

# An Orwellian winter

GHAZI SALAHUDDIN

After I disembarked at Milan's Malpensa airport, it didn't take long for me to be reminded that the world was still with me. So the escape I had planned from the raw winds of my own country was going to be less than perfect. Before I could get to the immigration windows, I had to pass through a medical team scanning all incoming passengers – a beep on the forehead to check coronavirus.

This intimation of a global crisis somewhat deepened when I settled in Monza, a quaint little town near Milan that is famous for its Formula One track. There were stories about the discrimination that the Chinese people are facing. It has a racial tinge. For instance, the owner of a Chinese restaurant that has existed in this town for over thirty years, posted a notice that if customers continued to stay away, he would be forced to shut down the outlet. A Taiwanese family returning from home sent a WhatsApp message to parents of their daughter's pre-school nursery, explaining that although Taiwan was not China, they had decided to not send the girl to the school for two weeks. And there was a sigh of relief, with responses of "thank you for being so considerate".

In another sense, or course, the Chinese citizens have been warmly welcomed in Europe. In recent years, the rich Chinese are contributing an increasing share of income derived from tourism. Their faces would stand out against the backdrop of familiar sights such as the Colosseum in Rome or the Rialto Bridge on the Grand Canal in Venice.

But the Chinese are not there at this time and there have been assessments of how much revenue some specific tourist destinations have lost because of this coronavirus epidemic and the scare it has spread. Our own interaction with the Chinese is of a different kind and I do not know if their presence and visibility in our cities has

been affected. Another immediate impression I got was about the weather. This is not the central European winter that I would have expected. February is supposed to be the coldest month of the year and now temperatures during the day rise to double-digit Celsius. Is this a testimony of the dreaded climate change?

Anyhow, I feel deprived of the adventure of wandering through these environs in an extreme, snow-clad winter. On the other hand, I was able to take off my parka and sit in the sun on the stairs of the Milan cathedral. During this week, there was just one day that had clouds and some showers. It is going to be an early spring. Tiny, white bulbs are sprouting out of dead earth in some corners. Someone saw butterflies in the park.

Winter is also the season of art exhibitions and cosy, indoor events. The European fiction I had read as a teenager kindles, in my imagination, a fireplace in the room and snow falling across the glass windows on a moonlit night. Still, there is this considerable excitement of being in northern Italy, with easy access to a number of fabled locations. Speed trains have diminished distances.

In Monza, I was particularly attracted to an unexceptional exhibition of photographs now continuing for some weeks in the historic, red-brick town hall. It is titled 'To Read' – 'Leggere' in Italian – and is composed of photographs by the renowned Steve McCurry. My interest in it was aroused for two reasons.

One, I feel strongly for our lack of reading habits and think that this reflection of our state of intellectual deprivation is an important measure of our social condition. In addition, I was familiar with some of McCurry photographs on the subject. Hence, here was also some nostalgic value for me. After all, the most celebrated snap of this iconic photographer was of that Afghan schoolgirl McCurry had found in an Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan in early eighties. It was this image of the 'Afghan Girl' that

made McCurry famous and after that he covered many human crises in the Middle East and South Asia.

This exhibition had an entry ticket of 10 euros and I got a two euro discount for being a senior citizen. Obviously, the photographs of people reading a book or a newspaper or separate pages in some very unlikely situations all tell stories. There was one of a woman reading a newspaper in a Peshawar refugee camp in the eighties when others in that tent are watching PTV. I am tempted to dwell more on the photographs and on how the exhibition is curated with famous quotations on the value and the magic of reading. On this occasion, I will only reproduce two quotes. Josif Brodskij: "There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them". Hermann Hesse: "We should read not in order to forget ourselves and our daily lives but, on the contrary, in order to gain a firmer, more conscious, more mature grip on our own lives". Ah, so should we also read George Orwell's 'Animal Farm'? Yes, this subject of reading books brings me back to Pakistan of this week. On the very day that I was standing in front of McCurry photographs in the Monza town hall, former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi was addressing the National Assembly in Islamabad. He concluded his observations on the country's 'economic meltdown' with the remark that Pakistan today is the embodiment of Orwell's 'Animal Farm'. He suggested that all ministers should read the novel, which is an allegory of how a group of farm animals rebel against their human farmer.

Shahid Khaqan, who wants 'Animal Farm' to become a part of our curriculum, also offered to donate 200 copies for the benefit of the ministers and other members of the Assembly. Think about it. The photograph of a member of Imran Khan's cabinet reading 'Animal Farm' – or any literary classic – could belong in an exhibition in some faraway, exotic location.

IMF SAYS SOUND ECONOMIC POLICIES CONTINUE



## A false dichotomy

UMER FAROOQ

Who among us would not prefer to drive a Tesla-like car in Pakistan? This might come true very soon, if we are to take the first National Electric Vehicle Policy (NEPA) of Pakistan seriously. The policy, approved by federal government last year, promises radical electrification of Pakistan's automobile industry in a frighteningly short period of time. Before going into further details, let us agree on one thing with the policymakers: if we want to keep the global temperature increase below 1.5 degrees, we need a lot of transformation and that too very quickly – like promised in NEPA.

The draft policy gives an impression of the order of magnitude of the transitions we would need to see if we are going to meet the aggressive climate targets we undertook as signatories to the Paris climate agreement'15. For that, they deserve credit. However, the plan to implement the policy leaves far too many open ends, comprises far too many contradictions, and near-impossible adoption rates in a country like Pakistan which experiences severe shortfall of energy every now and then.

This policy tells us what they would do: 30-50 percent of the new vehicle sale would be EVs by 2030; 90 percent by 2040; swift development of charging infrastructure; exceptionally low import duties on EV-related technologies; low financing interest rate for EV manufacturing; establishment of EV center; hassle-free EV registration process; and anything magical that can electrify our whole transportation system.

What the policy does not tell us is how they will achieve it. There are no plans. There has been no briefing after the approval of the policy; neither on the plan nor on progress ever since it got approved. If any of this sounds too ambitious and expected to make a drastic change in real vis-à-vis climate change, you need only look as far as the activities of the minister of state for climate change to realize that it likely won't.

Let us talk about a few of the ambiguities associated with this policy. On multiple occasions, the draft refers to the economic benefits,

without any quantitative analysis, in terms of producing new jobs by adaptation of green technologies. However, the policy does not discuss anything of any sort about the impact of the inevitable old job losses as consequence of technology shift. It will for sure help in mitigating the climate concerns but what is the plan for the economic and social threats the lay-offs possess? No particular answers yet.

Furthermore, how would working class families be able to purchase EVs when the lowest price for the current EV in world is above Rs2.5 million. Most governments are offering subsidies to encourage new buyers to opt for EV over fossil fuel vehicles (FFVs), but we are left to wonder if the government of Pakistan is in any position to afford giving further subsidies? And that too on luxuries like EVs? If the answer is no, which of course it is, then the commercialization of EVs in our country would not be as easy as discussed in the policy.

Among many other problems, one is not taking the major stakeholders like the Pakistan Automotive Manufacturers Association (PAMA), the Pakistan Association of Auto Parts and Accessories Manufacturers (PAAPAM) etc in confidence until the start of the 2020 when Advisor to Prime Minister Abdul Razzak Dawood chaired a meeting to listen their concerns. Next, NEPA does not care about the already implemented Automotive Development Policy (2016-21) in this regard. There are also almost ten different ministries and boards that will work together towards the implementation of this project. This huge collaboration rather terrifies me that this policy will only turn out to be a ping-pong ball among collaborators where everyone will work on it; and thus, no one will work on it.

Another thing that leaves this policy cloaked in mystery is the lack of discussion about the bottleneck technology towards the commercialization of EVs around the globe – that is: the energy storage system. And, supposing the government were able to do all what is said above, you're going to need a massive increase in energy generation, storage and dispatchable electricity sources. Otherwise, it's going to be impossible to power many parts of the country

with renewable energy because the sun does not shine 24/7 and the wind does not blow at the same rate everywhere.

So, we will need to take the storage part seriously which is not discussed at all in the policy draft. Although NEPA points to the establishment of a centre for EVs, nobody knows what would be the mandate of that centre – production of EV units, R&D, Li-battery research or something else? I fear our EV industry, like others, would also be at the mercy of China finally. Some reports that came out recently claimed that a number of Chinese companies have already started collaborations with different government and private companies on the subject. Another thing mentioned in the policy is to start with the charging infrastructure with Islamabad and Lahore in the beginning. I hope that does not translate into any further regional disparity. NEPA offers targets to accelerate the phase-out of FFVs up to 90 percent by 2040, which are at least technically feasible, but they don't offer the comprehensive plan horsepower to get there. Many of the goals they do identify could be popular, but they simply won't generate the levels of economic benefits and carbon emission reductions promised. It seems as though this policy presents a false dichotomy: if we want mitigate climate change entirely, we have to electrify the automobile industry. No, that is not enough.

The only favourable thing that could give hope for the success of this policy to some extent is the credibility and keen involvement of Adviser to the Prime Minister Malik Amin Aslam who was also the architect of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Billion Tree Project. He has demonstrated that he can deliver what he commits. But how powerfully and far he can run the race is the question. Also, it is really unpredictable how the next government carries the policy Malik Amin Aslam and his allies drafted. Will it be thrown away like this government did to ADP 2016-21. The current government certainly cannot bind future government(s), but climate change mitigation requires long-term investments so it becomes critical that the next government shows the same level of commitment.

## Student unions

ARIF HASAN

Universities in 53 cities all over Pakistan participated in a student march on Nov 19, 2019, and demanded the restoration of student unions and reforms in the higher education sector.

Political parties have reacted cautiously to the demand and feel that these unions should not be allowed to participate in national politics and their role should be restricted to academic and cultural activities. Liberal elements in politics and society have also compared the similarity of this movement with previous student involvement in politics, especially of the Ayub era. Apart from the demands of the present student leadership, there is no such similarity because Pakistan is not the same as it was in 1952 when the first movement took place, or 1960 when the movement against Ayub began.

Those movements took place in a global climate of radicalism, when the first post-war generation came of age and the spirit of the anti-colonial movements in Asia and the Middle East were alive. At that time, there was a strong Non-Aligned Nations movement and there was also an Asia-Africa solidarity movement which was supporting the regimes fighting colonialism in Africa.

The students and many of the teachers of that time were very much a part of these movements so it is not surprising that the students organised large-scale demonstrations against Britain, France, and Israel, when the Suez Canal was nationalised and that the first major movement of the NSF resulted from a government crackdown on students protesting the assassination of Lumumba. All this has now changed. When Burhan Wani was killed or when the invasion of Iraq by the US took place, there was no student reaction and nor has there been one to Trump's recent plan for Palestine. This is in part because in global politics things are no longer black and white. There is a whole grey world produced by ideological changes in China, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fake consensus-seeking of the EU, and the growing domination of global capitalism. There have been other changes too. In 1964, there were six universities, of which one was private. Today, there are 209 recognised universities, of which 82 are private. In 1964, the university student population was 13,221 and today it is over 1.8 million. Previously, movements originated and were organised from Karachi. Today,

they will originate and be organised from Punjab, where a strong middle class with roots in the establishment has emerged. Also, with the growth in private sector universities, the nature of political organisation between them and the public-sector universities will differ considerably. There are other differences as well. Since 2000, 21 universities in small towns of 200,000 to 500,000 (1998 census) have been established. Thirty per cent of students in these universities are from the rural areas.

Then, in 1964, the proportion of women in the universities was 20.6pc. Today, it is over 58pc. In the more urbanised cities, it is overwhelmingly female. Previously, in student organisations, women were organised separately from the men. This is unlikely to happen today as even if it does, there will be women in the main union who will stand for elections and some of them will probably get elected. These women are different from their earlier sisters for they are a generation that are increasingly taking to riding motorbikes and participating in the annual Aurat March, and are vocal supporters of pro-women laws. Further, a large number of rural women are in universities and are agents of change in their villages.

Meanwhile, there are 3m students enrolled in Pakistan's degree colleges and universities. This amounts to 15pc of the 20m Pakistanis in the eligible age group of 18-24, a formidable number but with very different sociopolitical situations in the four provinces. Student politics in Balochistan are likely to express its deprivation; those in the KP, a desire for justice in the post-conflict era in the province; in Sindh it is likely to give a new voice to Sindh nationalism; and in Punjab (judging from its role in the present movement) an emphasis for the consolidation of social and economic change. Irrespective of what role is prescribed to the unions by the establishment, they will definitely be involved in the politics of the country and will be wooed by different political parties irrespective of whether it is permitted or not. To bring this enormous student power together for promoting a progressive Pakistan requires consensus building in an ideologically disparate society. If different student groups can agree on the reforms required in the higher education system and their process of implementation, it will be an important beginning on which they can build a platform of discussion and debate on national issues.

## Letters to the Editor

### Railways policy

This letter refers to the news report 'SC directs completion of ML-1 project in two years'. The problem of the ML-1 project is not legal in nature but one of economic and public policy. Deterioration of track, rolling stock, overall operating efficiency and financial losses are only symptoms. The root causes stem from the fact that Pakistan Railways is not run as a commercial enterprise but instead as a government department following government instructions and policies irrespective of their effect on costs and revenues. For example, goods traffic is profitable, but preference is given to passenger traffic. Pakistan Railways is also continuing to operate loss-making secondary and tertiary routes at the instance of the government. They have never billed the government for the losses incurred by such operations. In order to solve these problems Pakistan Railways should close all secondary and tertiary routes and give greater preference to the more profitable traffic of goods. This will

improve operating ratios and release sufficient resources for clearing the maintenance backlog. Furthermore, Pakistan Railways should build in-house capability for maintenance of track, rolling stock and signaling.

Abdul Majeed  
ISLAMABAD

### Unfair test

Recently, a university in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa announced its MPhil/PhD programme for 2020. It was after a long cumbersome process that I finally completed the application procedure and gave the entrance test. To my utter shock and dismay, the paper given to me comprised 50 percent English and 50 percent Math and nothing of my own subject. My question for the HEC and the aforementioned university is how they could evaluate my knowledge of chemistry by testing English and Math only. I request the concerned department to look into this matter and address this issue at the earliest.

Yasar Aman  
SWAT

### Early warning

This refers to the editorial 'BRT blunders'. The inordinate delay in the completion of this project seems to be a blessing in disguise. As suggested in the editorial, the serious flaws in the design of the project should be rectified so as to avoid jeopardizing human lives and colossal financial losses. Luckily the audit report has given a timely wake-up call beforehand. It is mandatory to adhere to international standards in execution of such mega projects to ensure cost-effectiveness and safety, as is rightly asserted in the editorial.

Dr Najeeb A Khan  
BOSTON

### Draconian bill

This refers to the editorial 'Brutalised society.' People like the Roman Senator Draco and others have argued, without credible evidence, that savage punishments meted out

in public can deter crime. They never do. As any criminologist worth the name can testify, the only thing that deters criminals is the knowledge that the odds of being caught and punished are unacceptably high. In passing the resolution calling for public executions the legislators have only demonstrated their ignorance and hypocrisy, making it worse by dragging the good name of Islam into the controversy. The latter has no bearing on it. We don't need any new laws. All that is required is a responsible and efficient administration to implement the already existing rules and regulations.

K Hussain Zia  
LAHORE

### AAP victory

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) recently handed a crushing defeat to the ruling BJP government in Delhi's local elections, as per reports. This result clearly shows that ordinary Indian people, who oppose the extremist agenda of PM Modi, are far more numerous than those who preach divisive and hate filled propaganda, especially against Muslims. For 12 years, I worked and

interacted with Indian colleagues in a Saudi university. I found them to be quite friendly towards us Pakistanis.

Many of our traits were similar, including our basic language (Urdu/Hindi), customs etc. To me, India's present dilemma looks akin to our own situation a few years ago when terrorism and extremism held sway. I am sure that with the right frame of mind and with a focus on regional peace and prosperity, India's Aam Aadmi Party is ensured further success in the coming years.

M Masud Butt  
LAHORE

### Good deal?

This refers to the letter 'Bad deal' by Engr Shahryar Khan Baseer. Without placing on record any facts to refute the claim that the deal was the most economical and in the best interests of the country, the writer has chosen to denounce a highly laudable initiative. That the LNG was badly needed is evident from the fact that idle charges never had to be paid. It is a pity that we are unable to rec-