

The Business

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Ram mandir

The announcement made recently that the construction of the Ram mandir in Ayodhya — upon the ruins of the Babri Masjid — will begin within six months serves as just another troubling sign that India's transformation into a Hindu rashtra is nearly complete. Rather than a purely religious edifice, the temple would be a victory monument for the Sangh Parivar, announcing the triumph of extremist Hindu thought over what remains of Indian secularism. The representatives of a Hindu religious trust made the announcement; the Indian supreme court had ruled last year that the temple would be built on what is believed by Hindus to be Ram Janmabhoomi — the birthplace of Ram. But far from religious matters, the drive to build the temple, and before it to demolish the Babri Masjid, is part and parcel of the ruling Baratiya Janata Party's (BJP's) ideological make-up. After all, the party's stalwarts were at the forefront of the movement of Hindu zealots that culminated in the demolition of the mosque in 1992, marking the beginning of the end of Indian secularism, and the bloody, violent arrival of Hindutva on India's national stage.

The Pakistan Foreign Office has criticised the decision, observing that the move is part of a pattern in which "Muslims in India are being marginalised, dispossessed, demonised and subjected to senseless violence". Indeed, the monster of Hindutva has emerged from the rubble of the Babri mosque and spread its tentacles across India, smothering minorities, particularly Muslims, and recreating the country in the image of the Sangh Parivar. Whether it is cow vigilantes lynching Muslims on suspicions of eating beef, the shock troops of Hindutva terrorising Muslim men, women and children, or the Indian state introducing discriminatory legislation designed to disenfranchise the Muslim population, all indications are that hatred and majoritarian arrogance have now been mainstreamed in India. The ideologues of the Sangh have never accepted Pakistan and constantly seek to provoke this country, while internally they are meting out treatment to Indian Muslims not too different to what the fascists of Europe did to Jews in the 20th century. Rather they are doing not less than the Jews as far as their constitutional rights are concerned. They should at least given their birth rights as a minority community. There is great horror and revulsion over Nazi crimes — and rightly so. But though the Hindutva brigade is seeking to replicate what their ideological twins did in Europe during World War II, the world is mostly quiet, courting the 'world's largest democracy' that looks the other

A series of blunders

MOHAMMAD ZUBAIR

After seeing it almost two years in power, we still don't know why the PTI has not delivered anything at the federal or provincial levels.

To be fair, the PTI leadership does accept its failures. There is no new project that has come up in the last two years or any project that was initiated in the last two years and which is near completion.

Except for the current account deficit, there is no other macro indicator which has shown any improvement (the improvement in the current account deficit is another story for some other time). In fact, all economic indicators have seriously worsened in the last two years. In simple terms, Pakistanis are much worse off today than they were in mid-2018, with nothing to hope in terms of improvement in the remaining period of the five-year term.

What is remarkable is the current government's ability to provide multiple reasons for every failure.

The reasons can include any of the following: things were in a mess all these years due to the PPP and the PML-N (never due to other governments that ruled several decades); the presence of mafias and cartels that are so strongly entrenched that the poor government is helpless; the elites who can get anything done including the very recent lockdown in the country; the bureaucracy which is simply not ready to support the Tabdeeli government; the media which has been conspiring against the PTI government since the first day and which is only reporting bad news; the courts which hin-



der the initiatives of the government; the opposition which is simply bent upon sabotaging the good work' the 18th Amendment & 7th NFC award which has weakened the federal government; and most importantly the people who are indisciplined, incompetent, uneducated and have no patience. But for these reasons, the PTI government would have performed miracles.

The ruling party leadership has become an expert in telling why they could not deliver, why expectations have not been met, why even one house out of the 50 lakh houses have not yet been delivered, and why no jobs out of the one crore promised have been given. Several questions are being raised. Why are there more unemployed people today than they were back in August 2018 (the unemployment rate having gone up from 5.79 percent in June 2018 to 8.56 percent now and expected to go up to 9.8 percent by next year).

Why are there more people below the poverty line than they were when the PTI came to power (at least one crore people going below the poverty line between August 2018 and March 2020).

Why has the growth rate plummeted from 5.8 percent to 1.9 percent within the first year and which by the end of the second fiscal year will go into a negative zone? Why has large-scale manufacturing remained negative since August 2018 after a positive growth of 6 percent plus in the preceding year?

Why has inflation, which remained at low levels during the five years of PML-N rule, gone into double digits? Why could exports not increase in the past two years despite massive devaluation? Why couldn't tax revenue increase in two years after significant growth during 2013-2018 (doubling in five years)? Why have the losses and liabilities of state-owned corporations significantly increased over the last two years and why has circular debt increased from Rs1.1 trillion to around Rs2 trillion within two years and why has public debt increased by more than Rs12 trillion in two years compared to Rs10 trillion accumulated during the five years before this? What happened to the debt commission report set up in June last year? There are several more questions.

Let's come to the bigger projects. Nothing can be more embarrassing for the current government than the famous BRT Peshawar project. The ADB has raised serious issues of incompetence, mismanagement and possible corruption, yet the PM and his team remain unmoved by the criticism. The Peshawar High Court raised serious concerns on these issues and directed the FIA to complete an inquiry within 45 days.

Rather than ensuring completion and resolving those serious concerns, the government instead went to the

Supreme Court to obtain a stay.

The project has been stalled but the government would not answer the basic question of why it could not complete a simple project all these years despite the unprecedented cost increase, and exceeding the combined costs of the three metro projects completed in record time during the PML-N tenure (Lahore, Multan, Islamabad-Rawalpindi).

On state-owned institutions, the PTI had a clear policy which it had announced much before the elections and repeated even after coming into power. The plan was to set up a new company called Sarmaya Pakistan. All state enterprises were to be taken out from the control of the ministries and put under direct control of Sarmaya Pakistan which was then supposed to restructure these entities. Restructuring rather than privatisation was supposed to be the strategy under the new government.

Can we now know, after two years, what happened to Sarmaya Pakistan and why the project was shelved in favour of the privatisation of these entities? Why couldn't the new board and new management of Pakistan Steel be appointed even after almost two years and why does the mill remain non-functional even to this day?

There are no answers to the above questions. It's been a series of mass scale blunders. Their overconfidence, lack of preparedness, lack of good quality team did them in. Looking down on opponents, as well as arrogance and hubris is a deadly cocktail.

There is still time for course correction but for that they need to finally accept their own failures and stop blaming others.



Hard times

KHALID BHATTI

One report after the other on the world economy is indicating that we are heading towards a serious economic crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely impacted the production, trade and services sectors globally. Many sectors of the global economy will take years to fully recover. The recovery from this deepest recession will be slow and painful. We need to prepare for hard times ahead.

The World Bank in its latest forecast for the world economy, 'Global Economic Prospects', has projected that global economic activity will shrink by 5.2 percent this year. The World Bank has said that "the world is facing an unprecedented health and economic crisis that has spread with astonishing speed and will result in the largest shock the global economy has witnessed in more than seven decades. Millions of people are expected to be pushed into extreme poverty."

It will be the sharpest contraction in the world economy since 1945-46 when the global contraction was 13.8 percent. It will also be the fourth worst global downturn over the past 150 years in the capitalist economy. Only the Great Depression of 1929 and two periods soon after World War I (1919-1921) and World War II (1945-46) experienced a sharper decline in global capitalist economy.

The report says that economic activity in advanced economies is anticipated to contract 7 percent in 2020 as domestic demand and supply, trade, and finance have been severely disrupted. For the US, the updated World Bank forecast is for GDP to fall 7 percent this year, before growing 3.9 percent in 2021. That estimate is similar to top forecasters for the National Association for Business Economics who forecast a 5.9 percent drop in for the US this year. The US Federal Reserve is projecting the economy to shrink 6.5 percent in 2020 and the unemployment rate to be 9.3 percent by year end. For China, the world's second largest economy, the World Bank forecast growth will slow this year to a barely discernible one percent but rebound to 6.9 percent in 2021.

For the 19 European countries that form the Euro Zone, the World Bank projected a drop of 9.1 percent this year, followed by growth of 4 percent next year. This sharp economic decline will have a devastating impact on the incomes of working people. The World Bank report has pointed out that the per capita income of most countries is going to contract in the largest fraction since 1870.

The per capita incomes of more than 90 percent of emerging markets and developing countries are expected to fall. "For all countries, the drop in per capita incomes is expected to average 6.2 percent, much larger than the 2.9 percent fall during the 2009 financial recession." The huge decline in incomes means more poverty and misery for poor and working people. So

it is not surprising that the World Bank report expects between 70 million and 100 million people to fall into extreme poverty. More people will fall below the poverty line as a result of rising unemployment and sharp decline in incomes.

Let's take India as an example. A latest study - 'How Are Indian Households Coping under the Covid-19 Lockdown? 8 Key Findings', carried out by experts at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Chicago and the Mumbai-based Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE) - has pointed out that nearly 84 percent of Indian households are seeing decreases in income since the lockdown began. Nearly a third of all households will not be able to survive beyond a week without additional assistance. The study found a "sharp and broad negative impact on household income" as the pandemic diminished their staying capacity, adding that the unemployment rate in the country had crossed 27 percent in early May, up nearly four-fold from levels in January-February.

The poor and the most vulnerable sections of the population are going to bear the brunt of this crisis. They will need assistance from governments to see off the hard times. Demands for unemployed benefits including unemployment allowance will increase as young people will find it difficult to get jobs. But we have a problem here. As the World Bank report pointed out, the pandemic has laid bare the weaknesses of national health-care and social safety nets in many countries. It is necessary to put in place social benefit systems that can provide an effective, flexible, and efficient safety net during disasters.

It is good to see that the World Bank recognises the need of a social security net and strong public healthcare systems. In the past, the same World Bank and IMF imposed policies of austerity under the neoliberal economic agenda. That forced governments in developing countries to undergo the structural programmes. The role of governments and states was reduced in the running of the economy. The neoliberal onslaught of the last four decades on welfare state, social programs, public health and education and unemployed benefits has taken away most of the social benefits and welfare programmes.

"The health and human toll grows; the economic damage is already evident and represents the largest economic shock the world has experienced in decades. For emerging markets and developing countries, many of which face daunting vulnerabilities, it is critical to strengthen public health systems, address the challenges posed by informality, and implement reforms that will support strong and sustainable growth once the health crisis abates." It is time to rethink our economic policies and direction. Neoliberalism is not the way forward. This time try something else. Democratic Socialism might be an option. Let's try

Uprooting racism

ROBERT C KOEHLER

"This was not an attack on history. This is history. It is one of those rare historic moments whose arrival means things can never go back to how they were."

And the toppled statue of a 17th century slave trader, now at the bottom of Bristol Harbour, is suddenly more relevant than ever, as the cry for compassionate social order - sparked by the murder of George Floyd - begins to engulf the whole planet. Perhaps... oh, let us hope... we are at the point of real change, a shift in the collective consciousness that holds our social systems together. This is the rebirth and continuation of the civil rights movement and may be the most serious undoing of racist normal that I've seen in my lifetime.

Not only have the protests against police violence gone global, but they have cut deep into Western history: into its racism and colonialism, which, until now, have remained quietly unquestioned and entrenched



in our institutional "normal." A movement has begun to rethink the nature of public safety and, indeed, to rethink who we are. For instance, a majority of Minneapolis city council members recently pledged to disband - and re-envision - the city's police force: to "end policing as we know it," as council president Lisa Bender put it, "and to recreate systems of public safety that actually keep us safe." This is the rebirth and continuation of the civil rights movement and may be the most serious undoing of racist normal that I've seen in my lifetime. And, as I say, protests and rallies have gone

global, emerging across Europe, in Canada, Australia, Japan, Zimbabwe, Kenya. Could it be, despite endless political declarations to the contrary, that this is one planet?

Could it be that we can uproot our history and start over?

I'd never heard of Edward Colston and knew virtually nothing about the English city of Bristol. But when I read about the toppling of his statue, I realized this movement was not only wide but deep.

A statue of Colston had stood in the center of Bristol since 1895. Hardly surprising.

This rich, benevolent merchant had endowed schools, churches and hospitals in Bristol with his wealth, giving generations of city fathers reason to honor him and ignore an awkward reality: Colston was the deputy governor of the Royal African Company, the largest slave trader of his day. Slave-trading was the source of Colston's wealth. Historian David Olusoga, who is quoted at the beginning of the column, writes that Colston "helped to oversee the transportation into slav-

ery of an estimated 84,000 Africans. Of them, it is believed, around 19,000 died in the stagnant bellies of the company's slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage from the coast of Africa to the plantations of the new world. The bodies of the dead were cast into the water where they were devoured by the sharks that, over the centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, learned to seek out slave ships and follow the bloody paths of slave routes across the ocean. This is the man who, for 125 years, has been honoured by Bristol. Put literally on a pedestal in the very heart of the city. But tonight Edward Colston sleeps with the fishes." Turns out the Colston statue had long been controversial. More than 10,000 people had signed a petition demanding the city take it down, but of course this was ignored. So on June 7, in the midst of the global uprising against institutional racism, protesters did the job themselves.

Excerpted from: 'Globally Uprooting a Racist Past'. Courtesy: Commondreams.org

Letters to the Editor

Unequal solution

In response to the pandemic-triggered lockdown, the Higher Education Commission has started online classes for varsity students across the country. But students are protesting and demanding reduced fees and free internet access. The HEC has thus far ignored these concerns. On the other hand, most private institutions that charge higher fees have transitioned to online classes easily, unlike the underfunded public institutions. Many public university students come from poor families that have been financially damaged by the pandemic, many have lost their jobs and are unable to pay their children's fees, hence the student's demands. Students from big cities can attend class easily and have ready internet access, unlike their rural counterparts. The latter often have poor con-

nections or no internet at all. No doubt, the HEC should be praised for its initiative, enabling many to continue their education despite the crisis. However, the HEC cannot ignore the differences in educational infrastructure across the country. It must provide internet access to all students and then start online classes. Many students cannot afford fees in this pandemic and their demands for a reduction should be accepted considering the circumstances.

Shamin Humayun
JAMSHORO

Oil deficit

Anyone could have guessed that as the lockdown is lifted there would be a sudden surge in petrol consumption. While traveling on the Islamabad -Lahore Motorway I was literally

stranded, pleading with pump managers for petrol. While there is a shortage in major cities across the country, the situation is even more precarious in smaller cities and towns.

As usual, nobody will be held responsible for this fiasco and poor citizens will face the situation alone. There were scores of people on the motorway desperate for a few litres of petrol so that they could make it to their respective destinations. Despite the surging infection rate, I could see dozens of people in the queue with no masks yelling at the pump.

It is astonishing that in an era of historically low global oil prices, Pakistan is somehow facing a shortage. I would request our leaders to have mercy since we are already reeling from the spike in Covid-19 cases.

Sheikh Taimur Nawaz
ISLAMABAD