

# A bug in humanity's system

M SAEED KHALID

It's about China. The world witnessed year after year, the phenomenal rise of China, with mixed feelings of awe and envy. The world's most populous nation also became its biggest manufacturer. You need it – China can make it, as cheap as you want.

Modi wanted to emulate China and came up with his 'Make in India' banner. Trump wanted to curb China and slapped tariffs. China was hurting but coping with the US challenge. Then, something extraordinary arrived: a vicious bug hit Hubei province of China. And China is no longer the same country.

China moved swiftly to contain the epidemic. It was observed that China is the only country that can successfully fight the challenge posed by a virulent new strain of the coronavirus. However, China could not stop the bug being carried to other countries, causing hundreds of death, leading to unprecedented measures of quarantine. Eventually, the virus will be controlled but it may take time before the immense damage suffered by the Chinese and in turn the global economy can be repaired.

It was not long ago that the powerful of the world brought in globalization of the trading system and outsourcing of production. That period also witnessed the further speeding up of news dissemination across the globe with the help of digital technology. A new bug has sent the systems into a spin. The epidemic caused by it may not be so deadly but it is very scary.

The scare shows the extreme vulnerability of the human race to spasms of psychosis. In the information age, wisdom has taken a back seat, and we are left with a downward spin of the global economy. China may be the principal casualty but other large economies too are reeling from the meltdown. In turn, every country is likely to suffer from a slower world economy. The virus will be controlled in months if not



weeks and will recede as the top story. The global media will move on to another story as the corona scare becomes another episode in human history. If there are lessons to be learnt to meet a similar threat in the future, those too would be swept under the rug. The readers of this piece must be aware of how the digital age is testing the limits of human memory. There is such a lot to digest and retain every hour of the day. How many of us recall that barely two months back Australia was hit by its worst ever forest fires? Or that Iran and the US were at the brink of a war after an American drone killed Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iran's revolutionary guards? Earlier, there was an attack on Saudi facilities causing considerable damage to its oil industry. Does all of this prove that not only is information travelling much faster but events may actually be happening at a greater speed, to be forgotten as quickly?

Over the centuries, the human race has been afflicted by great epidemics causing millions of deaths. Corona too will pass – and quickly, given the advanced means to contain and eliminate the threat. Is humankind prepared to minimize deaths from everyday phenomena the way it rises to meet new threats? It takes a death on the road more stoically than one in a building collapse, a plane crash or an earthquake. Something must be wrong with our genetic makeup to accept

some fatalities as more matter of fact than others. Just like human rights suppression in some countries is ignored but not in others. Social scientists may be able to tell if the digital age will bring out the worst in mankind. Patience is in short supply as humanity is increasingly in quest of information and sensations at the cost of patience and wisdom. 'Me first' has inevitably led to 'my country first'. We don't hear of a shared future any more as the practitioners of zero sum games take charge. Win-win solutions are pushed aside as diplomacy is sent on forced leave. The year 2020 has witnessed a lot in its first quarter. A lot has yet to happen, with a succession saga opening in Saudi Arabia. The world is sadly used by now to the carnage in parts of the Middle East that has caused the greatest exodus of people after Afghanistan. The Afghan tragedy has assumed the status of banal with the exception of antics of various players to con the others. And the world's second most populous nation is going through a self-inflicted identity crisis just when it was being viewed as the next economic superpower. India has emerged instead as a colonizer of its own 'integral part'. This is the first case of a government taking its 'own' people hostage.

Please note that the premier of India tells whoever cares to listen that the Kashmir lockdown and Citizens Amendment Act, and the stigmatizing of 200 million people is just the beginning of his plan of action. Could the culmination of that approach be the elimination of those people? Imran Khan is straining his wits to call the world's attention but not having the desired effect.

Is humanity dying in India and large parts of the world? It took mass killings of Bosnian Muslims to shake the conscience of the big champions of human rights and act. It will take many years to bring the ringleaders before the International Criminal Court. Humanity's conscience is painfully slow if not dying.



## Pakistan in chains

GHAZI SALAHUDDIN

In a rather physical sense, the barriers have been set by the coronavirus emergency. Like in so many other countries of the world, our freedom of movement is drastically restricted. Our social life is aborted. We breathe an environment of anxiety and gloom. But metaphorically, the limits that are being imposed on our freedom of thought and expression are so much more disturbing. Besides, they are not time-bound. And on both fronts, darkness suddenly descended on the same day this week.

On Thursday, Editor-in-Chief of Jang-Geo Group Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman, was arrested in Lahore by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) on a 34-year-old property matter. The message this delivers is loud and clear. In fact, it creates a new precedent in the recent history of the suppression of independent media, with the largest media group of the country bearing the brunt of it. As the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan put it in a tweet: "There remains a strong suspicion that such actions by NAB are selective, arbitrary and politically motivated". Human Rights Watch noted that "the space for dissent in Pakistan is shrinking fast and anyone who criticises government actions can become a target". The point is that this arrest has prompted deep concerns, including at the global level, about media freedom in Pakistan.

As for the Covid-19 spectacle that has turned billions of lives upside down, our authorities were almost in denial until Thursday night. We were happily playing cricket, a national pastime that seems to camouflage our setbacks on numerous other fields. Huge crowds were cheering a PSL match at the National Stadium in Karachi, leaving the city in a traffic mess.

But that night, everything changed. I see this as an example of the paradigm shift, when ground realities that are for long ignored become critical all of a sudden. We have seen how everything has changed and we feel plugged into the global cycle of lockdowns and isolation and social distancing.

My younger daughter lives in Italy, in the region that was first put into a lockdown. On Tuesday,



watching the scene in Pakistan, she posted this tweet: "Looking at tweets as people react to the arrival of coronavirus in their countries, it's a textbook formula. It begins with jokes, memes, becomes fear and panic and then, as now in Italy, it's just deep sadness. 827 dead." I have many stories to tell about how Italy is living through its present life-changing predicament. They show the spirit of the people and their zest for life even in dire circumstances. There is a lot on social media. One example is how cities choose a time when all citizens open their windows and sing or play some music in unison. Voices and melodies meander through curfewed streets. When I called my daughter yesterday, she was having coffee with a friend, on a video link.

Now, this coronavirus will be with us for a number of weeks. But the suppression of the media is something that we will have to live with for a long time, unless there is a paradigm shift in our political affairs. Thoughts that have been triggered by Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman's arrest demand deep and serious examination. Here is an instructive intimation of how our rulers can ride roughshod over constitutional, legal and moral dictates that are integral to a democratic system. Look at this glaring contradiction. On March 7, the Islamabad High Court clarified that an accused should not be arrested by NAB at enquiry stage, if cooperating with the investigation. Mir Shakil was arrested on March 12.

In this context, we have other, very telling references to how the superior judges have looked at the two issues that have come together in the case of Mir Shakil's arrest. On the solemn occasion of the be-

ginning of the new judicial year in September last year, CJ Asif Saeed Khosa, respected for his erudition, talked about the media as well as the existing process of accountability. Let me briefly quote him. He said: "Voices being raised about muzzling of the print and electronic media and suppression of dissent are also disturbing". He added that a voice suppressed or an opinion curbed generates frustration. Frustration gives rise to discontent and increasing discontent poses a serious threat to democratic system itself. About accountability, Justice Khosa said: "We as a relevant organ of the state also feel that [the] growing perception that the process of accountability being pursued in this country at present is lopsided and part of political engineering is a dangerous perception and some remedial steps need to be taken urgently so that the process does not lose credibility".

It has been said and I have repeated it a number of times that this is positively the worst time for the media. That dark night of General Zia's martial law was not this oppressive. But I also regret that we do not have a fearless chronicler of these times. During Zia's era, we had Zamir Niazi whose book, 'The Press in Chains', is a landmark study of the suppression of the media since the creation of Pakistan. It was published in 1986.

The media scene has changed and is so much more complex because of its electronic and digital dynamics. When the media is in chains, can the society as such be unfettered in its social, political and economic development? This symbiotic relationship between the freedom of the media and the growth of a society is, sadly, not properly understood. One reason why Pakistan is lagging behind other South Asian countries in terms of the internationally recognized social indicators could be that the media is forever suppressed in this country. As a corollary, we do not have academic freedom on our campuses. It seems obvious that when ideas cannot be openly explored and a rational debate becomes very difficult, society does not remain very creative or innovating in meeting its challenges. It only means that when the media is in chains, the country too is in an intellectual lockdown. Who has the capacity to even think

## South Punjab province

RUSTAM SHAH MOHMAND

The creation of a new province will open the Pandora's Box, wrecking the federation and creating a crisis where there is none — something the PTI government is adept at doing. As if the formidable challenges the government confronts on a daily basis are not enough, in its naivety it has announced that a new province called South Punjab will be created by making a suitable amendment to the Constitution. No government in Pakistan has managed to create such huge frustration and despondency in the lives of millions of impoverished Pakistanis in such a short time. The mayhem that the country faces today, whether in the form of the ever-escalating prices, currency devaluation, closure of factories, rising unemployment, or relations with neighbouring countries being at an all-time low, are all attributable in large measure to the preposterous and wholly unrealistic policies that are being pursued by the current dispensation. Regardless of the motives, there is clearly an awful lack of vision, experience and competence.

The public anger at the worsening economic situation could have been handled with foresight and a pragmatic approach. The situation demanded a thoughtful and calculated policy steeped in objective reality. Instead, there was greater emphasis on rhetoric and hurling wild accusations against all former governments. In a bizarre move, the government has announced its intention to create a new province in South Punjab, with complete disregard to the spreading acrimony on account of the above stated problems. So what will the new province deliver to the people? Decentralisation or the devolution of power is an ongoing process that could be strengthened. The new province, which is not really rooted in the aspirations of the people, would mean more residences and offices, and more staff and ministers — all at the expense of development which will in turn take place at

the expense of the broader goal of socio-economic emancipation of the masses. Billions of rupees would go into creating new department buildings and tens of millions on their maintenance. This would inevitably incur a cost on the environment, the value of which would be difficult to assess. The creation of the South Punjab province will set the ball rolling for more provinces. The bill for the creation of the Hazara province has already been submitted to the Senate Secretariat and the demand for the province will now get a powerful boost. Fast on its heels, there would be a demand to declare Karachi as a separate province. The dying ethno-linguistic movements would also get a new lease on life. There would be a campaign for a separate Baloch province too. Similar demands would emanate from other parts of the country, like the Dera Ismail Khan division and the Tribal areas. For the next few years the energies and resources of the government and political parties would then be invested in confrontations over the creation of new provinces with critical nation building issues like quality education, healthcare, communications, industrialisation, climate change and agriculture taking a back seat. The debate for new provinces is likely to generate acute polarisation in the society and cause deep schism at all levels in national politics. It would promote more distrust and hostility and deliver very little. Precious resources would be squandered on unproductive schemes that will bear no value to the common man. Before the contagion spreads it needs to be stopped. If not, the politicians will soon find a new favourite topic to raise alarm over, and by so doing attract attention.

Can the country afford such futile ventures at such a great cost to the exchequer when resources are shrinking and the population is fast expanding?

The PTI government needs to put its house in order and save the federation from fragmentation otherwise it will be easy to wreck the federation if this madness continues.

# Letters to the Editor

### Corporal Punishment in Schools

It is a well-established fact that teachers are the decorators of the future of their students. However, corporal punishment against the students is likely a blemish on the glory of teachers. Students are disturbed not only physically but also mentally by these erroneous actions. In the war for grades, students are socially isolated. Students, despite being called the bright future of the nation, are being treated like animals. Actually punishment is prohibited, but still this practice is going on. Many students are depressed immensely due to their studies and many students quit school, while many commit suicide. In like manner, parents are worried about their children's protection. Yet no actions have been taken to resolve this catastrophe. That's why I request the relevant authorities to institute a strong law against this criminal practice as soon as possible.

Asif Murad Umrani  
KARACHI

### Progressive Punjab

Has Punjab really set sail towards progress and development? Different people have different opinions. Some people are of the opinion that the PTI led government has failed to provide any kind of relief to the masses while there are others who certainly believe that the government has taken many initiatives which are really meant for the welfare and wellbeing of people of the province. There is always an objective reality out there, but unfortunately we view it through the spectacles of our misbeliefs, stigmatic attitudes and self-asserted values. If we take such spectacles off then we might be able to understand what reality is! Some recent developments in different sectors have shown that Punjab is certainly heading towards progress and development. By realising the need to adopt a few measures and introduce some special initiatives, the Punjab government has really shown a very serious attitude in ensuring the betterment of its people. To provide lodging facilities to the poor, needy, and homeless citizens the government has established "Shelter Homes". To facilitate the citizens and help protect Police records and provide secure ac-

cess to the Police Station Record Management System, the government has set up "Mobile Police Khidmat Marakaz". To provide affordable housing facility to the low-income segments of the country, the government has started "Naya Pakistan Housing Program". Likewise, the government has launched "Punjab Ehsas Program" to provide necessary socio-economic protection to the disenfranchised sections of society. The government has launched "Sehat Insaf Cards" (health cards) to provide medical facilities to under-privileged people in a swift and dignified manner. Similarly, the government has launched "Smart Card for Registration of Vehicles", abolishing the traditional registration books. Moreover, the government has taken many initiatives to empower women and eliminate different forms of discrimination and violence against them in all its manifestations. To enhance the role of social partners in improving the condition of workers, the government has launched a new labour policy "Punjab Labour Policy 2018". The list goes on.

The credit for all this certainly goes to the political leadership of the province i.e. Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar who is firm, resolute, and relentless in his efforts to uplift the lives of people of the province. All this sheds light on the

fact that Punjab is on the way to progress and development and if it succeeds in its progressive mission, the future may bring many benefits to the millions of impoverished and poverty-stricken Pakistanis living in the province.

Syed Ali Qasim  
LAHORE

### Covid-19

Evidence shows that the principal means of an exponential increase in infected cases of Novel Corona Virus, is community transmission. That is why the federal government has correctly closed down educational institutions and restricted public gatherings. But the Punjab Provincial Government absurdly requires all public Universities staff to report for duty because of the rules regarding paid leave. Why should University staff be subjected to the risk of exposure to this deadly Virus? Are we not human beings? Moreover if University staff contract the disease the provincial government will be responsible for actually defeating the federal government's attempt to contain the spread. Will the provincial government please apply their minds? The country is facing an unprecedented national emer-

gency and they are following arcane rules that are counterproductive in the current situation.

Dr. Akmal Hussain  
LAHORE

### The Doctors' Farce

Recently I took one of the members of my family to the Civil Hospital Turbat in order to test his blood, but we got a lamentable response from the doctor. He told us that they could not test his blood there because a satisfactory result could not be obtained in Civil Hospital Turbat. Further, he told us he would sit in a private hospital at night were we should come for blood testing. In Turbat the doctors are just passing their time in the hospital and the patients are in grave trouble. How can an underprivileged person afford to visit private hospitals for his treatment? Therefore I would like to request the concerned authorities as well as the government of Balochistan to please facilitate our government hospitals and regulate our doctors.

Mohammad Jaan Qadir  
BOLAN