

The Business

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Afghan peace talks

United States Special Envoy for Afghan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, as expected, swung by Islamabad after visits to Kabul and Doha, where he met the Afghan government leaders and the Taliban, respectively. In Islamabad, Khalilzad met COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa, ISI chief Lt-Gen Faiz Hameed and other government officials. What little has emerged into public view after this round of shuttle diplomacy is the new proposed plan by the Biden administration to push the peace process forward. This plan entails a 90-day period of reduction in the violence that has continued to rage, if not incrementally increased, since the US-Taliban accord signed in Doha in February 2020, and national elections under a transitional Afghan government. In addition, Washington is launching an international and regional diplomatic effort to forge a consensus on the way forward to a negotiated peace. The reduction in violence, particularly by the Taliban, is expected to boost this diplomatic effort and pre-empt the traditional Taliban spring offensive. However, ever since the Doha accord, the Taliban have avoided attacking the US and NATO forces while pressing home their offensive against the Afghan government and its security forces irrespective of the season.

It must be said that the response of the parties to the conflict and important stakeholders says it all about the chances of success of the new initiative. The Taliban are said to be considering the plan, but reports of their rejecting outright fresh elections as western interference says all there is to say about the chances of the plan's success. The Afghan government, on the other hand, seems adamant that there will be no compromise on Afghanistan's constitution and the people's right to vote. Pakistan, perhaps because it has yet to digest the intricacies of the proposed plan, is meaningfully silent despite the US's desire for Islamabad to use its influence with the Taliban to get them to agree.

Pakistan, as a major stakeholder and supporter of the Taliban, feels compelled to play its role to facilitate the peace process since there may well have crept in a realisation that pushing the Pashtun Taliban card beyond a point could end up in a catastrophe in Afghanistan, with concomitant negative fallout for Pakistan itself. This catastrophe could, if it appears the Taliban are poised for victory and a total takeover, resurrect ethnic and sectarian fault lines that could conceivably tear Afghanistan apart. Islamabad therefore, in its own long-term interests, must follow up the positive role it has played in facilitating the Doha accord by bending its back to persuade the Taliban to find a modus vivendi with the Afghan government for a peaceful transition, lest the whole powder keg blow up in everyone's face.

Healthcare justice



DONNA SMITH

The Congressional Budget Office/CBO recently released its fiscal assessment of a single-payer, Medicare for All health system for the United States. There was no surprise to those who have advocated for the policy – single payer saves enormous sums of money while covering everyone (Feb 16, 2021, Journal

Health Affairs, Gaffney, Woolhandler and Himmelstein). Those worried about the cost and where the funding comes from aren't listening closely – if an item or even a system saves money, the money you need to pay for the system is obviously already available because you are paying the much higher price. This time, the CBO study and many others tell the clear story: we can get more for less. We don't need to find more money; we need to find more brain power to stop denying the reality. Medicare for All saves us all. Many of us have been calling for this policy change for quite a while. We've been educating people, and the American public gets it. What they don't quite understand enough yet, apparently, is that the profits being made by big insurance, big Pharma and the big

provider/hospital systems are being shared and passed along to our elected officials to ensure that Medicare for All does not happen and disrupt the flow of cash. We, the American people, must be strong enough for long enough to push our case yet again. Today we begin anew. From Sen Edward Kennedy to Rep. John Dingell and his father, to Rep Jim McDermott to Rep John Conyers to Sen Bernie Sanders and beyond, we will remember and honor the people who have called for health justice before now. We will build on that work and that courage. We will call. We will write. We will email. We will rally. We will hold vigils. We will do webinars. Leaving our children and grandchildren this mess of a system to protect them is a greedy, selfish decision.

Along with all other social justice issues, healthcare justice reaches into every section of our lives and our communities. Medicare for All is not socialized medicine. Don't buy that. Don't worry about the lies we'll hear all over again with rising intensity. Rise up, rise up. Stand tall and with the power of our shared commitment, let's teach more people to be active constituents who push their own Congressional members to co-sponsor the Medicare for All Act of 2021. It helps us care for the sick and heal the wounded. It builds to the next incredible step toward doing what I know many of us have been called to do. Love one another. That's it.

Excerpted: 'Rise and Shine: Medicare for All Saves Us All' Commdreams.org



Austerity measures

MUHAMMAD ZAHID RIFAT

Pakistan is a developing country where dire need for austerity measures in every sphere of national life cannot be over-emphasized ensuring every penny is spent and utilized for the specific purposes it is meant for.

Islamic teachings also tell us to shun lavish spending in public and private sectors and adopt adequate measures for ensuring austerity and simplicity.

Federal and provincial governments following presentation, discussion and approval of the federal and provincial budgets, issue a number of circulars for appropriate implementation of the budgetary measures.

These circulars are topped by circular enlisting austerity measures by all government functionaries for utilizing every penny placed at their disposal as a public trust avoiding its misuse and wasteful and avoidable utilization.

Over the years these austerity measures have continued to be enlisted in the circulars as an annual ritual. Once the austerity measures like circulars are issued, nobody bothers to see that these are strictly adopted and followed by all concerned down the lines also. This scribe has been seeing these austerity measures circulars from time to time as a professional journalist. Austerity measures normally are topped by prohibition of proceeding abroad for treatment at the government expense for such diseases and ailments for which adequate facilities and provisions are available within the country, no procurement of new official cars and other luxurious items. But these are only meant for being put in the official files concerned. Austerity measures circular issued following the Federal Budget for financial year 2020-21 is pretty short one. It bans purchase of new cars and motor cy-

cles for official use and also using paper both sides to ensure maximum usage official stationary.

But there are also no restrictions whatsoever on austerity measures being adopted additionally by anyone who is treading the corridor of powers at the national and provincial levels. One such instance which can easily be mentioned while talking about austerity measures is none else but that of PTI Chairman/Prime Minister Imran Khan who coming into power following free, fair and transparent general election in July 2018 had vowed to set an example of austerity in the utilization of public funds by the Prime Minister's House and the Prime Minister's Office.

The Prime Minister has ever since then is keeping his words as much strictly as possible, fulfilling his promise and ensuring the expenditure is reduced to the maximum extent possible regarding the Prime Minister's House and the Prime Minister's Office thus saving the precious public money and also setting the appreciable and praiseworthy example for all the government functionaries down the line to save the public money wherever possible.

The incumbent PM lives in his own bungalow and has no camp offices here, there or anywhere unlike the previous rulers and has taken measures to adopt austerity measures wherever possible so that the money thus saved is utilized for some purposeful purposes aiming at welfare and well-being of the masses at large. Before going any further this scribe would like to mention here briefly as to why this subject has been chosen to dilate upon ahead of the upcoming federal and provincial budgets presentation for the next financial year and seeking pardon from the readers for this pertinent deviation, very much essential and unavoidable though.

Pakistan had its first TV Channel in the public sector in 1964 which had

complete monopoly for more than three and half decades when the first TV channel in the private sector came into existence at the turn of the new century. Following scientific, technological and information technology developments, innovations and inventions and increasing demand for the electronic media, there has been virtually mushroom growth of TV Channels in the private sector during last about two decades. Electronic media, both in public and private sectors, is functioning round the clock at their programs and presentations can easily be broadly divided into dramas, entertainment, news, crime, violence, discussions and debates mostly about political developments and economic situations.

These discussions generally take place in the form of talk shows which are generally participated by political leaders from ruling and opposition parties, economic experts, businessmen and leaders from other concerned quarters by and large. And, in a recent talk show by a private sector channel, it was purposefully or unintentionally mentioned by the participants that the expenses of the PM Office had increased the allocated budgetary provisions during the last two financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20 in contradiction of the austerity measures.

Such presentation of facts and figures on the part of the participants without quoting the official facts and figures in a wrong manner just when every information can easily be handed from websites of the federal ministries and divisions and also by surfing internet facility available in every household. This had prompted this scribe to search for getting the actual facts and figures from the Finance Ministry sources and also searched the budget documents for the last two financial years as the information so poured out wrongly was not easily swallowed. Hence this article is based on the information

available with quarters concerned.

It may be mentioned here putting the actual position before the readers that as a matter of fact the expenditure of the PM Office had actually been reduced quite considerably as promised by the PM. As per budgetary provisions, expenditure relating to employees had increased slightly owing to the annual increments, which is basic right of every government functionary and cannot be denied, and operating expenses on the other had come down from Rs 218 million to Rs 46 million indicating a huge cut. Similarly, saving the readers from mention of budgetary facts and figures, expenditures under heads of Entertainment and Gifts, Miscellaneous Expenditure, Wages of Household Servant, Discretionary Grants and Prime Minister's Estate Garden Establishment had shown reduction in varying figures forcefully indicating that the Prime Minister is strictly adhering to his commitment and vision of austerity.

Facts and figures which this scribe got from official quarters just repudiate as incorrect data which was presented by the participants in the talk show as Prime Minister Imran Khan is sincerely and strictly keeping his words ensuring expenditure of PM Office are kept on the lower side possible and minimum burden is placed on the exchequer. In doing so continuously, the PM is not only keeping his word but also setting an example for all other political leaders as well as government functionaries to reduce avoidable, non-essential and wasteful expenditure without compromising on their working and performance. In conclusion, this scribe would like to request the participants of the TV Channels talk shows, irrespective of their political affiliation, to ensure they come fully prepared on the possible topics/subjects which are likely to be dilated upon in the discussion so as not to cut a sorry figure by putting forward wrong facts

The influencers' stunt

SANA MALIK

Social media plays a big part in our lives today. The last decade saw social media grow rapidly with 45% of the world's population actively using social media platforms, according to 2019 We Are Social report. A trend that has risen in the digital world is of influencers who are members of society that build a reputation for their knowledge on a specific topic by regularly posting about certain topics on their social media channels. This generates a large following of people who pay close attention to their views. The size of the following however, depends on the popularity of their niche. The form of influence can vary as no two influencers are the same and with the right engagement one can reach the correct target audience and build trust.

Social influencers have impacted our lives in ways we do not realise. Influencers have immense power to affect others and their decision-making because of their knowledge, position and/or relationship with their audience. The types of influencers can also be differentiated either by their content, level of influence or the niche in which they operate. Since, they often have a huge fan following, companies ask them to advertise their products or services.

Influencer marketing is a hybrid of old and new marketing tools where it takes the idea of celebrity endorsement while placing it into a modern-day content driven marketing campaign, the only major difference being that instead of celebrities, uses influencers. Influencer marketing has the ability to bring about change as nearly 34% of daily US Instagram users procure something because an influencer recommended it. From the marketer's perspective, in the US alone, 66% businesses increased their influencer marketing budgets in 2019.

However, despite its positive aspects of reaching large audiences

and directly connecting with them, creating original content and spreading awareness about global issues, there are downsides to social media with regard to what influencers are trying to inspire and whether it always has a constructive effect or not, remains questionable. Social media only shows the sides of people they want the world to see, which may just be conjured up to sustain weak egos.

We are continuously bombarded with ads and videos which impact us because they affect how we feel and how we want to be seen by others. Many are constantly on their phones exposing themselves to trends which influencers set for us. Influencers however, seem to be doing more harm than good by making consumers (us) increasingly image-obsessed and putting our mental state at risk as they use their power to make us to purchase something we may not need. They advertise clothing, makeup, shoes and health products that would help make us look and feel better about ourselves. The ads set standards for what is 'good' in our society — which is why influencers do more damage than good as we mould ourselves to live up to society's standards.

Moreover, many consumers of these posts, tweets and videos are individuals who are not as capable of discerning good from bad, right from wrong and true from false. Yet this very population makes up a majority of social media influencers or their followers, presenting us with a filtered reality that makes everything look better than it is. The fear of missing out prevails where one feels that everyone is living better lives. And influencers themselves can get addicted to a need for constant validation in the form of likes. Therefore, in a world where lives are designed, edited and publicly viewed, the boundaries between online and offline identities may get blurred and one should be mindful of an audience watching, identifying and persistently following one's behaviour.

Rejuvenation of the young nation

PARVEZ JAMIL

Year-after-year we commemorate "Pakistan Day" on March 23 with vim, vigour and vitality. For an even better celebration let us delve into the real essence, true spirit, and patriotic pledges of this memorable occasion pondering over the Reality Check on Pakistan Day. It was when a resolution was passed for the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims of Indo-Pak sub-continent for all its citizens to live with grace, dignity and honor irrespective of cast, color or creed.

Discover, validate and attribute on Pakistan Day how humble, less-heard and unsung journalists quietly, zealously and selflessly work behind the scenes in training, guiding and producing leading media celebrities, names and brands of Pakistan.

When academia, philanthropists, corporate leaders and professionals focus to harness the hidden wealth

of Pakistan in vocational trades of education, healthcare and environment through the spirit of self-help, trust, confidence building and sharing empowerment, it tantamount to a soulful pledge of a noble cause on "Pakistan Day". Positive thinking, caring and sharing is the spirit, essence and hallmark of Iqbal's dream-come-true reality of Pakistan amid Quaid's enlightening motto: "unity, faith, discipline". Imagine patriotic examples of students, whether of IoBM Society of Welfare and Trust initiating a quiet Sadqa-e-Jariya in the form of water pumps for all-time pure and clean water for Tharparkar, Sindh or passionate CSR-oriented activities at Bahauddin Zakaria University, Multan, Islamia University, Bahawalpur, Gomal University, D.I. Khan, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Peshawar University, Baluchistan University, Karachi University, Punjab University and private and public schools all over Pakistan! Indeed there is a ray of hope

for an enlightening future when our youth is so selflessly, altruistically and enthusiastically involved with the spirit of community service.

What remains of paramount significance and greater importance than feeding the poor, however, is inculcating the spirit of self-help, self-reliance and self-confidence in them.

That means enabling them to stand on their own feet through training in respectful, diversified, different and rewarding vocational trades for a better and brighter life:

For example, carpentry, masonry, plumbing, stitching, sewing, tailoring, polishing, washing, cleaning, drawing, denting, painting, decorating, designing, arts and crafts or handicrafts and a wide spectrum of trades in cottage industry including knitting, embroidery, weaving, bordering and so on.

It is all the more rejuvenating when both genders rise over ego and above self towards shared empowerment through mutual trust, respect and rewards for

a better quality of life. Shunning single gender empowerment (50 percent) and sharing double gender empowerment (100 percent) for the better is a question of corporate and social best practices. It is a matter of gender mutual trust and confidence towards gross benefits for family and society leading to Gross National Happiness strengthening our socio-economic conditions and giving us a respectable place in the comity of nations.

It becomes even more refreshing and beautiful on Pakistan Day pledging for a greener Pakistan, planting countrywide saplings, protecting trees and wildlife and cleanliness drives all over Pakistan, destined as land of purity, promise and potential! A neater, cleaner and purer Pakistan needs to be prioritized, eulogized and materialized by men of letters, men at the helm of affairs and man in the street alike. May our political, corporate and social leaders rise over ego and above self to be trend-setters in the rejuvenation of the young nation. A'meen