

The Business

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Toshakhana reference

The word 'Toshakhana' has been all over the news cycle lately, because of all the references filed against our former leaders for misusing it. It turns out that Toshakhana is an official department under the administrative control of the Cabinet Division, which was established in 1974, to store precious gifts given to our rulers, parliamentarians, bureaucrats and other government officials by other heads of governments, foreign dignitaries, etc., whether as goodwill gestures or simple routine matters on official tours.

The rationale is that for all the good our leaders have done and the country whatever gifts others give them is because of the positions they hold, which is why they must be duly submitted with the department. Furthermore, the State of Pakistan too offers gifts to foreign leaders and officials in reciprocation and those gifts are paid for by the exchequer. The Toshakhana (Maintenance and Administration) Rules 1974, which were revised up to 2012, apply to the president, prime minister, Senate chairman and deputy chairman, National Assembly speaker and deputy speaker, federal ministers, ministers of state, members of parliament, government servants and employees of autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies. The rules stipulate that all official gifts be deposited in the Toshakhana, officials are also allowed to keep some of them provided they pay a certain percentage of the price as assessed by the official valuation committee.

That is all very good and there seems nothing wrong with letting officials keep the gifts they receive once they pay a part of their estimated value. But since the references of alleged misuse of Toshakhana against former president Asif Zardari, and former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Yousaf Raza Gilani have been under trial, this department has attracted a lot of attention, new stories are coming out about how it is regularly misused by the same officials that are required to observe its rules very strictly. And it is not very surprising that people in powerful positions have been getting the department to come up with the kind of valuations that are not based on market prices so they would have to pay only a fraction of the value to keep very valuable gifts.

Ideally, government servants and elected officials should not be allowed to keep the gifts they receive, since it is the position they hold and not their persona that is the recipient of the gift. Therefore, the practice to allow gift recipients to buy the gifts should be done away with. Instead, the high value gift items should be entrusted in the care of the national museum for display at its own premises or in official dwellings such as presidency and prime minister's house. While those gifts that cannot be displayed these should be auctioned without disclosing the identities of the recipient or the presenter of the gift. Bullet proof vehicles should be given to the foreign office or the cabinet division's car pools.

Letters to the Editor

Increasing medicine prices

The federal government has decided to allow pharmaceutical companies to increase prices of 94 lifesaving medicines in order to end the chronic shortage of these drugs in the market. To address long-term shortage of some key or life saving medicines, the federal cabinet has allowed rationalizing prices of drugs that had been reported to be in short supply due to unrealistically low prices," said Special Assistant to Prime Minister on National Health Services Dr Faisal Sultan

He said the drugs whose prices have been allowed to increase include medicines such as furosemide injections for emergency use in high blood pressure; acetazolamide tablets for glaucoma; hydralazine tablets for lowering blood pressure and carbamazepine tablets and suspension for epilepsy.

Atropine sulphate injection used in emergencies; magnesium sulphate used to treat seizures due to preeclampsia during pregnancy; hydroxyurea, daunorubicin, bleomycin — all used in the treatment of cancer; nitroglycerin and glyceryl trinitrate used as emergency heart medicines and anti-rabies vaccine are also among the medicines.

Muhammad Naeem
 KARACHI

Need to address Islamophobia

PM Imran Khan in the 74th UNGA session expresses concern on the fact that the scourge of Islamophobia is growing and Muslims around the world are targeted in various parts of the world. As the poignant conditions of Muslims under the BJP-led RSS inspired Modi government is nit new before the eyes of the international community, Islamophobic sentiment is brewing in the Western world that is fuelled by increased immigration and a violent response against the Islamist militant outfits in the Western soil.

While we all know that in India's case, the anti-Muslim policies are promoted by the state, the hatred for the Muslims in the West is stirred by the most atrocious and vicious activities perpetuated by militant groups in the name of Islam. Therefore, the brutality carried out by Al-Qaeda, ISIS and terrorist organizations in the name of religion leading them to penetrate within the grassroots of international order have adversely affected the way non-Muslims in the West perceive Islam. Such distorted perception about Islam feeds toxic narrative of extreme right in Europe, US and other parts of the Western world. As a result, all Muslims are considered violent and aggressive and are tarred with the same brush.

Such communication channel will eradicate all misconceptions that the violent lot who justify atrocities in the name of Islam do not represent the majority of the Muslims.

Hadia Mukhtar
 LAHORE

Abdullah Abdullah the harbinger for peace?

IKRAM SEHGAL

The total military expenditure in Afghanistan since the war began in 2001 is \$822bn, this includes the US Department of Defense, State Department, USAID and other government agencies.

The real costs might be much higher. The considerable human cost includes 2,300 US soldiers killed and 20,660 wounded, not counting those traumatised who cannot find their place in society again. According to Ghani since he became President in 2014 more than 45,000 members of the Afghan security forces and over 100,000 civilians have been killed, not counting the casualties of the Taliban.

After Daud Shah toppled his cousin King Zahir Shah and declared himself the first President of the Afghan Republic in 1973, relations with Pakistan became tense. To counter with this emerging threat on its western borders Pakistani President Z A Bhutto tasked Commander IGFC Brig (later Maj Gen) N K Babar. A number of Afghan students were given training by one of my childhood friends Maj (later Lt Col) Salman Ahmad of SSG in two camps in Pakistan in 1974, among them Ahmad Shah Masood. Alongwith Salman in the Kandahar region during the Afghan war was Sher Muhammad Abbas Stanikzai, now the Taliban's political leader heading their delegation in the peace talks in Doha.

Trained in the Indian Military Academy, he was commissioned in the Afghan Army. Joining the Mujahidin during the 80s he was in their Military Committee set up by Salman (codename "Col Faizan"). More than any other Pakistani serviceman in our history Salman has fought multiple times more battles for Pakistan in East Pakistan in 1971 and during the entire Afghan war against the Soviets. Hesaing among all the Afghans Stanikzai accompanied him most in military operations against the Soviets. Incidentally Salman took Sandy Gall making his famous BBC documentary, "Allah Against the Gunships".

The peace between the Taliban and the US signals a rigorous withdrawal of US forces from Afghan soil in line with President Trump's policy of 'America first'. Not happy with the situation the US military would like to keep a foot in the Afghan door by leaving behind some troops. A distant dream for many years, peace is now within reach.

In February 2020 the US reached a pragmatic agreement with the Taliban, while also signing a declaration with the government of Afghanistan to start an intra-Afghan peace process. Notwithstanding the structure of the peace agreement and its faultlines, without the help of Pakistan as a go-between this agreement would not have been

reached. With its own stake in the civil war in Afghanistan Pakistan had also learned its lesson. Pakistani politicians and military professionals have been putting their money and effort on the Pashtun horse in the race for changing the power balance has cost our country dearly.

A flood of Afghan refugees created economic turmoil that has adversely affected our growth rate and other economic indicators. In addition, the militarization of our society fed by stolen US weaponry meant for Afghanistan took a new turn.

Flourishing in Pakistani seminaries, "Jihadism" financed with external funds resulted in the rise of a Pakistani Taliban force as an off-spring of the Afghan movement. Instead of recognizing the danger that was brewing in the underdeveloped and unruly tribal areas Pakistani military and intelligence put their trust and money in the Pashtun component of the Taliban movement, thus alienating the Tajik and Uzbek elements of Afghan society.

To add to this a cruel and selfish newcomer Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was sent into the war in the 1990s by Pakistani intelligence. Basically a Karuti from Pakatia Province, Hekmatyar alienated Ahmad Shah Masood and others, at various times fighting both against and aligning himself with almost every other group in Afghanistan. He ordered frequent attacks on other rival factions to weaken them in order to improve his own position in the post-Soviet power vacuum. His interecine rivalry led to his arranging the arrest of Ahmad Shah Masood in Pakistan in 1976 on so-called spying charges. Masood and Hekmatyar ronce agreed to stage a takeover operation in the Panjshir valley-Hekmatyar at the last minute refused to engage his part of the offensive, leaving Masood open and vulnerable. Masood's forces barely escaped with their lives.

India is not the friend Afghans would like to believe, Afghanistan only used them as a means to an end, a convenient platform for conducting a proxy war at someone else's expense, first at Soviet Union's cost and then the US, with Afghanistan taking the brunt of the death and destruction that ensued. Afghans cannot seem to perceive the ruling BJP's hatred of Muslims in India, incidentally most of whose ancestors came from Afghanistan.

The Pashtun-Tajik problem started in 1929 when Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik leader who was a kingmaker and the power behind the Afghan throne whose advice was binding on the king, overthrew King Amanullah Khan because he would not scale back his reforms opening the Afghan society to western norms. Because of differences with Amanullah Khan, the

long time C-in-C Nadir Shah headearlier gone into exile. From the border areas, now mostly comprising Pakistan, Nadir Shah created a Mehsud and Waziri tribal lashkar and defeated Habibullah Kalakani's forces. He then executed Kalakani and many members of his family by firing squad. Unfortunately the lashkar then went on a rampage north of Kabul in the Tajik area, pillaging and looting, they committed many atrocities. The bloodfeud has lasted nearly a 100 years. It is time to heal the wounds of the past. With a mixed parentage of a Pashtun father and Tajik mother, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah is best equipped to do this.

Our unwise policy in Afghanistan during the 1990s allowing the US to use our ports, roads, air bases and other amenities added to our human and economic cost and alienated the Taliban also within Pakistan. Pakistan is still having to bear the residuals of this failed policy. Nevertheless, Pakistan's remaining influence was still enough to help bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. Just a week ago after another period of harsh negotiations, the peace talks between the Taliban and the Ghani government, there are severe doubts if the two sides can agree on anything — that much was immediately clear during the very first meeting.

The severe attacks of Taliban groups at Afghan soldiers and security personnel only displays the continuing rift between the two. An additional difficulty is the fact that the anti-Taliban side is divided in itself. Both the first and the second presidential election — both severely marred — brought a close run for power between Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. While Ashraf Ghani returned to Afghanistan after 24 years in December 2001 after leaving his posts at the UN and World Bank to join the new Afghan government as the chief advisor to President Hamid Karzai on 1 February 2002. Abdullah Abdullah was a senior member of the Northern Alliance working as a close adviser to Ahmad Shah Masood before 2001.

After serving as the Foreign Minister for nearly five years he stood against President Karzai and Ashraf Ghani even twice (last time in 2019) and every time came second according to the official counting. Based on the doubts that the handling of the election and the vote counting were manipulated he rejected the official results and got himself sworn in as separate president.

During the "Afghanistan Re-Connected" dialogue series organised during the 2007-2012 period by the prestigious US think tank East West Institute (EWI), I was designated as the EWI Director for Brussels and Berlin. I was privileged to have long conversations with both Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. Both have tremendous

grasp of both domestic and international issues, while Ghani tends to be abrasive at times Dr Abdullah was always more cool, suave and accommodating. On a flight back from Berlin to Dubai, Dr Abdullah was by coincidence sitting next to me. When asked why he did not constructively engage with Pakistan, his reply stunned me, "Even if we want to, will Pakistan talk to us?" When I approached the powers-that-be in Pakistan about Dr Abdullah Abdullah being far more pragmatic than other Afghans but seeming to have a genuine grievance with Pakistan that needed assuaging, I was given a "shut up" call!

In the aftermath of the first several controversial days of peace negotiations Dr. Abdullah Abdullah is now visiting Pakistan. As a young doctor he served briefly in Pakistan in 1985-86. This belated visit gives us unique opportunity to rethink and perhaps rectify our former Afghan policy. Pakistan needs a peaceful Afghanistan, they are our neighbours and this fact won't change at any time in future. As the connecting link to Central Asia and Russia, Afghanistan plays an important role in the water and energy policy of the region and without peace no progress in those domains is possible. CPEC (and its extension to Iran) makes Afghanistan a vital link to Central Asia. Most of the 2 million or so Afghans would go back home if there was peace and a chance for a better life, this would certainly ease our economic burden.

The peace between the Taliban and the US signals a rigorous withdrawal of US forces from Afghan soil in line with President Trump's policy of 'America first'. Not happy with the situation the US military would like to keep a foot in the Afghan door by leaving behind some troops. In the aftermath of US withdrawal, fighting might still go on. We cannot afford the existing govt structure in Afghanistan to collapse and return to a vacuum in governance, so a fair-sized contingent of US troops must remain for some time. Ashraf Ghani serves the US better than Abdullah Abdullah and that is why the vote counting came out in his favour.

However Abdullah Abdullah is more a 'son of the soil' than Ghani, who sooner or later will return to the US. It would also suit Afghanistan and the region if it had a rather independent government. In a growingly interconnected world the present peace process, with India attempting to sabotage it by all means possible, is not only in the interest of all the countries of the region but is certainly justified in our interest.

The Foreign Office (and more so the ISI) must be applauded for arranging this extremely important and tremendous breakthrough. As the possible harbinger for peace, welcome to Pakistan

Khan wants to have Shehbaz arrested-Aurangzeb



PTI and PML-N vs inertia

MOSHARRAF ZAIDI

The PML-N is, above all, a political party seeking to win power. Its leaders clearly believe that the best way to win power is to promise the people of Pakistan a more normal democratic system in which elected leaders have total control over foreign policy, resource allocation and most crucially national security. This is an awfully seductive pitch. What sentient Pakistani would not want the country to not need an asterisk next to it? "Is it a democracy? Yes, but..." But is this a promise that can actually be delivered?

Of course, the PTI is no stranger to fantasy-fiction as its primary pitch to the Pakistani people. This is a party that has shamelessly married the word 'justice' to the notion of corruption. A party with leaders like Jahangir 'I'll Be Back' Tareen, with a revolving door for special interests to enter and exit the Prime Minister's office, and cabinet members widely despised within the PTI itself for their reputations for ill-gotten wealth, who keep getting newer and better cabinet assignments.

The PTI faithful, much like their Noone cousins, have trouble believing that anyone could believe anything but the holy truth as professed by Bani Galaists around the country. Pakistan is nowhere near about to be rid of corruption. Yet PM Khan continues to pretend that his government is an anti-corruption juggernaut. If civil-military equilibrium is unachievable, and rooting out corruption is unachievable, then why do the two most iconic national leaders in Pakistan continue pretending to be committed to them? Are they lying to us? Many powerful forces in Pakistan would like nothing better than to let this question hang in the air unresolved. The continued pregnancy of the political discourse with the question of integrity is a central plank for the sustenance of extra-constitutional power. Of course, this is a question for a different time.

For now, it is more urgent that we realise that the question of politicians' integrity is external (or at best incidental) to the effectiveness of the politicians' programme. In short, what matters is not whether Nawaz Sharif or Imran Khan really mean what they say when they make all the promises that they keep making. What matters is

whether they can get things done. Even the relatively little things.

You see, much as the Sharifistas and the Imranists would like us to believe that they represent polar opposites of each other, they actually don't. They are a lot more alike than they aren't. Both are broadly centre-right parties, with leaders from Lahore, and drawing on support from the urban centres across the country. One area of similarity that they share (along with the PPP, and with the Musharraf regime of 1999-2008) is also the least explored. It is this area of common ground that is at the heart of the inevitability of the failure of their political programmes.

In short, whether the PML-N, or the PTI, or the PPP, or any other political or non political rulers of Pakistan, they all face the same core challenge. It is this challenge that prevents the PML-N from delivering on civil-military equilibrium and the PTI from delivering on anti-corruption. Until this fundamental and core challenge is tackled, the cat-and-mouse game between lofty promises and your favourite politician will continue to be played — to the detriment of the taxpayer, the voter, and the citizen at large.

What is the common core challenge? Simply put, it is the awesome, inescapable, relentless and dominant power enjoyed by the concept of inertia. Now, we all want heroes and villains. So, the more vigorous reader will obviously want to know: 'who is behind inertia in Pakistan?' And of course, the answer is: 'it depends'. But there is a general rule of thumb that can help fix the root of a problem like inertia. That general rule of thumb is to ask the question: 'who benefits from a given inertia?'

To understand this framework better, let's take the news this past week of PM Khan signing off on an economic diplomacy initiative called the Economic Outreach Apex Committee'. Modelled on the NCO framework, which has thus far also been applied to both the tourism challenge, and the Karachi challenge, this apex committee is supposed to solve the issue of coordination and coherence across various federal departments as well as the ostensible challenges to economic diplomacy caused by the provincial autonomy on some aspects relating to economic diplomacy. To assess whether this 'Economic Outreach Apex Committee' has a chance to