At the time of this writing, Pakistan's external

debt servicing burden over the next 12 months is expected to be close to 40% of its dollar income. This is one of the highest across the world with only a handful of small (mostly African) economies having an external debt servicing burden which is more than that for Pakistan.



Data Source: State Bank of Pakistan

What do these numbers tell us? Short of a miracle involving tens of billions of dollar inflows from 'friendly' countries (e.g. UAE flows to Egypt), restoring debt sustainability will require even more austere policies than what the IMF currently recommends. To be precise, imports will have to be considerably lower than the country's dollar income such that it can start paying back the principal in addition to the interest which has been the case in the last 15 months. This is indeed possible. However, under the most likely scenario where the dollar income does not increase substantially, the

What do these numbers tell us? Short of a miracle involving tens of billions of dollar inflows from ‘friendly’ countries (e.g. UAE flows to Egypt), restoring debt sustainability will require even more austere policies than what the IMF currently recommends. To be precise, imports will have to be considerably lower than the country’s dollar income such that it can start paying back the principal in addition to the interest which has been the case in the last 15 months. This is indeed possible. However, under the most likely scenario where the dollar income does not increase substantially, the socio-economic cost which the citizens will be required to pay will increase to an extent where the reliance on austere policies alone will no longer be economically desirable even if not completely outrageous. As Rogoff (2022) notes, “Yet in some cases, particularly where the inherited debt burden is exceptionally large, it is by no means obvious that the debtor country’s low- and middle-income citizens fare better under an IMF-style adjustment plan than they would do in an outright default, or equivalently a rescheduling of repayments that lower the market value of the debt.”

Indeed, IMF itself notes that a ‘slower medium-term growth’ than what it currently projects will undermine its assessment that Pakistan’s debt is sustainable. This is revealing as IMF’s projections are in fact very much based on the ‘miracle’ assumption that tens of billions of dollar inflows from international creditors will materialise in the next few years. For example, IMF projects external inflows from international private creditors to increase from close to \$7 billion during FY23 and FY24 to \$15 billion in FY25. It further projects these to increase to \$21 billion by FY28. This assumption underpins IMF’s projection that the GDP growth will increase to 3.5% in FY25 and to 5% by FY27. Such projections based on miraculous assumptions already undermine IMF’s assessment that Pakistan’s debt is sustainable.

Where do we go from here? Ideally, a well-functioning debt restructuring framework at the global level is the most desirable solution to the problem of debt sustainability. This is increasingly important with China emerging as one of the largest creditors but with geopolitical interests which do not always align with creditors associated with the Paris Club. The game where the creditors (or groups of creditors) are most incentivised to pass on the cost of restructuring to others due to conflicting interests and an absence of a cooperative framework leaves countries stuck in a debt trap with no good options but to consider the possibility of an outright default which will force the creditors to cooperate towards a mutually beneficial outcome even if through a messy process. The most recent example of this is Sri Lanka.

So, with every intention to provoke the reader, the big question I want to ask is should Pakistan default? At the core of it, this question is hardly provocative and simply a matter of considering the trade-offs involved. If the cost of continuing with the austere policies outweighs the cost the country will have to pay if it chooses to default, then the interesting question is not whether the country should default but, instead, why it chooses not to. Rogoff (2022) notes that this could be because the IMF programs “are overly focused on ensuring that foreign private creditors get paid in full and on time” and debtor country governments “often keen to avoid a politically destabilizing default.” However, before one could answer this question, one must ask what is the cost Pakistan will have to pay if it chooses to default? To answer this, let’s consider the case of Sri Lanka.

In the first quarter of 2022 Sri Lanka recorded a trade deficit of \$1.59 billion. While close to \$0.7 billion of the trade deficit was financed by remittances, the rest was financed by central bank reserves. Soon after, with reserves falling below \$2 billion, Sri Lanka’s government chose to default in April 2022. The depletion of reserves and the drying up of financial flows from the rest of the world in preceding quarters meant that Sri Lanka could no longer sustain the high levels of trade deficits. As a result, the exchange rate collapsed, and the economy experienced a sharp slowdown with the GDP growth falling from close to 0% in the first quarter of 2022 to -7.4% in the second quarter¹.

This adjustment was necessary to bring imports to a level which could be financed using the country’s dollar income. Worse still, Sri Lanka’s banking system’s exposure to external creditors as discussed below required imports to fall even further. Trade deficit fell from \$1.59 billion in the first quarter of 2022 to \$0.67 billion in the second quarter and \$0.16 billion in the third quarter of 2022. It recovered in subsequent quarters but only due to an increase in remittances thus allowing the country to finance more imports than it could in the immediate aftermath of the sovereign default. According to recent reports, Sri Lanka’s GDP is projected to grow at 1.6% in 2024 but only after contracting by 7.8% and 3.6% in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Overall, Sri Lanka’s economy has contracted by 11.7% in the period after default².

¹National Accounts Estimates – 2023 Q2. Statistics Department, National Bank of Sri Lanka. https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/national_accounts_estimates_2023_q2.pdf

²Reuters: Sri Lanka’s economy returns to growth, led by agriculture. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/sri-lankas-economy-returns-growth-led-by-agriculture-2023-12-15/>

Sri Lanka is a useful example to highlight the significant cost associated with sovereign default. However, critically, these also depend on factors which are not common to Pakistan. First, and the most important, Pakistan's dollar income has been more than its imports by a significant amount over the last 15 months. Therefore, unlike Sri Lanka, Pakistan will be able to finance more imports than what is currently possible once it suspends its debt repayments. Second, the cost of default is amplified if the country's banking system plays an important role in the economy (Obstfeld et al., 2010). This is indeed the case for Sri Lanka where bank deposits amounted to 60% of GDP just before the crisis. In contrast, bank deposits amount to only 35% of GDP in the case of Pakistan.

Third, the exposure of domestic banks to external financing is another critical factor which can exacerbate the crisis. Default and subsequent restructuring of domestic debt sent the Sri Lankan banks scrambling for dollars to service the maturing credit lines they had in place from external sources but could no longer be renewed. It is reported that Sri Lankan banks have repaid \$3.4 billion in debt to their external creditors since April 2022³. These were raised from the open market thus putting additional pressure on the exchange rate and requiring an even bigger slowdown in economic activity to generate necessary current account surpluses. Once again, this is not the case for Pakistan.

The discussion above highlights that the cost of default will be nowhere close to what we have seen in the case of Sri Lanka. Instead, the biggest risk will come from the restructuring of domestic debt due to excessive exposure of the banking system to the sovereign. This will require measures such as preventing banks from giving out dividends and, instead, using these to build capital over a few years. Additionally, it will make sense for the government to temporarily relax regulatory requirements around capital adequacy ratio while the central bank announces a much more proactive role for itself in providing liquidity whenever the need arises. Finally, the fragility of the banking system in the context of domestic debt restructuring can be presented to international creditors in a credible and transparent manner to convince them that any largescale restructuring of domestic debt will undermine the long-term success of any new arrangement that is reached at the end of restructuring process.

Perhaps a miracle will happen and the assumptions underlying IMF projections will come true even if these haven't in the last two years. But in the more realistic scenario where these don't, it is important to consider the trade-offs between keeping the economy paralysed under the long shadow of short-term rollovers or an outright default which forces the creditors to sit on the table and start talking. I am tempted to argue that the latter option is less costly than the former.

The author is a Senior Lecturer and School Resource Director at the University of Bristol's Economics Department.

³EconomyNext: Sri Lanka banks repay debt or collect US\$1.7bn to Sept 2023. <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-banks-repay-debt-or-collect-us1-7bn-to-sept-2023-142275/>

UNENDING CRISES OF UNENDING HYBRIDITY

Rasul Bakhsh Rais

Perhaps political crisis is ingrained deeply into the genes of the system of neither democracy nor a dictatorship, but an unnatural fusion of the two—generally understood as hybrid. Never have the two mixed anywhere in history, as demands, spirits and driving forces of the two would collide headlong for inherent contradictions. While dictatorship of any type has no faith in, respect for, or recognition of the common man, democracy places great value on the popular will, its strength, and the collective wisdom flowing out of it. The former is elitist in its ideological outlook, believing that the selected, chosen upper crust of society or those occupying high offices in the state structure must lead in the interest of the ordinary folk, as they know what is best for society, the country, and the nation. The latter rests on enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality, and dignity of mankind. In any hybrid order, like ours, the electoral process and political institutions are employed as a façade to fake legitimacy for the rulers. However, the practice of mixing two dialectically opposite propositions about how to govern, particularly a large, semi-urban, industrialising society of Pakistan, a country having a tumultuous history of political conflicts, has generated perpetual crises of managing and stabilising such an unwieldy political order.

There is yet another, more crucial and critical element in the shaping of political hybridity—the dominance of the security establishment over the power arrangements by means of visible and invisible machinations to maintain its primacy over structure of power of the state. Resultantly, the institutional imbalance in civil-military relations has only stunted the growth of democratic culture, political parties, and leadership. There are many ideas that explain the ascendancy of the military and subordinate role of the political leadership, often seen and dealt with as proxies. Among the competing theses are ‘over development of the state’, primacy of geopolitics and security, strategic alignments with the Western powers, and ‘rivalry’ with India. In my view, it was the colonial legacy of state elites guiding, supervising, and controlling the political and economic processes within which the military and bureaucratic leadership had

socialised when they captured power in the formative phase by manipulating the institutions. Since then, Pakistan’s politics has found it difficult to get out of the dense and long shadow of the ascendancy of the military, and every effort has resulted in the ‘empire striking back’. Placing itself on the high pedestal of the ‘guardian’ of the state, it has used political factions to serve as political fronts by fragmenting political parties when they have posed a serious challenge or displacing them from power by direct intervention. Since the second ‘democratic’ transition or political realignment in 1988, the establishment has employed instruments of indirect and direct interference, including coercion, intimidation, and threat of accountability institutions to produce a favourable political outcome of electoral exercises. This has actually been the subtext of Pakistani politics, an unwritten framework within which elections have been held, power transfers taken place, regimes changed, and various political fronts and king’s parties created, ensuring that the vital elements of power remained with the establishment.

The partial, incomplete, and even conditional transfer of power was acceptable to the dynastic political families of Pakistan because of their own rivalries, opportunism and requirements of a patronage system that demanded access to power to retain influence within their respective constituencies. This was not a bad bargain for them, as this hybridism with elected political fronts perpetuated electoral supremacy of the feudal-tribal oligarchy, which itself is equally deficient in holding high democratic values. The fact is the traditional elite and dynastic political parties that represent rival coalitions of socially dominant ‘electable’ families have flagrantly done the bidding for the hybrid order in order to protect their political gains. Connected with the ‘real’ power centre, they employ district and provincial administrations to jostle out competitors, as working closely with the managers of the system ensures them a good share of the spoils. However, much, like the Mughal Empire, whenever the central power of the king weakened, the peripheries seceded. Similarly, the dynastic elites left the sinking boat of a military dictator

to realign their political commitments. The civil society at large and the urban intellectuals whilst witnessing the making and breaking of collaborative enterprises between the feudal elites, industrial proxies, and the military, were not silent spectators: they always contributed to the narratives of resistance in every possible form penning radical poetry to fiction, satire, and democratic movements. The relentless counter of social and democratic movements, no matter how weak these have been, are a fascinating dimension of the political saga in Pakistan. They demonstrate an indomitable spirit of resistance that has been peaceful and constitutional and carried through generation after generation by some of the political parties, civil society, women, intellectuals, and progressives. Sadly, each time a movement shook the foundations of a military dictatorship, like against Ayub Khan (1967-69), Zia-ul Haq (Movement for Restoration of Democracy, 1983-84), and Pervez Musharraf (2007-8), the divided dynastic political class compromised on power-sharing, with the exception of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1972-77).

Two other Prime Ministers, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif (1997-99), a protégé cultivated by the Zia regime to counter the Pakistan People's Party, attempted to grow out of the shadow of his benefactors by asserting prime ministerial powers: he was ousted, convicted for the laughable accusation of 'plane hijacking' and sent into exile in a brokered political deal. Imran Khan (2018-2021) came to power through political alignments arranged by the establishment with king's parties and members of the assemblies connected to the hybrid power system—a mistake he would repent for life. Incongruities of the hybrid system once again generated a political crisis in 2022 when Khan stepped out of the dotted line on some domestic and foreign policy issues. There are other reasons for his estrangement, including his own egocentricity, engaging in multiple confrontations, and serious failings in governance. But the straw that broke the camel's back was his trip to Russia in February 2022 on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was seen as an attempt to take Pakistan out of the Western geopolitical camp. Reacting to this purported move, the establishment realigned with the three dynastic parties—the PPP, PMLN and JUI—and orchestrated a constitutional coup in the form of a vote of no-confidence. It threw Khan out of power, but he captured the street and weaved a defiant anti-establishment narrative that struck the right note in the heart of the general public whilst the military imposed a sixteen party government for sixteen months to serve as a new front. This time around, the difference was mass mobilisation by a popular leader, resistance, and a launch of a national movement for Azadi (freedom) with the objective of claiming national dignity, sovereignty, and supremacy of civilian authority. The establishment, used to effectively silencing, found the biggest challenge to its dominance in a very charged national atmosphere and from a leader made of a very different social material—middle class and eminent on the basis of self-achievement as a renowned, charismatic cricket player and captain.

His humiliating arrest by the para-military forces inside the Islamabad High Court triggered on May 9, 2023 triggered a nationwide reaction that included attacks on military installations. The events of that day and the narrative of resistance before and after May 9 point to a change in the demographic make-up, urban landscape, class structure, role of social media and society large. There are now effectively two sides in the new political confrontation—the PTI and all the rest. The security establishment and the dynastic parties closed the ranks and have since been branding Imran Khan and his Tehreek-e-Insaaf as 'enemy' of the state for allegedly orchestrating the May 9 attacks. What followed is a long story of coercion, intimidation, humiliation, torture, forced disappearances, and dismantling of Khan's party piece by piece. Most of the notable leaders left the party in droves by addressing pre-arranged press conferences to quit and hold Imran Khan responsible for attacks against state institutions. The objective was to tell all and sundry that Khan's party was finished, and his political career was over. To ensure his exit from politics further, a harsh environment was created with questionable legal and administrative means. The proxy care-taking governments registered about one hundred and fifty criminal cases, convicting him via a judicial fast track in four cases — which collectively sentenced him to thirty-four years imprisonment, with two judgments coming just days before the general elections. Further to his anguish, the Supreme Court denied the PTI its political identity, the electoral symbol of the bat, and the hounding of its candidates and total blackout of ads and posters went on to make the electoral exercise a one-way contest for the dynastic parties: now working hand-in-glove with the establishment.

It seems both the dynastic parties and the establishment have lost touch with the political reality of Pakistan, as alluded to above. Imran Khan fostered 'change', if not in the material conditions of the country, in the form of a narrative of resistance against the dynastic parties whom he has relentlessly branded as corrupt and colluding to rob Pakistan, resulting in their routing out in the 2024 elections. Against all odds, however, the PTI affiliated independent candidates won a numerical majority even if one accepts the allegedly fabricated results. The big story is yet to unfold as the party claims it had bagged more than two-thirds of the seats in the National Assembly and also swept the KPK and Punjab Assembly polls. There is circumstantial evidence in the fact that live broadcasting of incoming results mysteriously froze on the screens when the independent candidates were leading in absolute majorities. In the meantime, the Election Commission of Pakistan switched off its live board for journalists, and the Chief Commissioner strangely disappeared for an urgent meeting in the middle of the night when the whole nation wanted him to explain the situation. The Election Management system came back to life later the next afternoon when apparently 'cooked up' results started flowing in. If that is true, this was perhaps done to avoid the worst of the scenarios—PTI's 'claimed' two-thirds majority. Once can imagine what it could have meant for the hybrid system and the future of dynastic parties: most

probably a new, populist nationalist and majoritarian order.

To conclude, the hybrid system appears to have lost whatever rationale and legitimacy, if any, it had, and so have the dynastic political parties in the face of populist sentiment of Azadi awakening the youth. A fragmented mandate, if one accepts the legitimacy of the electoral results, and a coalition government driven by political necessity at the centre, even with the backing of the establishment may not ensure stability. One cannot dismiss a paradigmatic shift having taken place in how the people of Pakistan have voted, what for, and why so massively against establishment-favored parties. The real challenge is acknowledging this change and respecting the popular will. If not, the system that is already past its expiration date may find it more difficult to deliver any goods, let alone stability and order.

The author is a Professor of Political Science at the Lahore University of Management Sciences.



MAKING SENSE OF PAKISTAN'S RETALIATION AGAINST IRAN

Syed Ali Zia Jaffery

Days after Pakistan retaliated against Iran by conducting airstrikes that killed scores of militants¹, both countries ended a week-long suspension of diplomatic relations². More encouragingly, Islamabad and Tehran, through their foreign ministers, announced that they will respect each other's sovereignty while committing themselves to taking steps to bolster their security cooperation³. An amicable termination of an unexpected crisis is good news for regional security, especially at a time when the Middle East is riddled with conflicts. This outcome can be credited to Pakistan's assiduous handling of the crisis. Notwithstanding domestic bottlenecks and upheavals, Pakistan was able to give a swift and effective response whilst ensuring that it did not engage in jingoism. Pakistan's kinetic response, it must be stated, was the main plank of its crisis management toolkit, not least

because of Iran's unprovoked strikes. Islamabad's decision to use force against Tehran made a lot of tactical and strategic sense, for three primary reasons.

First, Pakistan's retaliatory strikes against Iran were necessary for reestablishing deterrence and underscoring the sacrosanctity and inviolability of the country's borders. The country's calibrated response conveyed to Iran that, come what may, its territorial integrity is a red line that must never be breached.

Had Pakistan not given this kind of befitting response, Iran would have learnt some wrong and dangerous lessons from this crisis. It could have been concluded that because Pakistan can tolerate minor incursions like this, more such actions could be taken going forward.

¹John Davison, "What Is behind Iran-Pakistan Attacks and Could Conflict Escalate?," Reuters, January 19, 2024, sec. Middle East, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-its-proxies-widening-violence-middle-east-2024-01-18/>.

²"Ambassadors Return to Tehran, Islamabad as Iran-Pakistan Relations Improve-Xinhua," accessed February 25, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240127/-cab0a9cd7a0f47dfb3431472d93d873e/c.html>.

³Gibran Nailyar Peshimam, "Pakistan, Iran to Expand Security Cooperation, Move on from Missile Strikes," Reuters, January 29, 2024, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/world/pakistan-iran-agree-expand-security-cooperation-after-missile-strikes-2024-01-29/>.

More importantly, Iran could have calculated that it is a propitious time to aggress against Pakistan, not least because the country is weak from within. Here, it is important to mention that a lackadaisical response from Pakistan would have engendered reputational costs for it. When facing multiple inimical forces who want to carry out similar attacks, these reputational costs cannot be ignored. India, a country that has already carried out airstrikes inside Pakistan, would have been encouraged had Iran gone scot-free. Hence, it could be argued that Pakistan's retaliatory strikes delivered the same message to multiple audiences, including the Indian leadership that has repeatedly threatened to carry out such attacks against Pakistan.

Second, an unremitting spell of escalation between the two countries would have been damaging for Pakistan because its political and economic woes do not leave any room for further instability. The country has been in the grip of major political and constitutional crises since the ouster of Imran Khan from office in April 2022. His rising popularity⁴, coupled with an economy in tatters⁵, saw a disgruntled citizenry up against a political dispensation that lacked credibility and constitutional backing. Therefore, with this conflagration taking place weeks ahead of the general election, Pakistan could not have afforded to let the situation simmer. Given how Khan's victory in the election had been undermined and led to chaos⁶, it is somewhat comforting that tensions with Iran have reduced. It would have been exceedingly difficult for Pakistani authorities to navigate volatility on the Pak-Iran border in the midst of countrywide protests against rigging. Additionally, had the crisis not terminated this quickly, one might have witnessed many rounds of skirmishes between the two countries. Such a scenario would have added more pressure on Pakistan to up the ante against Iran, making crisis management all the more complex. If anything, an unpopular political setup would have had its work cut out had the situation worsened. Therefore, it was important for Pakistan to show timely resolve, responsibility, and restraint, with a view to convincing Iran that further escalation would be costly.

Third, a militarily-active Pak-Iran border would have dented Pakistan's chances of taking advantage of the opportunities that the China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal brings to the table. Certainly, if normalcy were to replace animosity in Tehran-Riyadh relations, Islamabad can find geoeconomic space for itself. Also, the country could benefit from the centrality of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁷. This, when coupled with China's highly touted strategic deal with Iran⁸, as well as the complementarity between Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and BRI⁹, opens up many strategic pathways for Pakistan's economic turnaround. Moreover, if Saudi Arabia and Iran improve and strengthen their ties, the all-important Persian Gulf will become more stable, giving Pakistan unhindered access to oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and remittances. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that had Pakistan allowed Iran to become more brazen and the row to continue, it might have taken a long time to capitalise on these strategic openings.

In sum, Pakistan's measured yet resolute response to the recent border crisis with Iran was a strategic necessity. Foremost, Pakistan's inability to retaliate timely and reinforce red lines would have signaled vulnerability, setting a dangerous precedent for other hostile forces, especially India. Moreover, an elongated crisis with Iran would have been difficult to manage, not least because of a bevy of domestic political and economic challenges that Pakistan faces. Last but not least, Pakistan being at loggerheads with Iran would have attenuated the prospect of taking strategic advantage of the openings available in the wake of the China-driven Saudi-Iran rapprochement. That these costs are too prohibitive is one reason why both Islamabad and Tehran have agreed to resolve their tactical issues cordially.

The author is the Deputy Director at the Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR), University of Lahore. He can be reached on X at @syedalizia1992.

⁴"Jailed Imran Khan Favored in Survey to Run Pakistan's Economy," Bloomberg.Com, January 31, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-31/jailed-imran-khan-favored-in-survey-to-run-pakistan-s-economy>.

⁵"Pakistan's next Government Faces an Economy Sliding into the Void | East Asia Forum," January 24, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/25/pakistans-next-government-faces-an-economy-sliding-into-the-void/>

⁶Christina Goldbaum, "Shocking Opposition Victory Throws Pakistan Into Chaos," The New York Times, February 10, 2024, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/10/world/asia/pakistan-election-imran-khan.html>.

⁷Rabia Akhtar, "The Saudi-Iran Rapprochement and Its Implications for Pakistan - PIDE - Pakistan's Premier Economic Think Tank Advocating Reform through Socio-Economic and Public Policy Research -," <https://pide.org.pk/> (blog), accessed February 25, 2024, <https://pide.org.pk/research/the-saudi-iran-rapprochement-and-its-implications-for-pakistan/>.

⁸"The 25-Year Iran-China Agreement, Endangering 2,500 Years of Heritage," Middle East Institute, accessed February 25, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/25-year-iran-china-agreement-endangering-2500-years-heritage>.

⁹李阳, "The Belt and Road Initiative and Saudi Vision 2030 Will Bring New Prosperity— Beijing Review," accessed February 25, 2024, https://www.bjreview.com/Opinion/Voice/202309/t20230905_800341364.html.



GRASSROOTS POLITICS: THE ONLY WAY FORWARD

Shahnaz Khan

If there was ever any doubt that the current political set up has failed the people of Pakistan and held the country hostage to powerful vested interests, recent events have all but eliminated it.

This is a logical outcome of decades of excluding people at the grassroots level from meaningful participation in the political system of Pakistan. Since inception, Pakistan's politics has been dominated by the moneyed class, mostly large land owners. Their collusion with the civil and military bureaucracy has blocked the devolution of power to the masses. As a result, the institution of democracy has become handmaiden to their vested interests. The fact is that elections in Pakistan serve only one purpose: to create a facade of democracy while in reality it is an oligarchy, a small group of rich and powerful individuals and families pretending to be politicians, doing whatever best serves their own agendas.

Decades of incompetence, insincerity and vested interests have brought us to the point where economic and political crises have led to social and political turmoil, increasing rates of crime and the resurgence of terrorism – collectively representing an existential threat to the country. This is besides the influence of foreign powers, which have frequently intervened for their own interests.

While there is so much hue and cry about violations of the Constitution where power grabbing is concerned, not even an eyebrow is raised on the state's failure to safeguard the most fundamental rights of citizens guaranteed in the Constitution – most of which are outlined in Chapter Two. Some of the most important clauses are:

The State shall:

- Promote, with special care, the educational and economic interests of backward classes or areas.
- Secure the well-being of the people, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race by raising the standard of living, by preventing the concentration of wealth and means of production and distribution in the hands of a few to the detriment of general interest and by ensuring equitable adjustment of rights between employers and employees, and land lords and tenants;
- Provide for all citizens, within available resources of the country, facilities for work and adequate livelihood with reasonable rest and leisure;
- Provide basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, housing, education, and medical relief for all such

citizens, irrespective of sex caste, creed or race, as are permanently or temporarily unable to earn their living on account of infirmity, sickness or unemployment.

The system has been hijacked by a privileged few, while poverty, hunger, unemployment, disease, oppression and exploitation have become the fate of the majority.

In their pursuit to acquire power at all costs, most of these politicians seek help from and make deals with the military establishment and conspire against each other, thus weakening democratic institutions. Their lust for power is so strong that they have blocked the entry of any newcomer, except their own progeny, into mainstream politics, using their wealth, power and influence.

Rather than educating voters about more important policy level issues and offering solutions, they have kept them embroiled in petty constituency politics and when needed, have appealed to their regional, religious, linguistic and other identities to promote division for their own political benefit.

Politics is fundamentally a process through which it is decided who will have the authority to make decisions. Under the current system this process is strictly controlled by the rich powerful class, perhaps only a few hundred thousand in numbers in a country of 225 million people. Bad politics has led to bad decision making, leading to bad governance. There are mountains of papers written with policy recommendations to reform every sector but they are buried in some dark dungeons of the bureaucratic maze. Without political will, nothing can change.

On the one hand, extreme inequality of income and wealth, which has created extreme inequality of access to opportunity and on the other, decades of systematic disenfranchising of the masses from the political process. This is done by obstructing access to opportunity and quality education and keeping them financially destitute, making them believe that they neither have the capacity nor the means to become active players in politics. These are two of the biggest hurdles in the way of mobilising the masses.

According to Burki et al.¹ the wealthiest 10 percent of the households own 60 percent of household wealth, while the least wealthy 60 percent own just one-tenth.

The State's failure to fulfill its social contract has forced people to fall back on clan, tribe, and kinship for social security. This has affected their voting patterns. The political, economic, and social influence and oppression of tribal chiefs and large landlords in some parts of the country is another factor which compromises the

people's ability to vote freely.

So, what is to be done? Let us start with ending extreme inequality of income and wealth and access to opportunity, proven enemies of democracy. This will help reduce the political, social and economic power of this class. Some of the steps needed for this are:

- Agricultural land reforms. End unlimited profiteering and speculation on land and eliminate urban land mafia groups whilst developing a comprehensive land policy that is in line with the needs of people, now and in the future.
- State to set up new industry and control the strategic sectors of the economy, including the energy sector. There are successful models of this around the world.
- Austerity measures on government spending.
- Reform tax system to reduce wealth and income inequality.
- Focus on human development rather than brick and mortar.
- Strengthen public social sectors, e.g. education, healthcare, food security, transportation, housing, and internet access.
- Change colonial era laws to meet current needs of the people.
- Reform police, bureaucracy and the judiciary to make them people friendly.
- Promote and strengthen public banking.
- Strengthen local government system to empower local people to solve local problems.

But these steps are contrary to the interests of the current ruling class. Who will bell the cat? One thing is very clear, there is no magic solution and no quick fix. The only way out is for those who have been discarded and excluded from political, social and economic spheres of the country to rise up and take their place in history. However, waking up a sleeping giant will take time, effort, resources and leadership.

¹Burki, A. A., Hussain, A., & Khan, K. E. (2020). Exploring the Extent of Selected Dimensions of Inequality in Pakistan, Oxfam GB, Islamabad (in association with Chanan Development Association).

Revolution is the only way out but its pathway in the 21st century is through an informed, organised, and united political action. An angry, unruly, unorganised mob of people can cause a lot of destruction but can never bring about a revolution. Capitalism, whilst causing huge inequality, has also given masses the power of vote. But to use this power for revolution is like bringing millions of sunrays to a single focus through a lens.

The fundamental question is what will mobilise and unite the masses who are ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and nationality wise as diverse as it can get, and make them believe that they have the power? The answer is to start a class based politics.

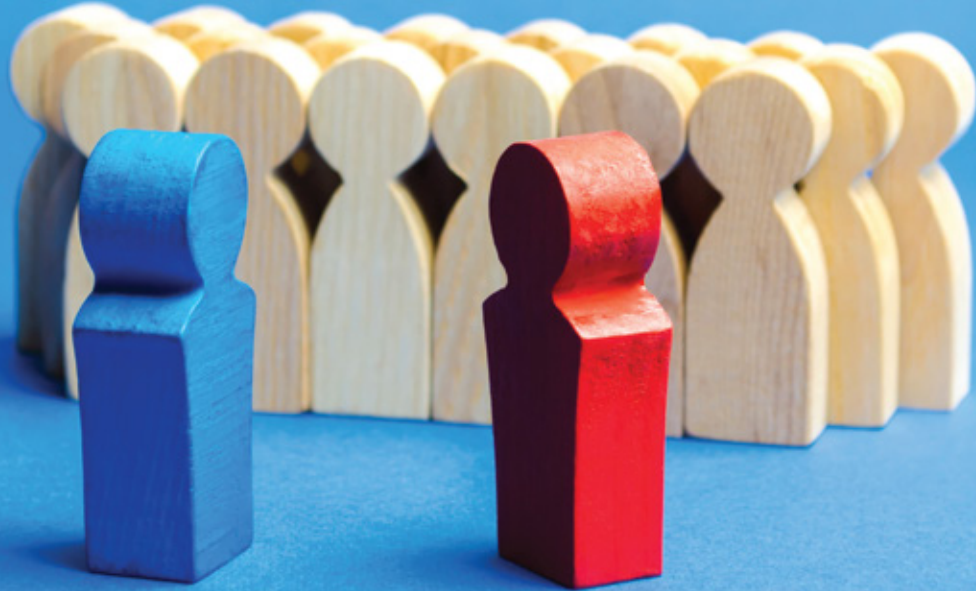
With the changing forms of capitalism, there is no organised proletariat as it was during the production based model of capitalism. Capitalism's evolution into finance capital and digital platforms have changed that. The fact remains, however, that a few individuals or groups of individuals own and control all means of production, land being the most important one in Pakistan, with the rest of the population is almost completely dependent on them.

The needed ingredients to mobilise and unite this disenfranchised class are:

- A common agenda. Poverty, hunger, disease, joblessness and exclusion from economy, as well as politics and social life, are common problems regardless of sex, caste, creed, nationality or ethnicity. With the worsening economic conditions, even the relatively comfortable middle class is slipping down, increasingly struggling to afford good education for their children, cope with major healthcare disasters or own a house.
- A leading voice which is already well known and trusted, without the usual baggage of vested interests, to rally people around their common interest, giving them courage and cheering them on.
- A political party platform for people to come together, organise themselves, and work in a disciplined manner under a central command.
- A strategy to reach out to people and convince them that they have the power to do it, that this will not only work but that it is the only way forward. Social media is an important tool for this.
- Finding supporters and sympathisers from all segments of society: a broad based coalition of intellectuals, writers, poets, artists, journalists, professionals, experts in various fields, which adds their weight behind this initiative.
- Enough committed people to provide the needed material resources.
- Then the rarest of commodities: patience, perseverance, commitment, courage and a relentless willingness to sacrifice for the cause.

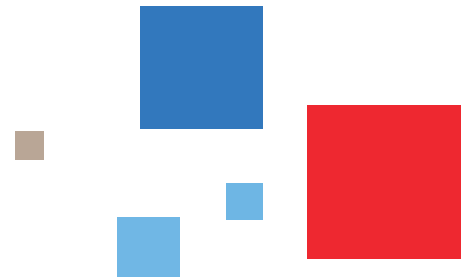
Success will be achieved when people will understand this message. It is only then that millions of sunrays will come together and focus on a single agenda to create a more inclusive society with equitable distribution of resources and access to opportunity. Only then will we see the new dawn promised in 1947.

The author is currently the Vice Chairperson of the Barabri Party, Pakistan.



DEBATĚ

The Debate segment of Discourse seeks to initiate open, good-faith exchanges on ‘big picture’ questions of policy: in particular, ones that involve two consolidated ‘schools of thought’ that have each evolved in apparent isolation and become the antitheses of one another over time. This is due, of course, to ideology and the incentive structures of both media and academia – which are structured to foster the growth of echo chambers. Through this section of the magazine, the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics is attempting to lay out the two salience perspectives of a particular topic in a manner that centres our audience, allowing them to engage with both sides and arrive at their own conclusions.





IS THE POLITICS OF 'ELECTABLES' over in Pakistan?

February 8th marked a peculiar, if not altogether bizarre, turn of events in Pakistan's history. The general elections – heavily 'influenced' by the powers that be – produced results that shocked all and sundry, with dependent candidates under the umbrella of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf emerging as the single largest 'party'. This was despite numerous waves of repression, with political workers facing arbitrary challenges during the nominations process, being disallowed from public campaigning, and even having their electoral symbol stripped. This is not to mention the total absence of Pakistan's most popular leader, Imran Khan, from the political theatre altogether following the events of May 9, 2023 – with several high-profile cases being charged against him in a coordinated onslaught from the judicial system. On elections day, phone signals were switched off and polling staff were mysteriously absent from their designated stations in key areas – particularly within Karachi – and scores of individuals that had planned on participating were regretfully unable to do so.

Despite all the trials and tribulations, however, the party adopted innovative techniques to resist the oppressive tactics: leveraging technology and the power of the internet to keep voters informed of electoral symbols via websites and the instant messaging service on Facebook. Supporters were also encouraged to join

WhatsApp groups for their specific constituencies for real time information sharing on polling day and encouraged to maintain a sense of calm and vigilance throughout the process, regardless of what may come. They did not disappoint. When results began rolling on television transmissions at 6 PM, PTI-backed candidates were outshining their competitors across the nation – even in areas considered strongholds of the PMLN. Celebratory cheers marking the triumph of democracy began ringing across social media – by all indicators, it seemed as though the 'resistance movement' was winning.

By midnight, live results came to a complete standstill and reports of journalists being barred from entry at polling stations began proliferating across the interwebs. This remained the case until the afternoon of the following day, when television channels resumed the proceedings. At this point, however, independents were shown to be losing on a large chunk of the seats they were in comfortable leads in the previous evening. Something was clearly amiss – and the talk of the town had assumed a sombre, frustrating tone: now revolving entirely around allegations of blatant rigging. In spite of all this, final 'results' still showed independent candidates bagging a whopping 92 seats in the National Assembly – ahead of the PMLN's 80-odd. Nationwide protests erupted across the country in the week

afterwards and petitions filed with election tribunals to contest seats – but to no avail. On the 3rd of March, Shehbaz Sharif was elected Prime Minister in the National Assembly.

Regardless of one's assessment of Pakistan's current political landscape, one glaring point of contention is the historic role and place of 'electables' in Pakistan's polity: elites with the sociopolitical capital to influence electoral outcomes via a combination of coercion and patronage. With household names being defeated by independents with little to no prior presence amongst the public imagination, there seems to be a narrative that the politics of 'electables' has reached its expiry date. If true, this would signal a radical departure from the political dynamics of old – in which strategic partnerships were formulated amongst the security apparatus, political parties, and the proverbial 'electables' to determine who gets to populate the corridors of power and set policy direction in Pakistan. The question has major implications and ramifications for democratic transition and decolonisation, as it would certainly not be an exaggeration to claim that the prominence and continued influence of electables has functioned as a key resource to uphold the status quo in governance affairs.

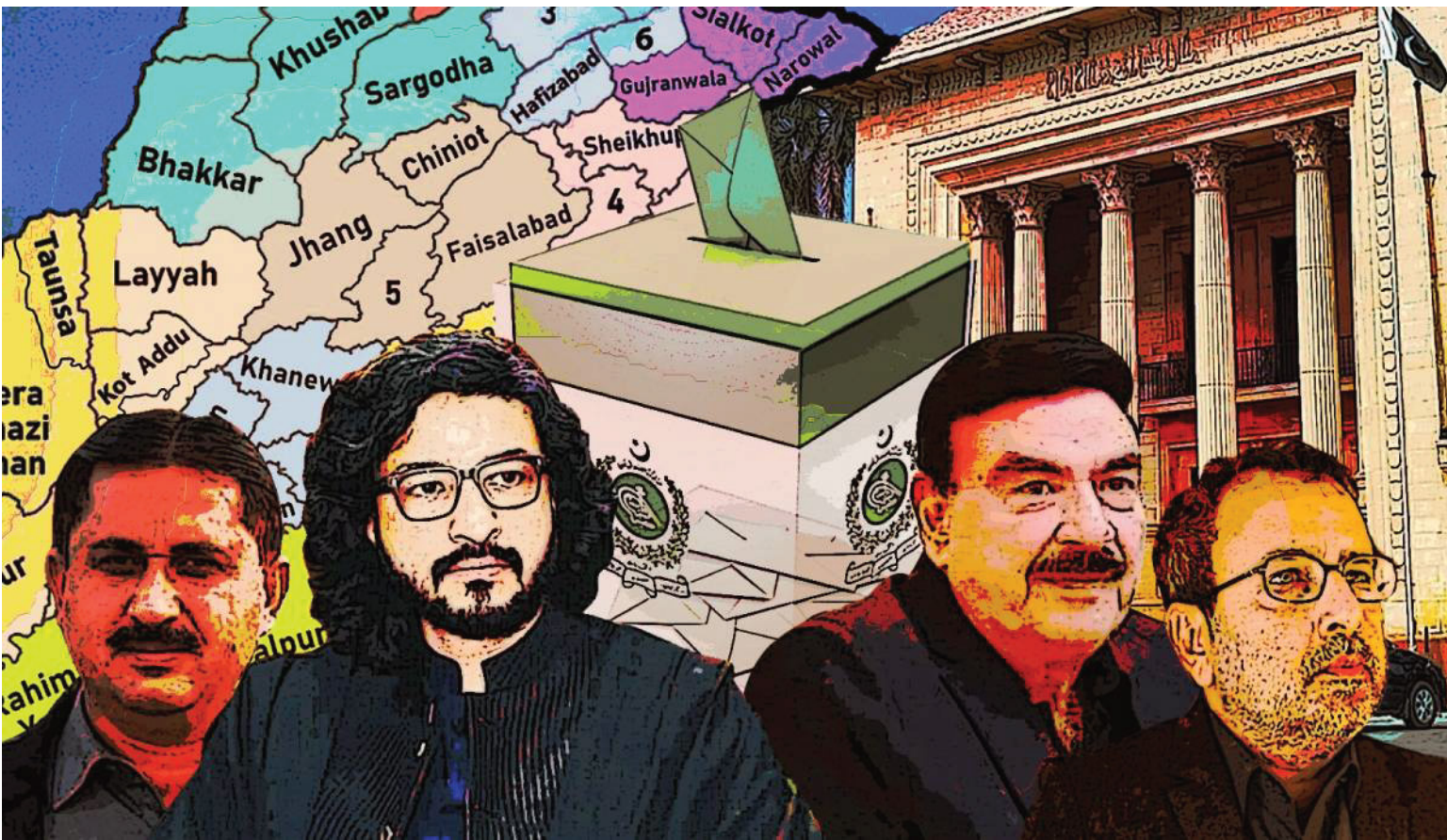
This issue of Discourse aims to evaluate these claims and ask whether it genuinely is the case that 'electables' have run their course, a discussion that will cover the source/origins of 'electables' influence – including land ownership, political clientelism, and service delivery – as well as their defining features in terms of political settlements and overarching ideological commitments and the recent rise of social media and other technological advancements and adaptations that have been disrupting the politics of old.

We hope this debate serves to highlight the strongest and weakest aspects of both positions, as well as underscoring the areas in which they may overlap: thus helping take the conversation forward whilst appreciating all the nuances that have made it such a 'sticky' issue for Pakistan.

Happy reading – and remember to keep the discourse alive!

Yours Sincerely,

Editorial Board
Discourse Magazine
 Pakistan Institute of
 Development Economics





ELECTABLES: THE UNSUNG LOSERS OF THE 2024 ELECTIONS

Bilal Lakhani

Who was the actual winner of the 2024 Pakistani elections? The answer to this question will be debated for generations in our history books. What shouldn't be debated though, is who was the biggest loser. That title doesn't belong to the PML-N or the boys, as is being argued by journalists who write the first draft of history in real time. The biggest loser of the 2024 elections is the politics of the electables.

Elections are typically an opportunity for the ruled to choose their rulers. In Pakistan, where black is white and white is black, the February 8th elections will not

produce a change in rulers. And yet, the PTI voters who quietly turned out a tsunami for change haven't lost their faith in democracy. Instead, they are energised and electrified. What's going on here?

On February 8th, PTI's voters may not have been able to force a change in their rulers immediately but they have rewritten the social contract between the rulers and the ruled in Pakistan forever. In the process, they have finally bent the arc of Pakistan's history definitively towards civilian supremacy and read out a namaz-e-janaza for the politics of the electable.

Traditionally, electables in Pakistan are used to winning elections regardless of which party's symbol they're running on and which way the political winds are blowing. Moreover, once they win elections, electables are a convenient lever for the real power brokers in the country to gently direct the people's mandate in whatever direction they feel is best for the country.

The 2024 elections turned these traditional expectations on their head. Jahangir Tareen, the chief organiser of the electables, lost his own election by a landslide and his party full of electables lost spectacularly in constituency after constituency. Even Saad Rafiq and Rana Sanaullah lost their seats and most independent observers argue that Khwaja Asif also lost his seat. Pervaiz Khattak also lost his personal seat to a no-name PTI candidate. Many of these electables lost to tier 2 and 3 PTI candidates with virtually no name recognition.

There's only one man who can take the credit or blame for this: Imran Khan. Over the last eighteen months, he has electrified and educated the masses on the power of their vote to dilute the strength of unelected forces, which exert undue influence within the corridors of power. He builds on similar messaging delivered by other political giants before him. The difference is that Imran Khan has been able to mobilise a larger number of people, including Gen Z, urban elite and traditionally pro-establishment constituencies on his message. More importantly, Imran Khan and his supporters have shown extraordinary courage in the face of brutal state repression.

It started with the murder of Arshad Sharif, the jailing and torturing of senior PTI party leadership, leaking of private videos, an assassination attempt on Imran Khan himself, media censorship, killing of a party worker and shelling others with tear gas and rubber bullets. This is classic behaviour to get any civilian leader in Pakistan to back down and fall in line. But Khan refused to fall in line or be exiled. He kept making a singular demand to hold elections. And now we know why.

On a side note, remember when they said he wouldn't last more than three days in jail because of withdrawal from drugs or when they disqualified his marriage? That's what they threw at him. Everything and the kitchen sink. And this is what backfired for the electables. For the first time, the Pakistani people voted for something beyond their 'bread and butter' issues - the thana katcheri patronage system that electables master. This time the Pakistani people voted for their basic rights, including the right to vote. And the electables chose to stand on the wrong side of history.

Of course, this is Pakistan and so even winning an election doesn't change things overnight. The mandate of the people stands for change and yet the powers that be don't want to change; they want to cut a deal. Wise intellectuals asked PTI to cut a deal in the name of talking to all other parties. But Imran Khan was stubborn and asked for the people's genuine mandate to be respected. We are now witnessing the last act of the

electable system that has ruled the country for decades and the birth pangs of a Naya Pakistan.

In the longer arc of history, some irreversible gains have already been made by the Pakistani people on February 8th. First, the Pakistani people are entirely capable of producing peaceful revolutions through the ballot box - an extraordinary feat when one considers how many other Muslim nations break out into civil war and violence whilst renegotiating social contracts between the ruled and rulers. Second, the new 'electable' candidate is the one who stands with the people of Pakistan. No backdoor deals or guarantees can withstand the sheer force of the Pakistani voter. And finally, that the Pakistani voter isn't dumb or unaware - even if their bat is snatched and phone shut. This was a vote for the right to vote. Democracy has won by a landslide.

And this time, democracy isn't defined by the electable but is inspired by opposition to the electable: so much so that even PTI independents aren't abandoning their party to join the PML-N or PPP in the numbers they would have previously, especially under such trying circumstances and incentives to switch loyalty. This shows how much the landscape has changed for electability.

The people of Pakistan have demonstrated how knowledgeable, intelligent and nuanced their voting choices are, even when the odds are heavily stacked against them. This is driven in large part by millions of young voters tearing apart the traditional social contract their parents have with their local electable. The 2024 elections mark the beginning of the end for the politics of electables in Pakistan.

The author is an alumni of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and a winner of the James A. Wechsler Award for International Reporting.



2024 ELECTIONS: THE END OF ELECTABLES?

Hassan Javid

Analysing elections in Pakistan – particularly in their immediate aftermath – has always been closer to reading tea leaves than solving a quadratic equation. There may be general trends that can be observed and speculative conclusions that can be reached, but the paucity of exit poll data and information about why people voted the way they did invites a certain degree of caution when making definitive statements about what a given election means for democracy, parties, and candidates in Pakistan. This problem compounded by the ever-present interference of the military establishment whose pre- and post-poll forays into electoral engineering further cloud the picture, as currently being seen in the furor over Form 45s across the country.

In the February 2024 elections, there are some observations that should be relatively uncontroversial. That the elections were rigged is something that cannot really be denied, nor would it make sense to suggest that the PTI's candidates did not perform better than expected given the constraints placed on them. Whilst there are

some who might argue that the military establishment ultimately benefits from a national political scenario in which no one party is able to claim an absolute majority in parliament – since unstable coalitions will always be easier to manipulate – there is little evidence to support the idea that the success of PTI candidates was part of some secret military conspiracy. If anything, the 2024 elections are an important reminder of the limits of state power. Attributing all events and outcomes to the machinations of shady uniformed masterminds gives them far too much credit.

However, in this context there are important questions that currently do not have clear answers. For example, while there is a broad consensus that rigging happened it is not immediately evident how much it affected the outcome of the elections. Which seats were rigged, who were they rigged in favour of, and how much of a difference did these efforts make to the overall balance of power in the National Assembly? The elections may be stolen, but what exactly is the scale of the theft? Similar

ly, to what extent can the success of the PTI be attributed to support for its platform as opposed to anti-incumbency bias driven by years of grinding inflation and poor governance? In other words, is there a meaningful difference between votes for the PTI and votes against the status quo? Much has also been made of the youth vote – 44% of voters in 2024 were reportedly voting for the first time – but again, we lack any concrete information about who young people vote for. This is not to suggest that they do not support the PTI but, rather, that we simply lack the data to be able to arrive at this conclusion with any confidence.

These are all interesting questions for a variety of reasons, but one reason why it makes sense to pause and take a wider view of the 2024 election results is because of the belief that this election heralds a profound break with the past, not only because it supposedly represents a defeat for the military establishment but also because some believe it signifies the beginning of the end for Pakistan's so-called electables. Defined as political candidates possessing the wealth, political connections, and social status required to mobilise local vote blocs and win elections without necessarily requiring the support of a party machinery, electables have long dominated Pakistan's electoral arena. For example, one study estimated that just 400 political families had won a majority of electoral contests in Punjab since the 1970s, and it has historically been electables defecting from one party to another who have often held the balance of power in Parliament (most famously when they join 'King's Parties' like the PML-Q under Musharraf and, more recently, the IPP). Through a combination of familial privilege accumulated over generations and generous support from the military establishment (when in alliance with them), electables have been a constant in Pakistani politics.

The abject failure of the IPP to make any electoral inroads in 2024, the defeat of party stalwarts from the PML-N and PPP, and the election of a record-breaking number of 'new' legislators in the National Assembly – 96 including six women elected on general seats – is being taken as evidence of the waning power of electables in the face of the PTI's overwhelming support and popularity. The electorate, it is argued, has turned its back on the traditional political elite and has opted for change, making its voice heard at the ballot box. But while there may be an element of truth to this narrative, it is important to highlight a couple of reasons why it may be too early to pronounce the end of electables in Pakistan.

It is important to understand precisely why electables have held power in the first place. Whilst it is often assumed that electables are little more than quasi-feudal elites coercing people into voting for them, the reality is that the key to political power at the local level has, at least for several decades, been contingent upon the ability to provide voters clientelistic service delivery. Put differently, electables succeed precisely because they possess the political and bureaucratic connections necessary to be able to credibly promise services to their supporters. These services can range from providing gas

and electricity to interceding with the police to resolve disputes. This ability to dispense state patronage is coupled with the construction of local electoral alliances, sometimes based on kinship networks, and lies at the heart of Pakistan's clientelist politics.

Clientelistic service provision of this kind is often contrasted with more universalistic, programmatic provision through which constituents would be entitled to public services regardless of who they vote for, and where votes would be cast in support of manifestos and policies rather than the promise of patronage. In terms of the 2024 elections, it is not immediately clear that this kind of shift – from clientelistic to programmatic politics – has taken place. After all, it is important to remember that many of the 'independent' candidates put forward by the PTI who defeated (or should have defeated) PML-N and PPP stalwarts would themselves qualify as traditional electables – including, but not limited to, individuals like Omar Ayub Khan and Malik Amir Dogar. Their victories could be attributed to an enthusiastic upswell of support for the PTI, but it could also be the case that their success rested, at least in part, on their ability to work the traditional levers of political mobilisation in Pakistan. Placed in historical context, electoral competition in Pakistan has often been more of an intra-elite affair than one in which no-name newcomers are able to dislodge powerful incumbents through the support of their party and the sheer force of their campaigns.

If all this is correct, how can we make sense of candidates like the PTI's Mohammad Mobeen Arif who defeated the PML-N's Khurram Dastgir Khan in Gujranwala? This, some may argue, is clear evidence of a relative unknown defeating a political heavyweight, which would not be incorrect. Once again, however, context matters. As research on dynastic politics in Pakistan has shown, traditional electables tend to fare worse in urban constituencies, and this trend intensifies over time. Put simply, urban voters tend to place a greater emphasis on service delivery and are less likely to be part of vote blocs organised around local kinship networks. Urban spaces are more pluralistic, in terms of the range and variety of political options and events available as well as sources of information and, crucially, are also home to Pakistan's middle classes. All these factors combine to produce voters who are less likely to reward poor candidates – regardless of their name of party affiliation – and it is not coincidental that some of the biggest upsets (or potential upsets) in 2024 took place in Pakistan's cities.

This brings us once more to the question of whether it is meaningful to distinguish between a vote for the PTI or against the status quo. Had the PTI not been forced out of power by the April 2022 vote of no confidence, there is considerable reason to believe its government would have presided over a deteriorating economic situation and that it would have fared poorly in a free and fair election. Instead, the record-breaking inflation and economic hardship endured by voters over the past two years have been associated with the PDM and Caretaker governments, and it would be reasonable to

assume voters punished their electables for this reason. Things were not helped by the relatively lacklustre campaign mounted by the PML-N, presumably because it assumed its partnership with the establishment guaranteed victory. The PTI itself was hamstrung by the curbs on its campaigning and whilst its leaders and party workers did build a narrative around their persecution and dismissal, the 2024 election season was characterised by a relative lack of debate on policy, even by Pakistani standards.

What this implies is that whilst there may have been pro-PTI sentiment for a variety of different reasons, or anti-PDM mobilisation due to economic hardship, it is difficult to discern how much of the PTI vote was for programmatic policies like the Sehat Card as opposed to more populist rhetoric. This matters because commitment to reforming the entire system of clientelistic politics would be a prerequisite for reducing the power of electables, and simply electing 'new' candidates is not sufficient to guarantee this. After all, 2024 is not the first time 'electable' politicians have found themselves ousted from power; similar dynamics were at play in the 1970 elections, and the introduction of a degree requirement for legislators by the Musharraf regime in 2002 also resulted in the disqualification of numerous traditional political elites. In both cases, it could be argued, the fresh faces brought into Parliament ultimately ended up reproducing the same systems of clientelistic politics they ostensibly had the potential to disrupt. Absent disciplined parties with strong organisational capacity, and because of continuous military intervention, candidates who become part of the political system tend to be coopted by it. Today's 'new' politicians could, therefore, become tomorrow's 'electables'.

This is not inevitable. Evidence from other parts of the world shows that clientelism declines as voters become wealthier and start demanding services that become increasingly expensive to provide in a targeted, nepotistic fashion. This is particularly true in circumstances where broader fiscal constraints – such as those being experienced by Pakistan – limit the ability of local electables to fund patronage spending in their constituencies (arguably another factor inhibiting the incumbents in 2024). As 'buying' votes becomes more expensive or difficult, parties are induced to make more programmatic, ideological appeals – and it will be interesting to see if similar tendencies take hold in Pakistan. Conversely, the opposite could also be true if economic conditions improve.

There are other developments that may also shape electoral politics in the years ahead. The development of new, centralised digital governance platforms – such as the mechanisms through which BISP and the Sehat Card are administered – have the potential to take state patronage out of the hands of local electables. Coupled with the potential elimination of so-called Constituency Development Funds, this could go a long way towards associating service delivery with parties rather than individuals. Similarly, as mentioned above, urbanisation and the growth of the middle classes should

similarly blunt the power of electables in the long run. Finally, and most importantly, reducing the military's interference in politics and allowing elections to take place uninterrupted over several cycles would do much to introduce accountability at the ballot box and strengthen democratic institutions.

Electables may indeed become a thing of the past in Pakistan, but it is far too early to make that prediction.

The author was previously an Associate Professor of Sociology at the Lahore University of Management Sciences and is currently based at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, Canada.





OPINIOŃ



EMPOWERING THE LOWEST STRATA: A VEHICLE FOR SOCIOECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

Nasim Beg

While Pakistan has a multitude of complex problems, whether in the form of our struggle to become a functional democracy, the unstable state of the economy, the inequitable distribution of resources, the lack of any long-term thought, sustained trade, investment and industrial policies, strategic geopolitical location and confused foreign relations, the extremely poor quality of governance, lack of investments particularly in the social sector, or the demographic explosion, the most crucial is the deep rooted class divide in our society. Without addressing this, the remaining issues cannot effectively be overcome – and more concerning, our next round of speculation is likely to be around not merely avoiding a default but that of avoiding the collapse of a failing State.

Just to emphasise this point of the class divide, one example is of our basic societal compact, i.e. our Constitution, which is in a language that is completely alien to the vast majority of our population. It was a compact agreed amongst the ruling elites of the country and supposed to speak for the downtrodden. Given that it is not what the people of Pakistan collectively cherish and hold sacred, it is often trampled upon with impunity, without any protest from the masses.

Many would argue that with the right policies based on corrective reforms, we will overcome this class divide. I would argue that this class divide is rooted in several centuries of societal stagnation driven by pervasive elite capture. It will not change unless we make it the key objective, rather than leave it to evolve as a desired outcome of a series of reforms in other areas because for any meaningful social development, freedom from elite capture is a basic pre-requisite.

A fair amount of academic work has been done to demonstrate that all species have evolved through degrees of group cooperation, and it is not natural for one or a small sub-group of a species to progress whilst everyone else is left out. All members of particular species are in it together or out of it collectively.

For human beings, the societies that seem to do well at a point of time in history appear to be those that have the highest level of cooperation amongst themselves. However, this is a cyclical phenomenon, where settled societies tend to see inequality grow over time and this tendency remains so, resulting in a gradual decay of that society unless some event or factor disrupts that inequitable order and results in some sort of a painful new equalisation that resets the path.

Cooperation amongst society members tends to be relatively weak amongst unequal societies, where members of the society are forced to work towards sustenance under degrees of coercion. The coercion need not necessarily be in the form of physical punishment or the threat thereof but can be in the form of the threat of not being able to earn a livelihood in order to survive. If we take the last few centuries, the European nations appear to have evolved to a higher level of cooperation amongst members of the society relative to other settled societies, of what is commonly referred to as the Global South.

These few centuries have also seen some nations experiment with Socialism or Communism, which have not succeeded, and amongst various factors that led to failure, an important attribute was that these went against the use of free trade as a means of exchanging produce and resulting in a balancing of supply and demand.

Of course, there is a school of thought that believes that the free trade or the marketplace is also best suited for balancing out the demand and supply of labour as well. This, to my mind, is an extremely flawed thinking and perverted interpretation of the concept of 'reliance on the market'. There is little similarity between the two. Firstly, people are not commodities that can be moved freely, unless they are slaves: people are members of families and communities and will find it difficult to relocate at any given point in time. Second, the demand for skills is not easily acquired, at least not overnight in the event of the demand arising for a certain skillset. Thirdly, there is a time lag between birth and joining the workforce; thus, once born, the supply of labour is assured whether or not there is a demand for it, say, eighteen years down the road. Over the very long run some minor adjustments in the supply of labour may be possible, but that too is subject to domestic as well as international political constraints.

Given the fact that there is a minimal possibility of switching off the supply of labour, it tends to become the buyer's market - which then sets the price for labour. This can result in no jobs for some, and inadequate wages for the luckier ones. Thus, this 'marketplace' cannot function as it does for commodities, where arrangements for the supply can be adjusted within days. With the possible loss of profit for the supplier, workers will potentially be let go: meaning that the lack of demand will actually impact the supplier's employees (labour). Thus, the lack of demand for a commodity ultimately impacts the persons in the labour market, who do not have the ability to do anything about it in the near term and may well starve to death unless there is some intervention by the society.

Pakistan is one of those societies where, for a variety of reasons, we have very low levels of productivity and thus low levels of labour absorption. On the other hand, the population is exploding. This continues to

place the labour force in a state of near serfdom, a tendency that has prevailed over centuries.

The resultant low wage levels translate into abysmally low per capita consumption of almost everything. This is made worse as owing to the low productivity, we need to import a very large portion of what we consume. We import machinery, raw materials, intermediate goods, finished goods and energy. This leaves us with an increasing import bill, but owing to the low productivity, we do not have the ability to earn enough from our exports to be able to pay for the import needs. On top of that, despite being basically an agriculture country, Pakistan in certain years has also been a net importer of agricultural produce. This import dependence in turn creates pressure on our exchange rate, which translates into higher consumer prices and leaves the labour force under further stress. It is not surprising that with this abysmally low per capita consumption, forty percent of our children suffer malnutrition, stunted growth and a bleak future.

The situation is likely to get worse over time, as the economy cannot grow with this high import dependence if we continue to struggle to earn enough foreign exchange to pay for them. We simply cannot afford to continue kicking the can down the road, i.e. postponing the day of reckoning through borrowing. This situation is further exacerbated by the high growth in the population, i.e. higher consumption needs, and higher supply of poorly skilled labour.

The question is whether we can somehow break out of this vicious downward cycle. The traditional approach of trickle-down economics has not worked and is not likely to work going forward. How do we empower the masses to participate in nation building, i.e. have the luxury of not being preoccupied with where the next meal will come from, and applying their minds to what sort of societal compact they want. This may set the basis for a participatory decision-making political system to evolve.

Economic management is a matter of managing money flows. With our current structure, the bulk of money is flowing to the better off members of society, whilst inadequate levels of money flows to the bulk of the population. The time has come for altering this equation, not through a revolution or turmoil in society, but through direct peaceful action by the State to deliver a larger share of money flows on a per capita basis to the bottom of the pyramid.

Some half measures have been attempted through conditional direct transfers, which have, to a very small extent, alleviated the plight of some families, but that system has inherent defects. It is designed as a poverty alleviation structure, meant to deliver a fraction of the minimum wage, which in itself is highly inadequate for the families identified as in near destitute situations. The attitude is that it is a handout, and borrowed wisdom is repeated such as, "It is better to teach a man how to fish, rather than give him fish."

Sounds very nice, but our economy, the way it is structured, results in even skilled persons struggling to find full employment and an acceptable wage level. If and when we reach a fairer and more egalitarian society, we will have the luxury of such out of place condescending comments. We need to pull out of the whirlpool-like vicious cycle first.

What I would recommend is a direct monthly payment to each adult, without going through a challenging exercise of trying to identify needy families, with all the inherent risk of abuse in the process of identifying the selected few. The direct payment to every adult citizen is easily identifiable through NADRA and we have good progress on the technology application side, which will enable the direct transfers.

The key features of the direct payment being proposed are:

1. The direct payment to every adult citizen will be a right to basic income of every citizen and not support for poverty alleviation.
2. The basic income shall be inflation indexed and adjusted each month.
3. The amount ought to be based on the targeted minimum consumption basket of every citizen, considered as the bare minimum in this day and age. Ideally, it must cover food, clothing, shelter, transportation, medical care, education, etc. as well as access to the internet. Whilst working out the details, items like medical care can be covered separately through a universal medical insurance.
4. A quick way of going forward with the basic income can be based on the current minimum wage. Given that the minimum wage is calculated for an average family, and the fact that the basic income would be paid to every adult, women and men, we can assume that if half the amount equivalent to the minimum wage is distributed to each adult, it should adequately cover a family. However, in order to avoid the risk that people will lose the incentive to join the productive labour force, the basic income can be discounted by a factor between 25% and 50%, which would leave the recipients with what one might consider an appetiser that generates a desire for more.
5. Do away with all subsidies and cross subsidies, including BISP, structures like subsidised Utility Stores Network – which are prone to inefficiencies – as well as higher than market interest based Behood Savings schemes, various tax breaks on one pretext or the other, etc.
6. Ideally, the entire amount (or a significant portion) applicable to the citizens domiciled in each province should be deducted from the NFC award

for each province.

7. For the sceptics, there have already been limited but extremely successful trials of basic income in both developed as well as developing countries. All the feared negative outcomes are negated by such trials.

FINANCING BASIC INCOME

1. If we assume that Basic Income will be paid to 50 million adults (20% of the total population) and apply it on the basis of the current minimum wage of Rs 35,000 per month, and pay half of that to each adult, with a 50% discount, as indicated in Point 4 above, the annual amount works out to Rs. 5.25 trillion.
2. Financing of the proposed basic income will require a change in the traditional approach towards monetary and fiscal policies, as well as distribution of the NFC amount after deducting the provincial share. If the provinces pick up 50% of the cost, the federal share will be Rs.2.63 trillion. The savings under the current system of subsidies will partially off-set this cost.
3. The federal government currently borrows the fiat currency (backed by the State itself) on behalf of the State from banks and pays interest to the banks on that amount far in excess of the proposed Basic Income. Ideally, the State should have the SBP create new money to the extent of the State's borrowing from the banks and pay back their loans. The SBP would need to ensure that the excess money so created is sanitised through the Cash Reserve Ratio being altered upwards significantly, so as to ensure that the entire amount is deposited with the SBP and cannot be used to create new money under the fractional reserve system. This will of course, much to the disquiet of the banks, reduce their profits significantly, which are currently being earned on risk-free lending to the State.

The likely benefits can be:

1. The higher consumption by the majority of the population will result in a virtuous cycle of higher economic activity for every aspect of the economy.
2. The higher spending capacity is likely to create higher demand for education and healthcare as well, which in turn will help our labour force productivity.
3. There is evidence that improved economic conditions result in the reduction of the population growth rate, and not the other way around.
4. Our import dependent consumption will force the exchange rate to realign our economy towards domestic sourcing; the inflation linked basic income will protect the masses from the consequences of exchange rate related inflation but will help create more jobs and at the same time place us in a better position to export.

5. End of market distortions through subsidies and cross subsidies.
6. Apart from the economic activity at the lowest level, basic income for every adult will help empower all those currently suffering discrimination, including backward regions, women, and minorities.

Overall, we ought to see truly empowered citizens, both economically as well as politically, who will demand and enforce better governance arrangements in a better functioning economy.

The author is affiliated with the Arif Habib Consultancy – all views expressed in these pages are his own.



How IMF's Structural Adjustment Programmes Violate ILO Conventions in Pakistan

Shahzeb Usman

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is one of those countries in the world which has most frequently adopted the lending arrangements of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)¹. The impact of IMF policies on economic and social fabric of the country is considered often a source of public scrutiny. To seek lending arrangements from the IMF, the Government of Pakistan generally agrees to various economic conditionalities in letters of intent.

These economic conditionalities are structural economic decisions which GoP aims to implement pursuant to the instalments – or tranches – of the IMF. The idea of these structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) is to promote national ownership of the lending arrangements, and to solve those issues which IMF considers as ‘plaguing’ the country². However, it is often considered that these SAPs of IMF are ‘anti – working class’, detrimentally impacting labour. Therefore, this essay shall investigate the link between the economic policies enunciated in these IMF SAPs in Pakistan and the exacerbation of violations of the International Labour Conventions.

TRADE LIBERALISATION, PRIVATISATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Trade liberalisation is the hallmark of the SAPs of IMF in Pakistan. However, it has added to the premature deindustrialisation of Pakistan, resulting in reducing employment opportunities for industrial labour. If there is any reduction in tariff rates and energy prices are rationalised, capital flight from the country becomes easy and imports increase. The dissonance arises because tariff reduction works only if there is an already established industrial base in the country³.

It is also observed that SAPs of IMF incentivise the production of cash crops to earn prompt foreign exchange which further increases the process of deindustrialisation. This process was best illustrated in cement and pharmaceutical industries in which Pakistan became dependent on foreign imports even though the country was self-sufficient before these liberal economic reforms⁴. The shift from building an industrial base to pushing preferential policies for agricultural equipment increased access to land for rich farmers and poor farmers were forced to take jobs in industries, causing further unemployment for labour and market saturation⁵.

Pursuant to the IMF SAPs, privatisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has also increased. This led to a revision in the model of governance of these SOEs, which generally led to a reduction of output and increases in price. In the cement sector, it was observed that wages of low-income staff steadily decreased due to these privatisation programmes and there was a marked increase in retrenchment. It is also important to note that the white collar employees were not impacted much by the privatisation waves and the upper middle class employees often became conduits of exploitation of working class labour⁶.

This whole economic environment in Pakistan clearly violates the International Labour Conventions, especially the Employment Policy Convention (‘C-122’). It is one the seminal pieces of labour conventions which require States to adopt economic policies that provide employment in a manner that ensures access to everyone irrespective of background⁷. The adoption of trade liberalisation and privatisation due to SAPs of IMF fosters the ideal environment to obstruct countries from complying or taking steps towards the ratification of C-122.

INFORMAL ECONOMY

A relationship between economic integration with global markets and expansion of the informal sector has also been observed as a consequence of IMF-led SAPs.

Due to increases in taxes, reduction in tariffs and adoption of small governance mechanisms – which are all a corollary of SAPs – push factors towards the informal economy increases⁸. In the trade liberalising reforms from 1988 – 2005 in Pakistan pursuant to the SAPs of IMF, this process was especially evident⁹. Thus, it was no surprise that a PILER study of Karachi power loom weavers in 2010 stated that 90% of labour was working 12 hours per day, 93% did not have any paid weekly holidays, and 99.8% were not accorded any overtime wage¹⁰. Moreover, not even one of the workers had formal contracts whilst only 2 out of 1000 industrial labour were registered on EOBI¹¹.

ILO considers the informal economy as part of that system with either no legal regulatory oversight or insufficient protection. Member states are required to safeguard labour from unsafe and unhealthy working conditions which include occupational hazards and absence of safety nets in the informal economy¹². It is important to note that the workers must be protected from harmful substances such as carcinogenic substances. However, they are more prone to such environment in an informal economy¹³. In terms of remuneration, ILO recommends to Pakistan that this concept can include cash or in-kind, and all those perks which will be paid directly or indirectly¹⁴. Wages must be paid properly which is often not the case in the informal economy. Thus, it is quite evident that adoption of SAPs leads to the expansion of economic informality which increases the chances of violations of International Labour Conventions.

GOVERNANCE AND LABOUR PROTECTION

IMF SAPs premise their sense of economic growth on the promotion of deregulation and foreign investment. This was perfectly illustrated when the neoliberal economic policies of 2000s resulted in a policy which stated that factories will only be visited after a notice of one month. Before this policy, factories were visited without any notice once a year. Similarly, for a certain time to promote business friendly policies like Punjab Industry Policy of 2003, Punjab simply placed a ban on labour inspections which was ultimately lifted due to several public mishaps¹⁵. Due to the shrinking of the size of government, which IMF often endorses, the capacity to enforce labour inspection further whittled down. Thus, it is no surprise that Pakistan generally considers lack of capacity and governance limitations as the biggest issue with regards to labour. Pakistani labour standards as well as the system of inspections are quite weak, with an utter lack of regard for the training of officials. In 2012, the ILO noted that there is only 1 labour inspector for 250,000 workers¹⁶. ILO also considered it problematic that most of these factories

were extremely guarded, such as military installations, and it was significantly challenging to access these factories¹⁷.

One of the most important pieces of legislation within the regime of International Labour Conventions is Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 ('C-81'). Article 3(1) of the C-81 states that the function of the labour inspection shall be to consider the enforcement of all the legal provisions relating to work hours and to bring before the competent authority any abuses which not are covered by existing legal provisions. Therefore, if the policies of labour deregulation and outsourcing of government functions are adopted, as the SAPs of IMF often espouse, ILO Conventions are violated as these policies clearly reduce the effectiveness of labour governance and provide an unfavourable environment to the government for protecting labour.

GLOBAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND LABOUR RIGHTS

One of the biggest issues which emerge pursuant to IMF-led SAPs is that the primary focus is on fiscal consolidation. For countries like Pakistan, the short-term measures to earn foreign exchange is through export of labour especially to countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council ('GCC') where they are subjected to excessive exploitation. For migrant workers, residence status is tied to the specific employer with no available recourse to complain against the employers in case of malpractice.

¹Pakistan: History of Lending Commitments' (IMF, 31ST October 2018) <<https://www.imf.org/external/np/fin/tad/extarr2.aspx?member-Key1=760&date1key=2018-10-31>>

²'IMF Conditionality' (IMF, 22ND February 2021), <https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2016/08/02/21/28/IMF-Conditionality>

³Shahrulkh Rafi Khan, 'IMF Conditions Stunt Growth', (2002) 37:44 Economic and Political Review, 4541, 4542

⁴Zulfikar Ahmed Bhutta, Structural Adjustment and their impacts on Health and Society, (2001) 30 International Journal of Epidemiology 712, 714

⁵Mahmood Hasan Khan, M. Ghaffar Chaudhry and Moazam Mahmood, 'The Structural Adjustment Process and Agricultural Change in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s [with Comments]', (1994) 33:4 The Pakistan Development Review 533, 569

⁶Iram A. Khan and Syed Tahir Hijazi, 'Impact of Privatisation on Employment and Output in Pakistan [with Comments]' (2003) 42:4 The Pakistan Development Review 513, 525

⁷ILO Employment Policy Convention 1964, (No.122), Article 1

⁸Robert G. Blanton1 & Bryan Early Dursun Peksen, 'Out of the shadows or into the dark? Economic openness, IMF programs, and the growth of shadow economies', (2018) 13 Rev Int Org 209, 312 -314

⁹Mengyun Wu, Jabbar -ul - Haq, Naeem - uz - Zafar and Huaping Sun, 'Trade liberalisation and informality nexus: Evidence from Pakistan' (2019) 28:6 An International and Comparative Review 732,

¹⁰Kamal A. Munir, Natalya Naqvi and Adorer Usmani, 'The Abject Condition of Labor in Pakistan', (2015) 87 International Labor and Working-Class History 174, 180

¹¹Ibid

¹²Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204), Article 2, 18, 19, 20

¹³ILO Convention on the Prevention and Control of Occupational Hazards Caused by Carcinogenic Substances and Agents, 1974, Article 2

¹⁴ILO Equal Remuneration Convention 1951, (No.100), Article 1 Equal Remuneration

¹⁵Human Rights Watch, "No Room to Bargain" Unfair and Abusive Labor Practices in Pakistan', (Report, January 2019) 52-57

¹⁶Inayatul Islam and Sher Verick, From the Great Recession to the Labour Market Recovery (Palgrave Macmillian 2011) 127

¹⁷Inayatul Islam and Sher Verick, From the Great Recession to the Labour Market Recovery (Palgrave Macmillian 2011) 127

Furthermore, global economic trends such as the Global Financial Crisis observed in 2009 also impacts such workers who are mostly young men employed in sectors such as industrial labour with temporary contracts¹⁸. Pakistan's economic policy of exporting labour to GCC crushes them as the Gulf sponsorship grant excessive power to the sponsor in terms of entry and exit to the country, issuance of passports and identification cards, and approval of any financial transactions. As a result, there are some grossly unreported violations of labour rights¹⁹.

Protection of Migrant Workers (Underdeveloped Countries) Recommendation, 1955 ('No. 100') provides a considerable number of protections to migrant workers which also fail to be upheld due to the policy of exporting Pakistani labour, especially to the Arabian Gulf. ILO places responsibilities on both the country of origin and host country. ILO states that the policy must be to discourage workers from emigrating if there shall be a detrimental effect on workers due to that migration. ILO requires from the countries of origin to develop such trainings and programmes that create opportunities and thus deter emigration to countries hostile to labour rights. Recruitment must not be taking place in origin countries for those countries which are hostile to the labour rights²⁰. In this regard, the Pakistani state has failed to convince the countries, especially in the Arabian Gulf, to provide their migrant workers all kinds of protections in terms of labour rights, whether in terms of remuneration or safety of working conditions²¹. Since the objective of IMF policies is stabilisation of the current account, the governments themselves become accomplices in such abuses of ILO Conventions as they are dependent on dollar remittances – which leads them to wilfully ignore the exploitation.²²

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that IMF SAPs are harmful to the rights of labour of Pakistan and violate ILO Conventions. Unemployment increases due to privatisation and trade liberalisation which violates C-122. Informality in economic affairs is often the result of lower tariffs, imposed and complemented by increased taxation which results in a higher likelihood of violations of various ILO Conventions because there is no oversight of the government. Deregulation and outsourcing of government functions results in lack of labour inspections which the government is required to undertake under ILO conventions. These inspections serve as linchpins for the compliance of all other ILO Conventions. The fixation of the whole economic paradigm to stabilise the current account balance results in tunnel vision and haphazard export of low skilled labour to GCC which results in Pakistan's violations of ILO-100. In summation, in Global South countries where there is a dearth of inclusive political institutions, the application of pure liberal economics (also known as neoliberalism) to achieve economic growth and fiscal consolidation in a myopic fashion comes at the human cost of crushing the working class.

The author is a Legal Researcher of International Law at IPRI and also a lecturer of Law at the department of law, NUST, Islamabad.

¹⁸Inayatul Islam and Sher Verick, From the Great Recession to the Labour Market Recovery (Palgrave Macmillian 2011) 127

¹⁹The Precarious Relationship between Economic Development and Human Rights in Emerging Markets: The Example of Qatar', (Havana Café in Damascus, February 13, 2010) <Havana Café in Damascus: The Precarious Relationship between Economic Development and Human Rights in Emerging Markets: The Example of Qatar (havanacafeindamascus.blogspot.com)>

²⁰ILO, R100 - Protection of Migrant Workers (Underdeveloped Countries) Recommendation, 1955 (No. 100), Article 18, 17, 16

²¹Economic and Social Council, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Responsibilities related to Migrants (Report, E/2010/89), Para 46, 61

²²Government of Pakistan, Labour Policy 2010 (Policy Report 2010) Para 47, 48, 49



POLITICAL REFORM: Constitution Sans Implementation

Naqi Akbar

A written constitution for any nation state is an assurance that the system of government itself, the division of responsibilities amongst various components of the state, popularly called 'institutions', are laid out clearly for the sake of honest implementation. If the decision-making elite of the nation state in question feels the need for a change in the modalities, the road to referendum or inhouse debate for constitutional reform is always present.

Taking a more on-the-ground look at the theoretical debate being explained in the opening paragraph, the period between the return to civilian rule in 1988 until today makes a perfect case study for why writing a constitution might not help the system unless its implementation is ensured.

A historical analysis of the situation reveals that the period after the assassination of the first popular Prime Minister of Pakistan and the failure of the State to reach the masterminds revealed that it was being discreetly hijacked by the civil and military bureaucracy. The chaotic reign of the vanguard party, Muslim League, until Ayub Khan's coup was the period in which the military was entering the political arena but not trying to dictate its terms. Following the coup in October 1958, the Constitution forwarded by the military dispensation never found any favour with the public. The lame LFO was thought enough to organise the first general elections made out of the federating units in December 1970. That election helped resulted in the battered leftover Pakistan (formerly west Pakistan) and newly created Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). The last impression of that election was the 1973 Constitution document which was finalised by literally all the political party leaders who were actually elected to the national assembly in the erstwhile West Pakistan assembly.

The 1973 Constitution predictably took into account the pitfalls witnessed during the Ayub and Yahya years and tried its level best to set the ground for each institution to work within its designated sphere of activity.

The oath for the military not to engage in political activity was laid out clearly to stop the road to martial law. Similarly, anyone sabotaging the Constitution in the form of suspension, abeyance or abrogation was to be dealt with Article 6. Furthermore, equating any intervention into the working of the State would be treated as treason punishable by death.

The practice of the 1973 Constitution could only be ensured until the early snap elections were called in March 1977. The rigging allegations on the ruling party of what was left of Pakistan, produced a perfect scenario for the two major institutions, Army and Judiciary, to question the sanctity of the written Constitution itself.

The 1977 coup by Zia ul Haq, followed by a meek approval of the Judiciary for the coup under the necessity doctrine, paved the path for subsequent decades in Pakistan. The famous 8th Amendment sanctifying the military takeover in 1977 and paving the way for future encrypted interventions under the presidential sword of 58 B2. The unceremonious ouster of the Junejo government in 1988 paved the way for what is being witnessed today. The Junejo government's efforts to penalise the military officers that were involved (in the aftermath of the Ojheri fiasco) and Zia reacting by sending the Junejo government packing set the tone for the practice of 'hybrid' arrangements becoming the order of the day.

The 1988 elections brought in Benazir Bhutto to power. It is an established fact amongst historians, however, that despite all processes outlined in the Constitution as to how the Leader of the House has to be facilitated to take his or her seat, it was a series of long negotiations between the Army and the United States good offices which finally paved the way for Benazir to formally take oath on December 2, 1988. Her ouster in August 1990 under 58-2(b) actually formalised the military intervention through the said clause. The events until November 1996 all revealed the security establishment pulling all strings via the President. The removal of 58-2(b) in 1997 left the military

with the only option of a coup, when happened on October 12, 1999.

The second return to democracy in 2008 changed the rules of the game for the establishment. Apparently the 1973 Constitution was in force; yet it has been the invisible hands which continue to call the shots; whether it was the case of Baloch separatism or any protest by marginalised communities like the Hazara in the same troubled province. It was the security apparatus which was allowed violation of basic human rights as enshrined in the first ten clauses of the Constitution, signifying that the military seems to have had the final say. The advancing years until 2018 formalised that intervention through the courts.

The government taking shape in 2018 actually led to a historic entrenching of the 'hybrid' set up. Falling foul of that arrangement in March and April 2022 has defined much of the chaos being witnessed along the length and the breadth of the country.

All these instances bring home the very basic question: is the 1973 Constitution itself is enough for the sound macro and micro governance of the country? Or is there a need for further discipline of the system? Is the written Constitution enough for the country to act in a sane manner could there be external factors, above the Constitution, that may be needed to ensure the smoothness of the system? Does the system need an expediency council or assembly made up of technocrats who can overrule the institutions or serve as a counterbalance to the system in an innovative manner to correct the quagmire of asymmetric power relations?

The author carries with him 34 years of a diverse profile in print journalism, macro and micro policy advocacy and banking industry regulation.



COUNTER-TRAFFICKING & COUNTERINSURGENCY: A (Counter) Productive Relationship

Hammad Bilal

The 2023 Caretaker System's joint-ops comprising of the Rangers, Armed Forces, and the Police were solely but not uniquely targeted at the 'deadly menace' of drug circulation. From Sindh to Balochistan, this move had been ratified into existence via an expedited order granting the Rangers acting powers in Sindh from September 2023 to February of 2024. Around the same timeframe, Qila Abdullah district in Balochistan became a battleground between drug dealers and Pakistan forces, including Levies, Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) and regional and federal law enforcement personnel. In the resulting operations, processing plants, manufacturing hubs, and acreage of drug cultivation was handicapped if not eradicated. Couple together the precarious percolation of the Afghan-Pakistan border and the profiling of certain Afghan immigrants as central to this drug nexus and you can determine the threats vulnerable communities living in borderlands now face. Such an operation, against a 'societal menace', is not unique – these interventions have taken place before – but it is almost always uniquely presented as a panacea to end all evils. That is optimistic to a fault.

Social factors are key to the rise of the drug nexus; meanwhile, the political expediency of the drug trade also means that political conditions can change its necessity – the 2021 ban by the Taliban on opium cultivation as they sought to reorient themselves as a legitimate enterprise is one example of how political maneuvers have not translated into cultural dogma. It also means that social factors in the border communities with Afghanistan in particular can aid in incentivising – socially, culturally, religiously – the farmers to move out of the debt trap of opium cultivation. Otherwise, blanket policies aimed at destruction rather than rehabilitation sidestep the vertical integration of the drug industry, leading to the rise of a hybrid crop of prominent drug dealers with regional political power.

The drug trade is a circuit governed by the government, drug lords, local warlords, farmers, and labourers – it is not a carrot, nor a stick, but a dynamite in disguise.

For years, the local warlords – “into the shawl of democracy”¹ – allowed operations with impunity, exerting economic control on farmers and itinerant labourers, and exercising economic and political power over these constituencies. A second zone is that of transnational organised crime such as poppy trading – declared illicit by the new Taliban mandate: “the Taliban ordered a halt to poppy production, and the production, use, and transit of other narcotics.”² Afghanistan's role as a drug transit State combined with its vulnerable economy, statehood, and populations, makes for a disenfranchised poppy trade replete with exploitation.

As a result of an extensive regularising climate molded by the UNODC and the US's investment in counter-narcotic (CN) strategies – “more than \$8 billion over 15 years on efforts to deprive the Taliban of their profits from Afghanistan's opium and heroin trade,”³ the opium landscape has not only endured but thrived under different ruling factions. For President Karzai, the strategy satisfied various capacities. Presently, Afghanistan leads not just the global opium trade, but has also been declared the kingpin of the methamphetamine trade, although it has acquired little purchasing power. Afghanistan's lead in narcotics does not convert into public abundance, albeit the funds procured as a duty by non-state entrepreneurs were instrumental in supporting the insurgency movement when “taxes on it became a source of revenue”⁴ to fuel the insurgency prior to 2021.

¹Fahana Schmidt, “From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: The Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (January 2010): pp. 61-77, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-2010-005>.

²James Durso, “Is the Taliban's Halt of Poppy Production Too Good to Be True?,” *The Diplomat* (for *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2022), <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/is-the-talibans-halt-of-poppy-production-too-good-to-be-true/>.

³Jonathan Landay, “Profits and Poppy: Afghanistan's Illegal Drug Trade a Boon for Taliban,” *Reuters* (Thomson Reuters, August 16, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/profits-poppy-afghanistans-illegal-drug-trade-boon-taliban-2021-08-16/>.

⁴Secunder Kermani, “Meth and Heroin Fuel Afghanistan Drugs Boom,” *BBC News* (BBC, December 12, 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59608474>.

The idea of the opium exchange has in this manner changed fundamentally. Succeeding the mid-nineteenth century, the prevailing superpowers took part in significant drug trade; today, Afghanistan has acquired a critical situation in this nexus viz-a-viz its internal security and external relations with Pakistan.

Afghanistan's rise to the world's driving opium provider – “The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated the gross value of the Afghan opiate economy — including cultivation of poppy, processing into heroin, and trafficking up to Afghan borders — to be between US\$4.1 billion and US\$6.6 billion in 2017”⁵ and “accounting for 85 percent of the global total in 2020”⁶. The economic trade is intimately connected with insufficient State control on national policies combined with a destabilising political situation. Furthermore, strong provincial groups inside the ‘Golden Crescent’ compete with each other for proxy power over the trade. Territorial warlords interpolate with arms providers and drug dealers, accordingly funding and balancing out their quasi-regimes inside the nation-state.

Accordingly, the Pakistani-Afghan borderlands have stayed contentious since the Durand Line appeared and bisected the settlements of the Pashtuns. Afghan lawmakers have utilised the irredentist case for Pashtunistan – guaranteeing that this significant piece of Pakistan where Pashtuns are residing should have a place with Afghanistan. The significant outlet for arriving at the European market was the southern course to Iran and Pakistan, bifurcating the sea route by means of the Gulf States and the earthly course through Turkey and the Balkans. These connections have led to socioeconomic and political realities, on ground and at the sea ports. For Pakistan, it means a precarious border situation.

Surprisingly, the Taliban government seems to be fully aware of the gravity of both homegrown and foreign stakes of the chronic drug usage in the country. Furthermore, because of the critical help with respect to the global local area, Kabul has mounted significant endeavors to battle the creation and appropriation of opiates. Global associations, for example, the UNODC, the EU and the OSCE are executing their own mitigation programmes. To start with, intergovernmental organisations are generally helpful apparatuses for getting to itemised data about a given country. In this vein, the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), explicitly issued public reports concerning the effect of police activities in the periphery, “however, the strategy seems to have been drafted predominantly by the UK and the UNODC, with only limited Afghan input.”⁷ Therefore, the principal stakeholders are absent from the equation.

Instead of guerrilla or rather, bulldozer, operations against these drug centres, a multi-agent model of the drug trade may answer for the numerous players in the opiate industry. This is to show that participating in the drug exchange gives temporary yet risky stability to farmers who need elective jobs. Strategic mediations do

not essentially alter the worth of the drug business, although they may reallocate the drug income stream among the players, for instance, a few interventionist approaches might just drive dealers to pay off government authorities more. The strength of the drug nexus originates from the way that the choice to partake in the drug network at any stage is rational despite the risk. Therefore, it is necessary to frame its physical, authoritative, and social conditions before planning interventions that may create even more instability. These agents are as follows.

Farmers. Farmers are the labourers who either sublet or lease the land or cultivate it themselves, thus being a crucial component of the multi-agent drug chain. A few harvests, for instance, poppy, are very impervious to weather patterns, thus being an optimal choice for the Afghan farmer. Farmers allot harvests to the land they develop to augment their normal yearly pay. Farmers are the labourers of the land, who might claim the land or lease it from khans or warlords. Furthermore, through the ancestral ‘salaam’ means of loaning, farmers can get sufficiently close to credit. They are given a settlement ahead of time on speculative earnings and opium, with its dependable rate of return, is inclined toward ancestral moneylenders. Assuming farmers decide to develop poppy, the government's strategists can present cash incentives or subsidies to discourage opium production. The problem is that “the farmers end up owing more than the value of their harvests. . . the farmers find themselves increasingly unable to escape the yoke of debt.”⁸

Dealers. Dealers are farmers themselves; farmers are merchants. Every dealer has an ideal supply of each harvest. This is mostly subsistence farming. By altering the vector of supplies of yields, we separate farmers, dealers, wholesalers, and so on. For years before the Taliban's incorporation into the Afghan government, they operated through local networks like warlords and local normative agents. Clamping down on these agents through brutal tactics curbs any potential for rehabilitation and increases, rather than decreases, potential for criminality in these spaces.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ERADICATION

Exploring the impacts of a CN strategy on the behavior of farmers and dealers and other elements in the supply chain involves looking at profit-oriented intercessions, adding elective administration, and shaping governmental approval against authentic, verifiable sources. Thus, one needs to find an ideal mix of CN approaches,

⁵Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Drugs, Security, and Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan,” Brookings (Brookings, March 9, 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/drugs-security-and-counternarcotics-policies-in-afghanistan/>.

⁶Rupert Stone, “‘Business as Usual’: Afghan Drug Trade Continues under Taliban” (TRT World, November 23, 2021), <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/business-as-usual-afghan-drug-trade-continues-under-taliban-51942>.

⁷Bewley-Taylor, 2014.

⁸Farhana Schmidt, “From Islamic Warriors to Drug Lords: The Evolution of the Taliban Insurgency,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (January 2010): pp. 61-77, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10474552-2010-005>.

prohibition and development endeavors that yield national decrease in drug production and increase yields in alternative crops. Thirdly, one would need to regulate the supply chain to get rid of arbitrary prohibition by regional players which do not represent the writ of the State.

Furthermore, the thought processes and techniques utilised by each stakeholder differ in view of their geographic area, financial conditions, associations with ethnic clans and outside parties, and political circumstances. In this contextual analysis, I centre around the coterie of stakeholders that are associated with the cultural climate and political economy of any ordinary town in the Afghan/Pakistani border locale. These descriptions were collated from Mansfield (2017)⁹:

Malik: Maliks are the mediators and agents between the town local area and focal power/government, and are responsible for addressing shared questions and keeping up with collective property.

Khan: The title conversationally signifies a landowner who controls numerous assets locally alongside giving positions to workers and land to tenant farmers. Khans may also be key to conflict resolutions.

Ulema: The Ulema shura is a gathering of leaders who lead petitions, give religious sermons, and have the force of moral judgment locally. They are likewise associated with dispute resolution according to the perspective of Shariah (Islamic regulation).

Since the focal government is still generally feeble in these peripheral areas, these stakeholders are effective sources of collusion between the public authority and the public itself. Thus, these two factions can be co-opted to change the channel of drug trade towards a mutually-beneficial dynamic. Maliks act as the broker between the locals and the central government, and Ulemas (gatherings) and the Shura are assembled to referee neighbourhood clashes and direct numerous public works and town wide issues. In any case, strains do exist between the conventional social design and the new drug economy, as the vast majority of the new policies is constrained by delinquents or independent contractors.

PROPOSED ACTIONS:

1. Gathering support from locals — those warlords who have command over towns on the Afghan-Pakistani boundary are probably going to gather additional duties from those brokers endeavoring to pirate opium through designated supply routes. Because of the overall financial benefit of cultivating poppies instead of different yields, Khans have a huge motivation to drive their tenant farmers to develop poppies for drug exchange. Moreover, if the Ulema publicly and unequivocally announced opium to be un-Islamic, Khans might consider executing the same order.

2. Acting on the Taliban's propaganda tools: Using religion to exert pressure on the masses to follow a certain course of action is not new to the Taliban which "follows a Salafist egalitarian model that seeks to emulate the life and times of the Prophet Mohammed."¹⁰

Local farmers have developed their skillsets to depend progressively on the development of poppies for their endurance and vocation. Since opium dependably brings more income than other legitimate harvests, informal moneylenders give special credits to farmers developing opium. Indeed, even farmers who might want to agree with the CN regulations are majorly influenced by the strong Khan whose land they consider home and who controls the vehicle and exchange of illicit contraband; as a rule, then, the cultivation of illicit substances may not really be a decision for the farmers themselves.

Emulating a drug supply chain as a circuit which when disturbed or distended, will exhibit the normal functions of supply and demand. A disturbance in the drug exchange is a disruption for the insurgencies since most of the insurgents are subsidised by the drug exchange. By concentrating on drug exchange according to a stakeholder analysis, effective policing may be facilitated — this time by 'co-opts' instead of 'co-opts'.

The author is a graduate in History and Comparative Literature from the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

⁹David Mansfield, "Understanding Control and Influence : What Opium Poppy and Tax Reveal about the Writ of the Afghan State / David Mansfield ; Editor Jill Suzanne Kornetsky and Matthew Longmore.," ed. Jill Suzanne Kornetsky and Matthew Longmore, 2017 Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2017, https://doi.org/10.29171/azu_acku_pamphlet_hv5840_a23_m355_2017.

¹⁰Thomas H. Johnson, Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict (Oxford University Press, 2019).



STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND STATECRAFT

Ashraf Jehangir Qazi

(In memory of Dr. Kissinger)

*Baat to sach hai magar baat hai ruswai ki. – Parveen Shakir
(The story is true but embarrassing)*

For Pakistanis in their present condition, it would be irrelevant to discuss strategic leadership and statecraft without reference to the realities that prevail in the world and their country. Constitutionally, Pakistan is supposed to be a democracy. Given the recent electoral farce, however, it is not surprising that the Economist Intelligence Unit recently downgraded Pakistan from a 'hybrid democracy' to an 'authoritarian regime' or non-democracy. As such, no national or provincial elections conducted in Pakistan can have international credibility.

Pakistan today barely pretends to be a democracy. It is, in truth, a military-led autocracy in violation of its Constitution, the Pakistan Movement, the vision of its

founding father, and the aspirations of its people. This has been abetted by an unprotecting judiciary, a managed legislature, a servile executive, a restricted media, and not least, the whip hand of the US which treats Pakistan – a nuclear weapons power with a population going on a quarter of a billion people - as a country without options.

In such a context, what can we possibly mean by strategic leadership and statecraft? Pakistan's location and size, needless to say, endow it with a certain strategic potential which can only be realised through efficient statecraft, which, in turn, is a synonym for good governance on behalf of the economic and human

development of all its peoples. The very first condition, however, for such an endeavor is a government that is seen by the vast majority of the people to represent their choice and their interests rather than those of their domestic oppressors and external exploiters. In a country whose people are, by force of circumstance, as politically aware as in Pakistan, it is all too clear how far they see this first condition being met, if at all.

Unfortunately, the people in Pakistan have been conditioned to have minimal expectations and resign themselves to accepting their priorities are not of those who govern them, and they can do very little about it. Statecraft, in these circumstances, becomes the containment of the people's expectations and the protection of domestic and external elite interests against their occasional outbursts of anger. It undermines the very possibility of strategic leadership and becomes instead the management of strategic dependence.

This requires skill, determination, vigilance, violence, and cynicism dressed up as patriotism and religious idealism. It rules out statesmanship or political leadership in the interests of the nation and the people. It constrains the freedom of the people in the name of law and order and denies them resources for the protection and fulfillment of their basic entitlements and rights. It is essentially illegal and corrupt.

In speaking about strategy, one cannot avoid discussing the late great practitioner of this art, Dr. Henry Kissinger, who combined prodigious historical knowledge and theoretical insight with a genius for negotiating realistic if not always principled compromises. As a practitioner of *realpolitik* or power politics, Dr. Kissinger relegated the moral or ethical factor to a decidedly secondary position, not because he was necessarily immoral, but because he saw strategic leadership as an essentially amoral exercise of power between nations even if it required his countrymen to see it as an expression of their unique morality.

When asked how he felt about being regarded as a genius, Kissinger said geniuses were one in a hundred whereas 'good people' were far fewer, and he would, accordingly, prefer to be regarded as a good person rather than a mere genius. Unfortunately, when he recently died at the age of 100, he was overwhelmingly remembered as a genius instead of a good person. His strategy to bring an end to the Vietnam war, which combined brutal massacres all over Indochina with brilliant bilateral and multilateral negotiations, was ultimately successful, but at the cost of his reputation as a decent human being.

The writings of Dr. Kissinger are nevertheless essential reading for anyone wishing to gain insight into what strategy and *realpolitik* entail. His book, *A World Restored*, published in 1957 when he was a young Harvard professor, is a classic. He notes, "The attainment of peace is not as easy as the desire for it. Not for nothing is history associated with the figure of Nemesis, which defeats man by fulfilling his wishes in a different form, or by answering his prayers too completely.

Whenever peace — conceived as the avoidance of war — has been the primary objective of a power or a group of powers, the international system has been at the mercy of the most ruthless member of the international community." Kissinger was, of course, writing about post-Napoleonic Europe and referring to Germany muscling itself into the front rank of European powers. But how ironic that it should apply even more accurately to his adopted country today whose foreign policy he shaped so fundamentally!

Kissinger goes on to say stability, the objective of strategic leadership, "has commonly resulted not from a quest for peace but from a commonly accepted 'legitimacy' which should not be confused with 'justice' but rather an international agreement about workable arrangements and about the permissible aims and methods of foreign policy." This is what the US today calls "a rules-based world order," with the rules framed by itself for the rest of the world to follow in greater or lesser measure in accordance with their capacity to resist its pressures.

Kissinger qualifies his statement by observing that it "implies the acceptance of the framework of the international order by all major powers, at least to the extent that no state is so dissatisfied that, like Germany after the Treaty of Versailles, it expresses its dissatisfaction in a revolutionary foreign policy." A legitimate order, he says, does not make conflicts impossible, but it limits their scope. Ironically, this essential proviso is absent from today's hegemonic rules-based order pursued by the US. Other major powers, like China and Russia, are certainly dissatisfied with the world order the US seeks to impose and are, accordingly, following "a revolutionary foreign policy" such as Germany pursued in the 19th century. Kissinger notes diplomacy as the adjustment of differences through negotiations "is possible only in legitimate international orders." Such a legitimate international order today can only be based on the United Nations Charter which the US observes largely in the breach. Diplomacy, which Kissinger defines as the art of restraining the exercise of power, cannot function in such an environment.

What Kissinger says on behalf of the world's most powerful country can be generalised to apply to smaller powers including Pakistan. He visited Pakistan on two occasions. The first was in 1971 when he made his now-famous secret visit to China from Pakistan to prepare for President Nixon's visit to Beijing. Kissinger had a seminal meeting with Chairman Mao which paved the way for Nixon's historic visit and initiated a US-China *détente* that altered the course of the Cold War. That was strategic leadership. Five years later, he visited again to dissuade Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto from proceeding with a nuclear reprocessing plant. Despite using threats, incentives, and humour, Kissinger failed to persuade Bhutto to drop the idea. Nevertheless, the mutual respect between the two leaders enabled them to engage in humorous banter at a public banquet on the word 'reprocessing' which showed the role of humor and personal relations in strategic leadership if only to soften the impact of failures which inevitably happen from time to time.

In a talk at the National Defence College, Kissinger likened strategy to a chess game in which each player seeks to control the maximum number of squares on the chessboard to retain an advantage over his opponent. This either enables him to win the game from a stronger position or at least force a draw from a weaker position, which is what Bhutto achieved in Shimla in 1972.

Dr. Kissinger is no less lucid and illuminating in his book, *On China*, where he contrasts the western concept of strategy and statecraft with its Chinese counterpart. He writes, “a turbulent history has taught Chinese leaders that not every problem has a solution and that too great an emphasis on total mastery over specific events could upset the harmony of the universe.” Only a civilisational country which sees itself as ‘Chung-wa,’ the centre of the universe, could have such a comprehensive concept of strategy and statecraft. He notes that China had too many potential enemies for it to live in total security. Accordingly, it accepted relative security which implied accepting relative insecurity, which in turn implied the “need to learn the grammar of over a dozen neighbouring states with significantly different histories and aspirations. Rarely did Chinese statesmen risk the outcome of a conflict on a single all-or-nothing clash; elaborate multi-year manoeuvres were closer to their style.

Where “the Western tradition prized the decisive clash of forces emphasising feats of heroism,” Kissinger says “the Chinese ideal stressed subtlety, indirection, and the patient accumulation of relative advantage.” He contrasts the Chinese strategic board game of “Wei-chi,” better known by its Japanese name of “Go,” with chess. Wei-chi is “a game of surrounding pieces and involves strategic encirclement. Whereas the chess player aims for total victory, the Wei-chi player seeks relative advantage. Chess produces single-mindedness. Wei-chi generates strategic flexibility. The difference between Wei-chi and chess is also reflected in the differences between Chinese and western military strategy.” Carl von Clausewitz, according to Kissinger, treats strategy as an activity in its own right separate from politics and famously said war is a continuation of politics by other means. Sun Tzu, on the contrary, merges politics and strategy and emphasises the elements of politics and psychology over the purely military in conflict situations.

As major powers, the US and the larger West European countries were able to rely more or less exclusively on the military element of strategy in their imperialist and colonial heydays. Western Europe today has chosen to be a strategic satellite of the US. The US economy is shrinking because of what Yannis Varoufakis, the famous Greek economist and former Finance Minister, calls the emergence of techno-feudalism and American economist Michael Hudson calls the apartheid nature of the US economy in which a tiny number of super-rich and huge institutional creditors rule over debtors who comprise the overwhelming majority of its population.

As for Pakistan, it cannot successfully mimic Clausewitzian strategies even towards its smaller neighbours because the US, despite its declining economy, is still a global power and strategically every country's neighbour, not to mention India which is larger than all its South Asian neighbours put together. Accordingly, Chinese strategies are far more appropriate for Pakistan. But as an ex-colonial country, our national mindset in general, and our military mindset in particular, find it difficult to accept such a conclusion despite our proximity and friendship with China.

When I was in Moscow, the Chinese ambassador, a wise and experienced diplomat, became a good friend. Later when I was in Beijing, he had retired but remained an adviser to the government on foreign policy. He explained to me the essence of Chinese statecraft over 3000 years of history. The Chinese had learned the rise and fall of dynasties depended on the Mandate of Heaven. When it was bestowed, there was peace and prosperity, the harvests were abundant, enemies were kept at bay, law and order was maintained, the country was united, the dynasty was stable and strong, and it endured. When it was withdrawn, there was war, enemies intervened and occupied Chinese territory, there was pestilence and famine, bandits roamed and plundered the countryside, the country was divided and eventually the dynasty fell.

Over the centuries, Chinese scholars sought explanations for the bestowal and withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven. Eventually, they agreed on an explanation. In brief, all the problems and challenges that China faced fell into three broad categories: those that brooked no delay in resolving; those that were more complicated and required time to understand and devise an appropriate set of responses; and finally, those that were so challenging and overwhelming that all that could be done was to equip the next generation with the capabilities to deal with and overcome them.

Whenever China's rulers correctly categorised the challenges before them and responded accordingly, the Mandate of Heaven was bestowed and endured.

But when they incorrectly categorised the challenges before them and adopted inappropriate policies to address them, the Mandate of Heaven was withdrawn with all its consequences. He said China did not pretend to teach other people and countries how to govern themselves. All it could do was offer its own experience and it was for its friends to see whether or not it had any relevance for them. He then suggested, as an example, that Pakistan – which was more than a friend – might wish to analyse which category the Kashmir dispute belonged to. Did it belong to the first, second, or third category of challenges? What did the experience of Pakistan suggest? What do the needs of Pakistan require? Has Pakistan correctly categorised the Kashmir challenge? Similarly, with regard to other political, economic, social, regional, educational, and health challenges facing Pakistan which may belong to different categories of challenges? In classical Chinese tradition,

he left a thought over which I might ponder. I conveyed this conversation to the ministry which was probably highly amused, or bemused, or both. I never got a response.

In western discussions of statecraft and strategic leadership in the diplomatic and business worlds, one often comes across concepts such as transactional leadership, transformational leadership, visionary leadership, collaborative leadership, etc., with the implicit assumption that the best kind involves a combination of these segmented leaderships. Similarly, leaders are expected to demonstrate a variety of qualities such as vision, openness, focus, courage, prudence, balance, execution, curiosity, diligence, learning, etc. All these qualities are considered essential for zero-sum contests with adversaries in which one party wins and the other loses.

Although the concept of mutual benefit certainly exists in western cultures, it does not constitute a core element of strategic thinking, which is often seen as more a science combining mathematics, engineering, logic, inventiveness, deceit, surprise, etc. Instead, mutual benefit is considered a concept that owes its inspiration to religion, ethics, morality, philosophy, the arts, even music and poetry, in other words, the humanities which contribute to a humane and vibrant culture and civilisation despite the inescapably zero-sum quality of the struggle for dominance as a condition for survival.

In Chinese thinking, the strategic discourse is more holistic and integrated than segmented, just as is the case with its medical, political, and philosophical traditions. Chinese history and strategic thinking are, of course, replete with zero-sum games of deceit, outsmarting, outmanoeuvring, psychology, prevailing over superior numbers, etc. But all of this is integrated into a larger harmony as the condition for longer-term success and the bestowal and preservation of the Mandate of Heaven. When this harmony is broken and policies are segmented and stove-piped, all the short-term successes add up to nothing – as has frequently happened in Chinese history – and the Mandate of Heaven is withdrawn.

The US cajoles, bullies, coerces, and sanctions Pakistani governments into submission and reluctant cooperation. China achieves much more by investing in the prospect of shared prosperity and security for the people of Pakistan. It retains a relative advantage over the US despite the equivocation and unreliability of Pakistan's ruling elites. It demonstrates superior strategic leadership.

Pakistan's policies, whether external or domestic, have, by and large, been an extended series of short-term policies that never add up to a coherent and successful longer-term policy. That is strategic incoherence. This is because statecraft or good governance has been missing. In these circumstances, strategic leadership remains an aspiration divorced from reality. Economically, Pakistan has statistically done reasonably well with an externally dependent and colonially structured economy that has

little or no prospect of domestically generating longer-term stability, security, prosperity, and well-being for its people. Its massive informal economy has so far enabled it to survive as a low-level equilibrium economy. But this will not be for much longer because the youth and the poor of Pakistan are no longer ready to eke out their lives at the point of a gun and the bottom of the barrel.

These weaknesses have fed into every aspect of Pakistan's national policies, including its foreign, security, and strategic policies. The progressive militarisation of national decision-making on the basis of a fundamentally underdeveloped economy that is not allowed to be radically reformed, restructured, and developed by its ruling power elites has further exacerbated its strategic disadvantage. In these circumstances, discussions on statecraft and strategy become little more than intellectual entertainment and sterile discourse.

Where do we go from here? The newly elected government has made a number of electoral pledges drafted by experts to attract voters which are destined for the waste-paper basket. The military 'establishment,' as usual, promises to 'turn over a new leaf' after each change of government. But as the British philosopher A. C. Grayling observes, if each page has the same text then the book has only one page which may be turned over as often as you like but remain the same.

In his last book, *The Age of Artificial Intelligence*, written when 97 years old, Kissinger talks of how AI will radically alter the parameters of statecraft and strategic policy. He says AI is "integrating non-human intelligence into the basic fabric of human activity." Decision making will take place at speeds faster than human thought, and the amount of information integrated into decision making will be several orders more than what the human brain can contain. AI-assisted network platforms will outthink human decision making.

Whether this will supersede occidental and oriental strategic thinking and warfare, and whether it will enable the international community to come together to avert the elimination of human civilisation by the human misuse of non-human intelligence is today what a former US defence secretary called "a known unknown." Every country, including Pakistan, has a role to play in such a collective existential endeavour.

In conclusion, what should statecraft and strategic leadership require of Pakistan? It has to first become viable to have any statecraft or strategy worth the name. The elected or selected government should be held strictly accountable for the pledges it has glibly made. No excuses should be brooked. Electoral pledges should be time-lined. The Prime Minister must regularly brief the nation on national TV on the progress being made. He must similarly interface with the people, including media commentators, experts, scholars, women, teachers, etc. on TV to ascertain their assessments of progress with regard to his pledges.

Questions will need to focus on a whole series of radical structural and tax reforms to ensure transfers of income from the 10 percent richest families and corporations to finance the provision of basic needs and services to the poorest 90 percent of the population. This can ensure rapid progress towards debt-free development and escape from IMF structural adjustment programs and foreign investments that threaten economic sovereignty through one-sided SIFC investment protection agreements. Currently, administration, military, debt servicing and repatriation of profits and loans leave practically nothing for development expenditures which are financed by deepening the fatal debt trap.

Pakistan's experience demonstrates that none of this will even begin to happen as long as the people remain passive, resigned, uninformed, unorganised, divided and incapable of developing nationwide grassroots movements and political parties that represent their interests, and which are not led by essentially uneducated and pusillanimous politicians thousands of times richer than themselves. Today, political leaders and parties are by and large jointly arrayed against the people. Musical chairs at the top of the political food-chain accompanied by phony displays of mutual hostility are the name of the game and the 'establishment' is the impresario. All this will need to change.

If and when a legitimate political order is established the whole range of domestic and external policies can be rooted in the priorities of the people. The exhilarating task of devising, discussing, implementing, reviewing, and revising such policies can become the mission of a lifetime for a whole nation. Pakistan will progressively become a strategic player instead of an object of strategic play. This will change the political culture of the country, raise the quality of life for its citizens, elevate Pakistan to the rank of the more successful and respected developing nations, enable it to more effectively cope with the existential challenges looming over it, and enable it to exercise strategic influence and leadership. There are, however, far too many of the relatively comfortable middle-class intelligentsia who will merely shrug their shoulders at all of the above. They may not be the primary villain but they are the problem.

The author is a former Ambassador of Pakistan.

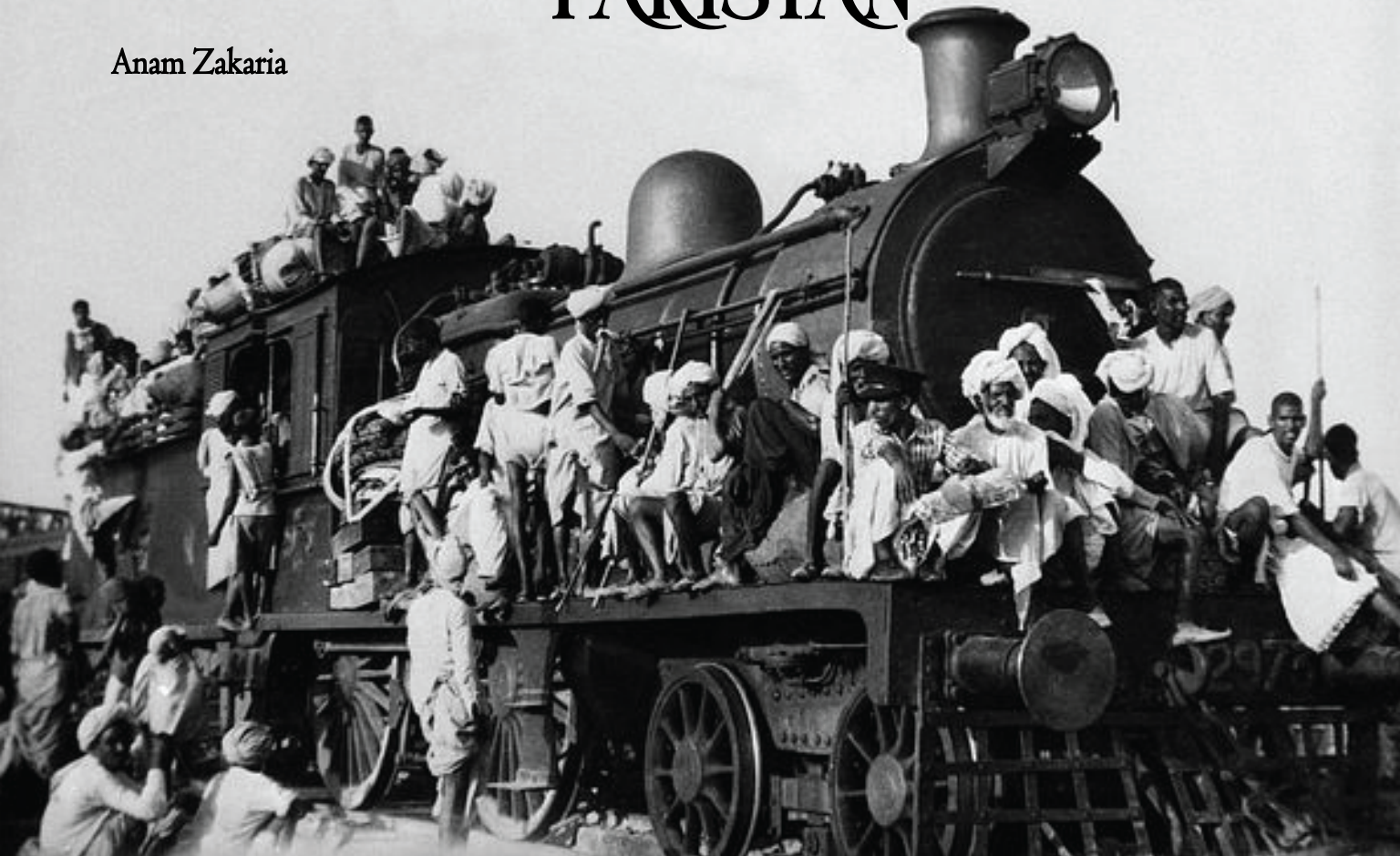




HISTORÿ

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL HISTORIES IN PAKISTAN

Anam Zakaria



My earliest understanding of Partition was shaped by my grandmother's stories. Huddled around her in the late afternoons, she would narrate stories of blood-strewn trains and massacred bodies, of violence and bloodshed she had witnessed as a young woman volunteering at Lahore's Walton Refugee Camp. When I began writing my first book, *The Footprints of Partition: Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis and Indians* (HarperCollins Publishers 2015), I returned to my grandmother with more formal, and rather different questions. It was during these sittings that other stories emerged, the violence interspersed with stories of her Hindu friends and a powerful narration of how her sister was saved by a Sikh family in Amritsar.

Alongside my grandmother, I also interviewed many other Partition survivors. Between 2010-2013 I led the Citizens Archive of Pakistan's (CAP) Oral History Project in Lahore and then continued to document oral histories long after I left CAP.

What became evident in the hours and hours of interviews I conducted was that people's experiences had been far more nuanced, and often more complex, than the state sanctioned versions of Partition that I had been introduced to through textbooks and other formal sources of learning.

National histories are written, rewritten, accentuated, silenced and curated in ways that are convenient to the national project, or to the sense of nationalism that states want to inculcate. In Pakistan's case, after 1947 history writing was tasked with establishing Pakistan as separate from India. Historians were assigned to rectify the unfavourable image of Muslims in colonial historiography and instill pride in Islamic history. In the post-Partition years, history in Pakistan and India began to be written in opposition to each other, creating a distinct Muslim history and Hindu history. In line with orientalist history, these historical narratives present Hindus and Muslims as "two fixed, unchanging, and

essentially mutually antagonistic communities [reinforcing] a communal rendering of the past.”¹ In the post-Partition years this has also meant that depending on what side of the border one is on, the national memory of Partition is remembered and evoked differently.

In Pakistan, Partition violence is selectively framed as Hindu and Sikh violence on Muslims whilst in India Muslims are painted as treacherous and disloyal to the state; Muslims serve as villains in the Indian national imaginary. In Pakistan, Partition is tied to nation-making and the violence is couched as an essential sacrifice and martyrdom paid by Muslims for freedom from not only the British Raj but also Hindu subjugation.² In India, Partition has historically been framed as a break-up of the motherland at the hands of treacherous Muslims, and as an illegitimate demand of the Muslim League.³ But beyond these national imaginaries lie people’s lived experiences. Whilst state histories appropriate or weaponise selective aspects of people’s experiences, and many times also shape people’s memory, people’s lived reality is messy and cannot be neatly packaged into linear and black and white versions of history. This reality unearths itself through oral history work.

In the oral history interviews I have conducted on the 1947 Partition, survivors have at times narrated being attacked and rescued by members of the ‘other’ community during the same interview setting. Indian political psychologist Ashis Nandy’s research on Partition, which entailed 1500 interviews, also indicated that 40 per cent of his interviewees recalled stories of being helped through the “orgy of blood and death by someone from the other side.”⁴ That these violent memories coexist with softer recollections are the truth for many Partition survivors, blurring the neat lines between perpetrator and victim carved out by states.

In my more recent work on 1971, the power of oral histories is even more evident. In the Pakistani state history, 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh has either been omitted, trivialised or fabricated. 50 years after the war, Pakistan continues to deny the genocide of Bengali people and other ethnic minorities. When the violence of 1971 is remembered, the state selectively remembers bloodshed against the Urdu speaking community and erstwhile West Pakistanis settled in then East Pakistan. The genocidal violence unleashed, backed by the state machinery, is ignored, denied or framed as an Indian conspiracy. Any violence by the Pakistan Army that is mentioned is legitimated as a justified response in the name of national integrity or as ‘collateral damage’.

Against this selective silencing and forced amnesia, oral histories offer one of the only sources of memory, and in their remembrance, as a form of resistance to state erasure. Whilst many Pakistanis settled in West Pakistan relied on the state machinery for news, and during my interviews with them reinforced state narratives, interviews with people based in East Pakistan as well as intellectuals and activists unfolded another telling of events. These oral histories shed light on the social, economic and political discrimination against East Pakistanis after Pakistan’s creation and the scale of violence inflicted upon Bengali bodies and ethnic minorities by the state in 1971. It was through these oral histories that, I, for the first time, found out about a resistance movement in Pakistan during the war. Though small in scale, it included people like the late I.A Rahman, Ahmad Salim, Tahira Mazhar Ali and many others who criticised state action. In the recalling of these memories, they continued to challenge state silencing in the years after the war.

In a context where conventional sources of learning – from textbooks to museums – often narrate distorted, censored, morphed or selective histories, people’s personal experiences of these larger meta events can offer us a far more nuanced understanding of the past. Oral histories serve as resistance, as a political act of remembrance against forced forgetting, challenging state amnesia and offering a different way of learning about the past and its implications on the present.

¹Ali Usman Qasmi, “A Master Narrative for the History of Pakistan: Tracing the Origins of an Ideological Agenda” in *Modern South Asian Studies*, Cambridge University Press 53(4): 1066-1105 (2019)

²Ayesha Jalal, “Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27(1): 73-78

³Krishna Kumar, *Peace with the Past*, <https://www.india-semi-nar.com/2003/522/522%20krishna%20kumar.htm>

⁴Ashis Nandy, *Pakistan’s latent ‘potentialities’*, Radio Open Source

The author is the author of three books, most recently 1971: A People’s History from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (Folio Books 2023).



HALF-HUMAN: THE BASTARDISATION OF SCIENCE VIA STANDARDISATION

Subas Amjad

To understand the 'modern' human, one must comprehend that it does not exist without context and, even more importantly, without history. The human of today, often examined in isolation or a vacuum, forgets that it is not just a consumer of reality but the product of a society in which it constructs and deconstructs itself. Therefore, it becomes an integral nucleus in the atomic process of meaning-making. The title of this essay, however, is inspired by Frantz Fanon's concept of being "half-human," which offers a lens through which we can understand the phenomena of objectification and standardisation as regulatory methods resulting from colonialism and racism (Fanon, 1952). This human is neither fully human, nor animal and so it suffers a tragic fate. The fate of his father and his father's father. The colonised human can never become whole, but neither can it disappear, as its very endurance is what defines that of the coloniser, and so, it persists. It exists as a mirror, or perhaps even a shadow, of the oppressor. It does not reflect but refracts the image of grandiosity and power, an illusion that sustains the dominance of the coloniser even in their physical absence.

In colonial contexts, objectification is a tool used by the coloniser to dehumanise and subjugate the colonised. The coloniser reduces the colonised individuals and communities to mere objects or commodities, stripping them of their agency, dignity, and humanity. They are no longer the Subject of their lives but rather objects 'discovered' and examined at the hands of the Coloniser. Their discovery is named and categorised, understood and interpreted. They are then no less than bodies in the morgue, dissected and naked, reduced to dismembered organs. The present human is still entranced into that position. Their coloniality captivates them in the romantic notions of the Western and the White. This eventual self-directed objectification, though, is part of a broader strategy of domination and control, wherein the colonised are denied subjectivity and relegated to subordination. Fanon's concept of being 'half-human' dismantles the components of this dehumanising

process, wherein the colonised are made to feel less than fully human, leading to internalised feelings of inferiority and self-hatred.

Fanon's theorisation of being 'half-human' refers to how the colonised people are evaluated based on the coloniser's criteria of humanity, causing them to feel disconnected and alienated from their own identity and culture. This type of standardisation acts as a regulatory weapon in colonial power structures by upholding norms and hierarchies that favour specific groups and exclude others. It involves the erasure of ancestral knowledges, indigenous cultures, and ways of being, as well as the imposition of uniformity and homogeneity. The field of research at large is responsible for the occupation of the storytelling of such people. Academic extortionists scavenge for narratives which they quantify, analyse and interpret, often reducing their meanings to translations and codifications of experiences into measures of statistics. These measures create generalisations and norms against which a group is ranked and diagnosed as either normal or abnormal. The objectification of science refers to this particular reduction of knowledge, individuals, and communities to mere objects, numbers or commodities within the academic realms. This process often involves the prioritisation of certain forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, while marginalising or disregarding others, perpetuating hierarchical structures and power imbalances. It encompasses practices such as the commodification of research, the exploitation of marginalised communities for knowledge extraction, and the erasure of diverse perspectives within academic disciplines.

The historical roots of objectification in science and academia can be traced back to the colonial period, where Eurocentric notions of knowledge and superiority were imposed upon colonised peoples (Smith, 2012). During this time, Western scientific paradigms were used to justify colonial expansion, exploitation, and domination, leading to the marginalisation and erasure

of indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2011).

Colonialism's influence on the objectification of knowledge is profound. It established orders of knowledge production, where Western scientific methodologies and perspectives were privileged over indigenous and non-Western epistemologies (Quijano, 2007). This epistemic violence positions such communities as passive subjects of study rather than active participants in the construction of knowledge systems (Smith, 2013). The implications of this result in the hijacking of epistemologies, producing narratives which are rendered and reduced to colonial languages and allocated meanings which are understood only within its confined infrastructures.

Objectification manifests in various ways within scientific research and academic practices reinforcing colonial legacies. For example, the colonial gaze, deeply embedded in the dynamics of colonial power, functions as a framework through which the coloniser observes and interprets the colonised. It represents a mode of perception characterised by the fetishisation and exoticisation of indigenous cultures and peoples. Rooted in edifices of superiority, the colonial gaze positions the coloniser as the authoritative observer and interpreter of knowledge. This gaze distorts the lived realities of the colonised while legitimising and perpetuating colonial violence and exploitation. It reinforces hierarchical structures based on race, gender, and class, thereby preserving systems of despotism and coercion. The enduring influence of the colonial gaze persists in contemporary discernments and representations of formerly colonised populations, accentuating the lasting impact of colonialism on our understanding of identity, culture, and power (Smith, 2012).

Decolonial analyses serve to interrogate the entrenched Eurocentric and patriarchal underpinnings inherent within scientific and academic frameworks, laying bare their complicity in perpetuating continuing colonial legacies and deeply entrenched power hierarchies (Grosfoguel, 2007). Objectification, a central facet within this discourse, operates to imprint stereotypes by confining individuals and communities within narrow and often distorted representations, thereby relegating them to oversimplified archetypes (Connell, 2007). Particularly discernible within the domain of psychology, objectification materialises through the reduction of individuals to diagnostic categories or statistical measures, thus disregarding and diminishing the intricate tapestry of human experiences and attributes (Crenshaw, 1989). This process inadvertently serves to fortify persisting stereotypes and prejudices associated with marginalised groups, consequently exacerbating societal stigmatisation (Sue et al., 2007).

In addition to objectifying individuals and communities, there's a trend towards treating human emotions as inconsequential in scientific pursuits. Scientific rigour often demands researchers to strip their work of emotional influence, aiming for a sterile, emotionless approach to research.

This quest for objectivity requires researchers to divorce themselves from their personal feelings, ensuring that their work is solely based on quantifiable data and measurable variables. However, by sidelining emotions in this way, we risk overlooking an essential aspect of human experience.

In conclusion, contemplating the ramifications of standardisation within the realms of science and academia, we are confronted with the sobering reality that our understanding of the 'modern' human is intricately entwined with colonial heritages. As we navigate the complexities of objectification and standardisation, we must heed the call for a paradigm shift—one that embraces the plurality of knowledges and dismantles the hegemonic structures that perpetuate colonial violence. Decolonial analyses offer a path towards liberation, challenging the Eurocentric and patriarchal foundations of scientific inquiry and fostering a more inclusive and equitable epistemological landscape. By embracing a decolonial framework, we can transcend the boundaries of coloniality and forge new pathways towards epistemic justice. This necessitates a radical reimagining of our research practices, one that acknowledges the inherent interconnectedness of knowledge creation and human experience. The expedition towards decolonising science is fraught with challenges, yet it also holds the promise of profound transformation.

REFERENCES

- Connell, R. (2007). Southern theory: Social science and the global dynamics of knowledge. Polity.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167.
- Fanon, F. (1952). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2007). The epistemic decolonial turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 211-223.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Duke University Press.
- Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 168-178.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- Smith, L. T. (2013). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271-286.

The author is a PhD. candidate in the Social Representations, Culture and Communication Joint PhD. programme at the University of Pécs, Hungary in affiliation with the University of Rome, La Sapienza, Italy. Her research interest focuses on the decolonial project.

BUSINESS





THE SILENT CRISIS:

How Climate change is Driving Food Inflation in Pakistan

Bilal Hussain

Fruit vendor Mohammad Salim, originally from Charsadda, is experiencing a 50% decline in sales in Karachi's posh area of Tariq Road. The fruits he buys from the market have become more expensive, leading fruit buyers to reduce their purchases. "People in the market (mandi) have jacked up prices, claiming that it's becoming expensive from the source. Additionally, they have limited quantities to sell, which results in minimal bargaining. When we sell high-priced fruits, common people negotiate extensively, leading many to either reduce or completely stop buying. Both margins and quantity have significantly decreased."

Waheed Ahmed, Patron-in-chief of All Pakistan Fruit & Vegetable Exporters, Importers & Merchants Association (PFVA), highlighted that Pakistan's most significant threat is climate change, wreaking havoc on agriculture. The country has witnessed a surge in extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and heatwaves. These events damage crops, disrupt agricultural activities, and lead to yield losses. Given that Pakistan heavily relies on agriculture—contributing 21% of its GDP, employing 45% of its population, and contributing about 60% to exports—climate change poses a severe risk. According to him, "There's a clear food security threat to Pakistan if the impact of climate change on agriculture is not mitigated. Reports suggest that Pakistan's agricultural output may drop by 30% to 50% if the sector's issues, especially climate change, are not addressed. Sometimes onions are scarce, and sometimes tomatoes. Kinnow exports have declined by 50%. Prices of edibles have certainly risen significantly due to affected and unstable supply."

Ahmed, also an owner of Iftekhar Ahmed & CO., a major player in the fruits and vegetable business, including value-added fruit products like beverages (juices), pointing out that raw material issues for the beverage

industry are also looming large. "The volatile supply of raw material (such as fruits) is affecting the beverage industry, which has already suffered a sales decline of 45% in the last two years due to 38% government taxation. This decline is also affecting the earnings of growers."

Kazim Saeed, co-founder and strategy advisor of the Pakistan Agricultural Coalition (PAC), emphasised that farmers are more aware of climate change compared to urban dwellers. "Farmers are on the front lines; they require not just awareness but also tangible support, such as covering the premium for crop insurance, to tackle the challenges posed by climate change," he stated. Saeed noted that changing weather patterns have begun to confuse even experienced farmers, who are uncertain about the optimal timing for planting seeds amid erratic weather patterns. Unpredictable weather, such as unexpected temperature fluctuations and unseasonal rain, not only reduces yields but also increases the threat of pests. He highlighted a recent example of the white fly pest, which severely affected the cotton crop last September due to unusually high temperatures.

Waheed Ahmed stressed that modern technology and measures will have to be adopted to tackle the climate change threat. These measures include, but are not limited to, promoting climate-resilient agricultural practices such as drip irrigation, conservation agriculture, and agroforestry to help farmers adapt to changing climate conditions and improve productivity. Investment in research and technology, such as modified seeds for climate-resilient crop varieties, and policy support, such as providing incentives for climate-smart farming and supporting farmers in adopting resilient technologies, is crucial.

Azhar Lashari, Director of the Policy Research Institute for Equitable Development (PRIED),

observed that people in urban areas, such as Lahore and Karachi, have high carbon footprints, but the impact of climate change affects farmers, especially in Southern Punjab and interior Sindh, the most. "People in urban areas travel more, use fossil fuel-based electricity more, and work in industries. They tend to have significantly better incomes than the majority working in rural areas, especially in the agriculture sector. Their carbon footprints are high, their income is high, and they are comparatively least affected by climate change. This is natural injustice." He suggested implementing carbon taxing in Pakistan, with the revenue spent on communities most affected by climate change.

The impacts of climate change on agriculture in Pakistan have far-reaching consequences, including food inflation. Reduced agricultural productivity leads to lower supply levels, which, coupled with increasing demand, results in higher food prices. This inflationary pressure disproportionately affects low-income households, leading to food insecurity and malnutrition. Food inflation in rural areas reached 52.4% in May last year, contributing to the highest overall inflation level in the country's history at 38%, mainly due to supply shocks, with floods being a significant factor.

Pakistan's population is growing rapidly. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Pakistan's population is currently estimated at 240.5 million and is projected to reach 403 million by 2050—a significant 67% increase. Urban centers may not fully grasp the seriousness of the matter, but malnutrition is one of the biggest threats to the population. According to the School Age Children Health and Nutrition Survey (SCANS) 2020, over 90% of kids have inadequate amounts of iron in their diet. Children in Pakistan are malnourished, with iron deficiency being among the top deficiencies (49.1% as per the National Nutrition Survey 2018 for those under 5 years of age). The declining agricultural output will certainly exacerbate the challenges the country is facing on the food security front.

Pakistan is also grappling with a water crisis exacerbated by climate change. According to the Asian Development Bank, Pakistan's water availability per capita has decreased from around 5,000 cubic meters per year in the early 1950s to less than 1,000 cubic meters per year in recent years, significantly below the water scarcity threshold of 1,000 cubic meters per capita per year.

Climate change has contributed to soil degradation in Pakistan, particularly through erosion, salinisation, and desertification. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that around 6 million hectares of agricultural land in Pakistan are affected by salinity and waterlogging, reducing the land's productivity.

Climate change-induced challenges have increased Pakistan's dependency on food imports. According to the State Bank of Pakistan, Pakistan's food import bill has increased significantly in recent years, putting pressure on foreign exchange reserves and contributing to food inflation domestically.

Deputy Governor Saleem Ullah, speaking at the Delfa Cattle Show at Karachi Expo Center, emphasised that the share of agricultural products in Pakistan's imports is USD 10 billion: "If agriculture, livestock, and fisheries are developed, 8 to 9 billion dollars can be easily saved out of this, while keeping the prices at a reasonable level to reduce inflation." He added that the State Bank has a special focus on the development of agriculture. For this purpose, the State Bank is working on a new project that will be introduced in the next two to three months. Under this project, access to financial facilities will be facilitated for small farmers, as 75% of small farms currently access financial services through non-traditional methods, facing stringent conditions. He stated that the second priority in the new agriculture development plan will be to increase the productivity of small farmers. This will involve facilitating the supply of agricultural inputs in collaboration with various stakeholders, as small farmers will require additional quality inputs. "They (farmers) do not have the ability to pay the price, so their productivity is very less than the national ratio, while the productivity of progressive farmers is almost double the national ratio."

REFERENCES

<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/357876/climate-change-profile-pakistan.pdf>

<https://pakistan.unfpa.org/en/news/state-world-population-report-provides-infinite-possibilities-pakistan>

https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/price_statistics/cpi/CPI_Review_May_2023.pdf

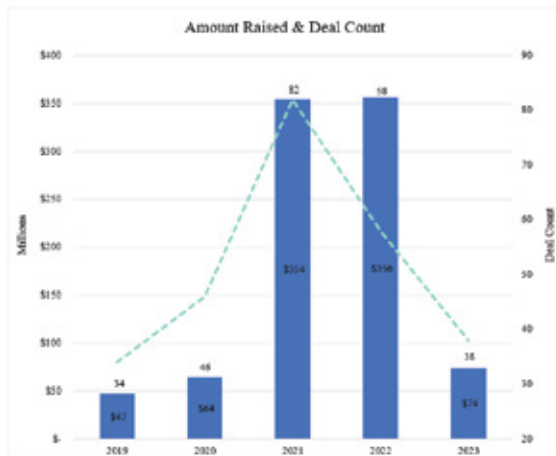
The author is a business journalist and is doing his M. Phil. in economics from University of Karachi.

MONUMENTAL SHIFTS IN PAKISTAN'S STARTUP LANDSCAPE:

For the Better or Worse?

Ahtasam Ahmad

Pakistan's startup ecosystem is currently facing a slowdown due to drying funding sources, resulting in the closure of multiple startups. This situation is aligned with the subdued global fundraising environment, as high-interest rates have shifted investor focus to alternative asset classes like debt-backed assets. The 'crowding out effect' was a significant topic of conversation within the ecosystem throughout 2023. This phenomenon, driven by the US interest rates remaining at 5.5%, has led to what some refer to as a venture winter.



Source: Pakistan's startup fundraising timeline as per Invest2Innovate End of Year (EOY) report 2023

The country experienced a substantial influx of funds in 2021 and 2022, as global investors recognised Pakistan's potential and took advantage of affordable financing to invest in frontier markets. Global venture investors, newly entering the market with ample funds, opted for a less robust due diligence process before investing in Pakistani startups.

This approach led to local startups being valued based on metrics that potentially overstated their worth. However, in 2023, the funds dwindled significantly, leading to a sharp decline in the amounts raised, returning to levels seen pre-2021. Subsequently, the valuations eventually reverted to pre-funding frenzy levels.

The main culprit for this is the persistent macro instability over the past two years coupled with the highly unstable business models of many local startups.

FLAKY MACRO CONDITIONS

Economic challenges have dominated the landscape over the past 24 months, with global conflicts, domestic political unrest, and natural disasters preventing the economy's soft landing. As a result, rising interest rates, rupee devaluation, and high inflation have diminished the country's appeal as an investment hub. Additionally, the dollar liquidity crisis and concerns about profit repatriation have discouraged foreign venture capital (VC) from supporting startups in the ecosystem due to heightened country risk.

The impact of the existing macroeconomic climate on venture investors is exemplified by the negative fluctuations in the value of the rupee. Global VCs investing in Pakistan typically denominate their investments in dollars. In contrast, local startups are initially valued in rupee terms, as their revenues are predominantly in the local currency. Consequently, with each round of devaluation, investors are compelled to write down the dollar value of their investments in Pakistani startups.

UNSUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODELS

Lack of sufficient stress testing by VCs while investing, as explained earlier, led to a flurry of startups with highly unsustainable business models. The unit economics of businesses, particularly in segments like quick commerce and e-commerce, were destined for failure. In many instances, the cost of customer acquisition exceeded the lifetime value of the customers, resulting in significant cash burn over the past few years. Once the seemingly endless supply of funds dried up, these startups struggled to sustain their operations.

The idea behind deploying such models in the first place was that the startups would be able to amass a large number of loyal customers over a specific period which in turn would be willing to pay a premium once the prices were gradually increased to end the loss-making cycle.

However, what local entrepreneurs learned the hard way was that many solutions were addressing issues that the majority of the population did not perceive as a problem to begin with. Moreover, the price-sensitive population faced challenges from economic pressures, causing consumers to switch when startups increased prices.

Thus, even after significant investments in building teams, offering discounts, waiving delivery fees, and providing other incentives, the unit economics proved unsustainable. Consequently, scaling operations exacerbated losses.

MOVING TOWARDS A SOLUTION

The recent news of numerous startups shutting down and others facing challenges may have disheartened many individuals invested in the sector. However, there are already explored solutions available to navigate this crisis.

At the funding end, raising local capital through rupee-denominated funds can de-risk investments and potentially reignite the startup funding cycle. A prime example of this is the recently launched Pakistan Startup Fund (PSF) by the Ministry of IT. The Rs. 2 billion fund aims to address the funding gap faced by Pakistani startups seeking their first round of external investment. Targeting companies at the crucial stage of securing venture capital (VC) funding, the PSF acts as a 'last-cheque' investor. This means the fund can offer grant funding to fill the remaining gap in a funding round once a startup has secured a commitment from a VC firm.

These grants can range from 10% to 30% of the total VC investment, providing startups with additional capital to reach their fundraising goals and fuel their growth. Additionally, the PSF aims to reduce risk for international VCs by partially funding these ventures, potentially encouraging more investment in the Pakistani startup ecosystem.

Though a promising initiative, the fund is likely to face some inherent limitations including a history of lack of continuity when it comes to government-backed programs. Further, the involvement of VCs may hinder progress, as there is a limited number of active VCs in Pakistan. Moreover, their cautious approach to investing has led to a restricted number of funding rounds. This situation is compounded by the difficulties local venture capitalists face in raising funds and the reduced activity of foreign investors.

Another potential solution to alleviate fundraising challenges is through merger and acquisition (M&A) activities. These offer dual benefits. Firstly, for startups that have depleted their resources, being acquired by a larger competitor or another entity can serve as a lifeline. For the acquirers, it presents an opportune moment to secure a favorable deal, as startup valuations are currently low and expected to bounce back once the macroeconomic conditions stabilise.

Furthermore, consolidation offers an opportunity for various sectors to reallocate their resources, especially in crowded sectors like fintech, where numerous players are competing for market share and impacting each other's margins. Acquisitions can lead to synergies and improved margins.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

As we move forward, startups and investors alike are prioritising sustainable business models that are asset-light and avoid operational burdens. Profitability has become the primary focus, shifting away from the prior 'growth at all costs' mindset and orientation. Investors are now keen on assessing Pakistani startups for their potential regional scalability.

Despite the challenges, Pakistan's startup ecosystem continues to show promise. The recalibration of seed round valuations to the 2019-2020 standards indicates a more sustainable funding environment. This valuation allows founders to raise adequate funds with minimal dilution, providing them with sufficient runway to attain product-market fit.

The ongoing transition towards digitisation in the country is a major driving force, propelling businesses towards more efficient and economically viable models. Fintech, in particular, is expected to thrive as a less capital-intensive sector, presenting significant opportunities for growth in the Pakistani startup landscape.

The author is the Research and Insights Lead at Invest2Innovate (i2i) and the Consulting Editor at Profit Magazine. He can be found on Twitter as @AhtasamAhmad and reached via email at ahtasamahmad@yahoo.com.



67

ARTS & CULTURE

OLOMOPOLO: Ten Years of Drive, Discourse, and Dialogue

Vicky Zhuang Yi-Yin

Imagine this scenario from ten years ago. A group of friends have decided to get together and the only place they can meet at is a café, and if they had some money to splurge, perhaps the cinema to watch the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Such was the case in 2013. But then I met Kanwal Khoosat, Iram Sana, Fyque Nadeem and Pakistan's powerhouse performer, Samia Saeed, in the midst of creating a theatre festival that never happened. Relax, this is not a sad story. From the ashes of failure was born our little community safe space, OLOMOPOLO Media. We thought, since we wanted to have 8 different theatre plays on 8 different but subsequent weekends in 8 different and unique venues, why not scale it down? Let's pilot this idea by setting up cultural activities every weekend on a smaller scale that would give people the alternative to just 'eating out'.

Since then, OLOMOPOLO Media has done just that, and has been able to organise or host over one hundred events in a year, and has expanded to creating original productions that have travelled all over: within Pakistan as well as the likes of Singapore, the United States of America, Dubai and even Norway - to name just a few! But coming to this has been a journey with its own set of ups and downs. It's alright. It's just part of the process. In a decade, OLOMOPOLO has proudly established itself as a premiere multidisciplinary cultural and social enterprise. Under this moniker, we have produced and conducted various projects for social intervention and empowerment; enhancing the value of visual and performing arts in facilitating social sensitisation for public awareness; and exploring narratives addressing ethical development and socio-cultural acceptance and sophistication. Under this ambit, we also created a little nook in the corner of Lahore, a space that we called home where our ideas flowed, flourished and flew.

When people think of performance spaces, they often think of a large hall, accommodating at least a hundred seats, and something proscenium and official-looking like an auditorium. OLO is not that. The space became a multipurpose studio space that would allow for various types of activities, such as a performance space for various mediums of expression, screenings for short and feature films that included an interactive session with the filmmakers, workshops for various interests

and forms of art, panel talks on important issues, and gatherings for thought-sharing. More importantly, it also became an inclusive and safe space for various communities that were otherwise invisible and mostly marginalised.

You could enter the premises on one weekend and find a children's activity happening in full swing, and you could hear songs like Billi meinay paali hai (The Cat I Pet) and If You're Happy and You Know It (sung in English, Urdu and Punjabi) loudly, or you could walk into a performance art piece like Dinner by Sarah Mumtaz, or you could walk into a musical gig with local bands and musicians jamming away into the night, or relax and laugh your worries away with a provocative comedy night, or be a part of a film festival, or join a game night like Antakshri with your friends singing songs and screaming at me over the scoreboard (because I am the scoreboard keeper), or learn through a workshop on acting, or filmmaking, or even be exposed to a different culture, through OLO People (a program that celebrates cultural communities living in Pakistan that are not part of the mainstream, but exist in the peripheries, whose holidays we celebrate with them). In fact, we just had a session on OLO People's Chinese New Year in late February, in the presence of the Chinese community where people learned about the various cultures within China, and what the Chinese eat on the New Year - of which some items we even had on the menu! We're going to share all the holidays like Eid, Easter, Nouroz and Vaisakhi sometime in April with all the fun activities associated with them.

The space that we have created is not just about entertainment. It is about creating an environment that is conducive to dialogue and discourse, even for topics that are very difficult to approach. Here, no intolerance is tolerated. Speak your mind, but respectfully. Bring your intellectual discussions and run with it, perhaps even explore what mediums your ideas can be expressed through. It is a space that fosters camaraderie not just within the team that is working here, but for those who enter the space to conduct their sessions or are just there to see what is happening. It is a space that fosters networking and ultimately creates a community that is inclusive, diverse and has something important to say. We approach all this by adding a human lens to our

work, and that has greatly helped us in our approach towards the narratives we work with and the multitudes of people who have come to OLO to showcase their work, their stories and their talents.

Yet, despite its many milestones, this is an organisation that has against many odds survived through thick and thin – even through the pandemic. I owe it to the unwavering dedication, drive, and heart that the team behind it possesses. It is almost magical. Surreal.

Many spaces have come and gone, and the struggles are real when potential corporate sponsors do not understand whether we are a CSR objective or not. At the same time, we have to be careful about pricing tickets so as to not alienate the audience with a high price and balance it out with being able to cover basic utility and rent costs. Yet, we do a lot of free events, our talks, open mic nights, and some film screenings are all free events that encourage expression and networking. At one point, the core team had to work day jobs to keep the space afloat and ensure that it had what it needed. For us, funding is hard, really hard, but the show must go on. We have places to go, and stories to tell. And people need a space to take time out of their busy lives and just not work. They want to laugh, relax to tunes, or watch a film that they would have never been able to find and discover new talent and anything that can help suspend them from their daily lives just for a moment to recuperate before returning fully recharged.

There should be more spaces like OLO in the city. I was once asked if I was concerned that other spaces were starting to pop up at a panel discussion, and I said no. In business and economics, competition is seen as a way of encouraging organisations to find their competitive advantage, and I am all for it. But from a social standpoint, I believe that having more spaces like ours is encouraging. Every space will have a limit. For us, our indoor space can take care of anywhere between 50 to 60 people and outdoors can take care of anywhere between 120-150 people. That is a drop in the ocean compared to the population of Lahore on any given weekend. More spaces, more activity, more solidarity is what I think. It is an opportunity for further collaboration and creating a larger space that fosters healthy discourse.

The future of OLO is expansive. No one can tell what will happen. But OLO is hopeful, despite hardships, that we can continue to perpetuate positivity in a hardened world. We continue to go experimental with the ways we can tell stories and stay open to new people to collaborate with when they come to our space to conduct their own sessions. Now we have to compete with them on when we can organise our own events on the calendar, and that's a great thing. It means that there are people out there who are willing to work in arts and culture.

We do hope that we can get enough support in the future so that OLO can become self-sustaining. That's still the goal. Perhaps in the next decade, this would be a path that we will endeavor to tread on with more fervour as the weekly events at OLO are becoming more frequented and requested for. Our first ten years were marked by an incredible journey of learning, struggling, and telling impactful stories. We only wish that this could continue into the future.

The author, a multidisciplinary storyteller, is the Co-Founder and Director of OLOMOPOL Media and the Founder and Creative Head at The Cheeni Chronicles.

ABSTRACTION IN ART: AESTHETIC EXCELLENCE OR ELITIST FARCE?

Abbas Moosvi

There seems to be an inverse relationship between how subjective a piece of artwork is and the extent to which it may be referred to as 'political' in its messaging. In the contemporary, post-USSR era, the direction of art seems to be in favour of the former - whereby works have assumed an abstract character. It is left to the audience to decipher its meaning, and generally speaking the greater the number of interpretations the higher the level of prestige and price tag. In this way, art has centred the individual - his a priori exposures, experiences, worldviews, preferences, and relationships all determine the manner in which he injects 'meaning' into his observations.

The consequences of this cannot be overstated, with the most obvious being the promotion of a general culture of narcissism. Individuals are encouraged to place their own perspectives above all others behind the shield of 'lived experiences' - true for me, valid for me, important for me. Second, it has stripped art of its fundamentally communal and aspirational nature: a vehicle for expression that anyone - regardless of their class, caste, gender, creed, religion, or sexuality - could tap into as a means of resistance, provocation, or camaraderie. In its stead, a certain 'high culture' has gradually come to dominate the creative domain - with the vast majority of producers and consumers of the arts hailing from elite backgrounds. This 'aristocratisation' of the sphere has functioned as a mechanism for depoliticisation, reducing it to an empty pastime for a small segment with ample leisure time. Furthermore, the hyper-subjectivity of artwork has eliminated the need for sensemaking; any and all interpretations are now fair game. Indeed, 'high classes' love to endlessly debate with one other on interpretative direction. The irony of this must, in passing, be underscored: all 'meanings' are valid, but a mindless game of one-upmanship on the various possibilities is also part of the course - in which no one has the courage to point out that the Emperor may not have any clothes at all. Unfortunately for participants, the winner of this contest is decided in advance: the inference of the individual with the highest preexisting social status always comes out on top. With no message

or objective, the 'value' of crafts, music, films, paintings, theatrical performances, etc. is assigned on the basis of who appreciates it: endorsements are now currency. Rationales unnecessary.

For instance, Elon Musk coming out and declaring that a particular piece of artwork resonates with him will - as a matter of course - drive up its price. Elites will then jostle with another to acquire it, bidding increasingly higher prices in an effort to signal their wealth and/or status to peers - regardless of whether or not they have the faintest idea of what it means. They can rest assured, however, that this is not a conspicuous purchase by any means. Au contraire, most approach the transaction as an investment in an asset that will continue to appreciate over time.



Figure 1. The Bored Ape, NFT bought by artist Eminem for USD 450,000 to kickstart an entire 'line' of ape art that fans are now 'collecting'.

In this way, a perverse 'market logic' now dictates the landscape – with the arbitrary personal preferences of individuals with access to financial capital determining which works are elevated. If this is difficult to conceptualise, consider the recent rise of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) – pieces of digital 'artwork' that are endorsed by billionaires and used as stores of value in a mindless speculative trading game. For all intents and purposes, these can be seen as tools for simple fundraising that impressionable (and frequently misinformed) young individuals are manipulated into buying in order to prove their loyalty and dedication to a particular celebrity. At an aggregate level, it is akin to 'trickle-up' economics: with resources flowing from the bottom and middle tiers of society to the upper echelons. Is this art?

In bygone times, particularly prior to the 1980s, art served a powerful societal function – educating people, enriching the cultural fabric, and inspiring entire socio-political movements. This is not to romanticise the art of that period and imply that all its works were of impeccable quality, but that they were relatable to ordinary, non-propertied citizens and had an 'animating' effect within communities. One did not need to have a formal degree in the arts to understand them. Art carried a central, unambiguous message that assisted audiences in understanding their place in the world rather than disorienting them further. As an example, Frida Kahlo's *Moses* – a painting she released in 1945 – depicts a newborn baby surrounded by a series of 'forces' that (attempt to) influence it: from political thinkers to religious leaders as well as historical movements and cultural traditions. Through a detailed, multilayered depiction, Kahlo achieves a tremendous amount with this artwork – showcasing the vast complexity of the human condition and the constant 'wrestling' (social, emotional, physical, and intellectual) that it must engage in over the course of a life. Another case is of Soviet painter Alexander Samokhvalov's *Kirov Greeting a Parade of Athletes*, in which the USSR's emphasis on physical fitness and its intimate linkage to economic productivity is illustrated via athletes in a town hall being received by enthusiastic supporters – with a massive billboard of Lenin in the background. Closer to home, the *Gyarah Murti* – sculpted by Devi Prasad Roy – is a series of statues depicting Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March, in which he is seen leading a group of individuals from various sociocultural and religious backgrounds in a seminal event that led to the independence of the subcontinent from British rule. The idea here is of highlighting the struggle that went into the independence movement, Gandhi's unique ability to inspire via non-violent protest, and a commitment to inclusivity in terms of the path ahead: powerful ideas that capture an important moment in time and seek to remind contemporary Indians of the sacrifices their ancestors had to make.

Art today is a random splatter of paint on a canvas, a handful of bricks piled onto one another, and geometric patterns with colourful backgrounds. Films are incoherent, musical lyrics comically childish, and literature



Figure 2. Kirov Greeting a Parade of Athletes - Alexander Samokhvalov (1935)

merely describing, in a detached fashion, random assortments of events that the narrator is subjectively experiencing. There is little to no 'direction' to which it flows, and the idea is to simply let it 'absorb' in one's mind without asking too many questions or attempting to make sense of the details. Art must, it is claimed, be consumed for 'its own sake' – and not turned into an instrumental activity with a defined purpose. In this way, a retreat from reality – a paranoid escapism – is promoted, whereby people are discouraged from engaging with the world around them, of which they are a part. What remains is a set of abstractions in one's mind and spirit. In many instances, it is claimed that these will serve as a means for discovering one's 'true nature' in an elaborate 'inward journey' to the recesses of the psyche. While this may sound exciting, there is an ideological backdrop to the phenomenon: in which a hyper-fixation on one's internal elements (whatever that means) is peddled – functioning to fragment society in an already atomised world.



Figure 3. Convergence - Jackson Pollock (1952)

This naturally tends to foster a culture of anti-politics, whereby the primary vehicle of ‘change’ is presented not as political struggle but self-regulation and improvement. Jordan Peterson, pop-psychologist and influencer extraordinaire, espouses the same in his global bestseller *12 Rules for Life* – in which rule numero uno is ‘Clean Up Your Room Before Criticising the World’. This is a general pathology within the domain of therapy today. Rather than looking at socioeconomic or political factors that may be responsible for disturbed mental health, myopic recommendations on how one can optimally ‘cope’, ‘consider how they may be worsening the problem’, or simply ‘adjust their interpretation of the situation’ are made. As famously pointed out by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, however, what if one’s room is a mess precisely because of factors external to the household?

Abstract art first surfaced in the late nineteenth century, as a response to the ‘absurdity’ of the world. This was the period in which the ideas of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche were making the waves, particularly his emphasis on perspectivism – a philosophical approach premised on the notion that ‘objective reality’ is ultimately a question of subjective interpretation. One of his more popular quotes, frequently circulated on social media today – particularly among youth segments – is, “You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, or the only way, it does not exist.” A prescient note that encapsulates his overarching school of thought, and the reason why he is frequently referred to as the father of postmodernism, the ideology that went mainstream in the 1980s and argued for a total rejection of meta narratives. A central theme of this current of thought is flippancy as a vehicle for enhancing one’s freedom: the shunning of cultural practices, historical traditions, religious duties, and ‘rules’ most broadly conceived – with the justification that these are arbitrary restrictions based on power relations in the final analysis. This is an outright rejection of second-order thinking, whereby deeply rooted historical details are rejected on hand simply due to there being no evident use for them in the immediate present. Christian theologian G. K. Chesterton comments on this phenomenon in his book, *The Thing*, and it is worth quoting at length: “There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, ‘I don’t see the use of this; let us clear it away.’ To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: ‘If you don’t see the use of it, I certainly won’t let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.’” Put another way, an emphasis is made on ‘deconstruction’ for its own sake as the default assumption is that ‘the old’ is necessarily flawed – even if one cannot articulate the specific (potentially useful) reasons for why it exists in the first place. In contemporary times, a ‘rebellious spirit’ is proposed: in which individual preferences trump all – not least of all in artistic expression.

This is what paved the way for the rise of abstract art, which centred the artists’ unfiltered feelings at the time of creation rather than serving as a measured analysis of, engagement with, or response to the empirical reality that they were dealing with in their lives. A quote from Josef Albers, one of the most well-known art educators of the 20th century, captures the extent of this sentiment: “Abstraction is real, probably more real than nature. I prefer to see with closed eyes.”

It is important to note that the critique of abstract art is not one that dismisses aesthetic subtlety – which differs from pretentious obfuscation. Take the recent Hollywood blockbuster, *Barbie*, as an example – a film that, for all its political messaging, ultimately proved unmemorable due to its in-your-face nature that left no room at all for mind-wandering. By explicitly spelling out its various (quite noble) messages, the experience felt intellectually insulting: like a helicopter parent patronisingly bombarding her children with long laundry lists of instruction for a fairly uncomplicated task. By adopting this approach, the film self-sabotaged: reducing itself to an infantile character. This is perhaps what the opposite of ‘aesthetic subtlety’ looks like. In contrast, Saim Sadiq’s *Joyland* – whilst also themed around ideas of abuse, exploitation, and entrenched power structures – was much more refined in that it not only relied upon but centred subtlety as its communicative strategy.



Figure 3. *Joyland* (2022)

Through well-timed silences, exchanged glances, non-verbal cues, cynical humour, witty innuendos, vocal inflections, and impeccable lighting/camera work, the film was able to powerfully capture the dynamics and consequences of patriarchal norms in Pakistani society whilst inviting the audience into a kind of intellectual dance via provocation – meeting them halfway. In this manner, whilst both films can be seen as ‘political’, the latter will likely fare significantly better in terms of standing the test of time – the reason for which is an acknowledgment and appreciation of viewers as active, thinking participants rather than passive spectators. This notwithstanding, both films – whilst differing from one another in degrees of subtlety – can at least claim to be fostering some sort of change in society, which ‘abstract’ art can never accomplish.

This latter category is fundamentally perverted: hidden within ivory towers for a privileged few to gather around for little besides vacuous entertainment and class solidarity. The associated depoliticisation and relegation to narcissistic indulgence can never be forgiven – and future art historians will surely look back and scoff at this trivialisation of what was once a powerful medium that brought communities together for progress and prosperity.

In the Global South, where state funding for art is few and far between, artists have been forced to adopt Western traditions enconced in abstraction – as their representatives, frequently multilateral ‘donors’, are the only avenues that can be engaged with for substantive financial support. The net effect is an art landscape that is not only devoid of any messaging but also entirely divorced from the sociocultural milieu. Rather than seeing this as yet another reason to produce nonsensical work that ‘reflects the bizarre nature of the world’, the arts community must initiate a wide-ranging conversation on how a reset can be made possible.

As philosopher Roger Scruton aptly puts it in his book, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*: “Art moves us because it is beautiful, and it is beautiful in part because it means something. It can be meaningful without being beautiful; but to be beautiful it must be meaningful.”

The author is a Research Fellow at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad and currently serving as the Managing Editor of the Discourse Magazine. He may be reached on X/Twitter at @Abbas-Moosvi and email at abbas@pide.org.pk.



PIDE BI-MONTHLY ROUNDUP

WORKING PAPERS

- Impact of Education Mismatch on Earnings: Evidence from Pakistan's Labor Market – Henna Ahsan

BOOKS

- Readings in Pakistan's Energy Challenges – Afia Malik

KNOWLEDGE BRIEFS

- Plots, Privileges and Protocols – Shahid Mehmood
- Challenges And Opportunities Of The Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Project (TBTTPP): A Case Study Of The Ex-FATA (Pakistan) – Nazam Maqbool
- Pakistan's Emigration: Trends & Insight – Junaid Ahmed

RESEARCH REPORTS

- PIDE Reform Manifesto: Transforming Society and Economy
- Government Training & Development Endeavors – Nadeem Ul Haque, Faheem Jehangir Khan, Izzah Salam
- Political Party Manifestos: Reform Paradox in Pakistan

EVENTS/WEBINARS

- Latex Training for Students
- The Secretary of the M/o Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives pays a visit to PIDE
- Memorial – Sartaj Aziz
- 4th Think Tanks Moot: Transforming Economy & Society
- Launch Of PIDE Reform Manifesto: Transforming Economy & Society
- Revitalising Pakistan's Automobile Industry
- Training Program: Artificial Intelligence (AI) For Social Scientists
- The Political Economy of Economic Development (Tobias Haque, WBG)
- Introduction To CGE Modeling (Training Workshop)

The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics
A center of cutting edge research on Economics,
Governance and Public Policy since 1957 and the official think tank of
Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives.



Pakistan Institute of Development Economics