

The Business

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Debt trap

The coronavirus pandemic, especially the global lockdowns that came with it, that forced the G20 to even consider a temporary debt moratorium in the first place, the actions of these two rating agencies now threaten to take the wind out of the entire initiative. That is precisely what World Bank chief economist Carmen Reinhart feared when she said that “countries will weigh this in... especially those countries which are still hoping to access private capital, to tap capital markets,” and added that “the prospect of being downgraded is going to be a deterrent.” This framework, which comes in addition to payment relief under the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), is open to more than 70 poor countries of which Pakistan is also a part. And surely at least some of them would have had second thoughts as they watched yields on Ethiopia’s dollar-denominated bonds shoot up from 6 percent in January to nine percent after they filed for the debt relief. Not all of the countries expecting the relief have international bonds outstanding, but literally each and every one of them can do without downgrades that are sure to spook foreign direct as well as portfolio investment. Reinhart also explained why Fitch Ratings and S&P could not have timed their actions any worse either. One of the most recurring problems with efforts to provide debt relief to poor countries is that often the amount calculated as relief is not enough, so “countries have to go back to the drawing board to resolve problems again.” Yet now, with the G20 common framework, finally there was hope that the first round of meaningful debt reduction would finally get under way sooner rather than later. And now there’s this rather powerful deterrent that has reminded poor countries of the old adage that if something looks or sounds too good to be true, then it most probably is not. There is a very urgent need for international financial institutions (IFIs) and also G20 countries to put pressure on rating agencies and rein them in at least till the pandemic’s headlock on the global economy is overcome. Snap downgrades because of debt relief where both rich and poor countries agree to the terms would not only push some among the latter dangerously close to default but also destroy their fragile bond and debt markets that are still in their infancy and need to be nurtured. Therefore, debt relief initiatives must not be allowed to turn into yet more complicated and cruel debt traps. Poor countries are already juggling between retiring old debt and arranging new loans. And considering all the constraints of the pandemic and slowdown, the kind of one-step-forward-two-steps-back debt relief scenario that has been triggered by two of the most followed rating outlets could leave them wrong-footed at the most inopportune of

Season of political challenges



MALEEHA LODHI

Prime Minister Imran Khan was compelled to seek a vote of confidence from the National Assembly following the defeat of his finance minister in the Senate election. He has now secured this and demonstrated that he still commands a majority. But this should be a moment of humility and introspection, and not triumphalism. More so because other challenges lie ahead when the political aftershocks of the Senate election, which exposed his government’s fragility, are unlikely to quickly fade away. Therefore, the government needs to reflect on what happened and learn lessons from a bruising experience that forced a trust vote on it.

The defeat of the ruling party candidate, Hafeez Sheikh, at the hands of the opposition nominee, Yousuf Raza Gilani, represented one of the biggest upsets in the Senate’s recent election history. Because it became such a high-stake poll, as the entire membership of the National Assembly constitutes the electoral college for Islamabad’s seat, its political impact was that much greater. It left the government reeling from the biggest political setback faced in its

tenure. The PTI government was also unable, despite winning more seats, to secure control of the Senate. It has 47 seats along with its coalition partners while PDM and allies have 53.

The prime minister sought to blunt the opposition’s demand for a confidence vote in the Assembly by pre-emptively seeking one himself. He secured 178 votes in the open ballot. But here is the paradox. Rather than end political uncertainty and ensure stability this may open the door to more opposition moves in a complex political chess game. The chink in the ruling party’s armour laid bare in the Senate election has emboldened the opposition and encouraged it to mount more pressure and plan further moves.

The opposition could now shift the battlefield to Punjab after the prime minister’s successful confidence vote which shrinks the political space for a no-trust motion in the near term. An opposition leader has already hinted at this. The opposition knows that an uninspiring and unpopular leadership in Punjab has made the province PTI’s Achilles heel. The government’s majority is razor thin in the provincial assembly with its survival resting on support from PML-Q, whose leaders have long felt undervalued by the prime minister and could prove to be a wild card in any fluid political situation.

Meanwhile, the prime minister’s speech after the Senate election reflected the angst of a leader frustrated by what had happened and who ascribed the setback to the opposition’s “corrupt practices”. The sermonising tone was familiar and repeated in his address to the National Assembly after the trust vote. His gratuitous criticism of the Election Commission for holding the Senate election by secret ballot provoked an unusually sharp rebuke from the ECP. Yet he echoed the cri-

tique in parliament. There was no indication of lessons learnt or any dispassionate assessment of the Senate setback, which is needed in view of the impending election of the Senate chairman.

Fielding Sheikh on a general seat from the capital was not a well-thought decision. As a technocrat he faced a tougher contest when the combined opposition nominated a long-time politician as their candidate. Sheikh had few if any links with Assembly members while Gilani had worked closely with parliamentarians during many decades in politics and as prime minister. Resentment against technocrats being awarded parliamentary seats has long been voiced in PTI. This was to prove consequential.

The government did however sense its candidate’s vulnerability and thus made last-minute efforts to secure an open Senate ballot in the hope of forestalling lawmakers from switching sides. All its manoeuvres were however frustrated — the abortive constitution amendment bill, an ordinance and then the Supreme Court’s advisory opinion upholding the secret ballot as enjoined by the Constitution.

Gilani’s victory showed that the government got 11 votes fewer than its parliamentary support while the opposition candidate got five more votes than PDM’s combined National Assembly strength. This meant that members from PTI’s allied parties switched sides and several PTI backbenchers also defied the party line. This was acknowledged by the prime minister himself who later claimed 16 PTI members had “sold out”. It was hardly a surprise. There were signs aplenty of discontent within PTI ranks and among the ruling party’s allies. The chickens had come home to roost for a party leadership that consistently failed to respond to its allies’ con-

cerns and barely found time to address the sources of disgruntlement within PTI. The leader of the House, for example, rarely came to the Assembly.

Although the government will now bask in the success of the confidence vote it would be mistaken to think that its political problems are over. Its experience in the Senate election and earlier in by-elections should be a sobering wake-up call for the leadership and should prompt a rethink of its political management. Legislation will be challenging to steer through parliament as the combined opposition is numerically stronger in the Senate. That should be reason enough for it to abandon its unilateral ways and reach out to work with lawmakers both in and beyond its party.

There are other lessons for the government from the Senate setback, which also showed the limits of the establishment’s influence. An important lesson is that political management cannot be left to the establishment. The PTI leadership should focus on addressing its political management deficit and cultivate the habit of listening to its backbenchers and be responsive to allies. Being a coalition government, this should be a matter of priority not choice. It has already seen how losing a few parliamentary votes can yield a negative outcome. With the prime minister generally inaccessible there is no focal person in PTI to whom backbenchers can turn to have their problems addressed. In parliamentary politics nothing can ever be taken for granted.

The election of the Senate chairman and deputy chairman is the next political test that looms for the government. But its toughest and most consequential test could come in the Punjab Assembly if the opposition decides to move a no-confidence motion there. That could yet



Health inequalities

SHMYLA KHAN

Access to healthcare is part of our basic right to a life of dignity. Despite its universality, healthcare and its denial are felt along lines of class, gender, sexuality, religion, race/ethnicity, (dis)ability — and often an intersection of all these. The healthcare system itself reproduces inequalities and systems of oppression that undergird society through inaccessibility and skewed priorities.

Throughout history, the centre of medical research and the reference point for medicine was men’s bodies. In clinical research, women are overwhelmingly underrepresented in trials for medicines and treatments. For instance, while women make up over half of the 35 million people living with HIV worldwide, most trials for treatments focus on men despite the fact that women respond differently to the infection as well as the drugs administered for treatment. This fundamental exclusion on the basis of sex at the starting point of healthcare, according to medical research, shows the rampant gender bias permeating the entire system. The specific needs of women are invisibilised not simply due to a lack of awareness but more as part of the dehumanisation and neglect that erases women from systems and institutions.

Despite society’s obsession with regulating women’s bodies, not enough attention is paid to the pain those bodies feel. Dianne Hoffman and Anita Tarzian point out in *The Girl Who Cried Pain: A Bias Against Women in the Treatment of Pain*, women are more likely to be undertreated or inappropriately diagnosed for pain. Termed as the ‘gender pain gap’, women’s discomfort is being systematically undervalued by the medical profession. In countries like ours where patriarchal controls severely hamper women’s mobility, women are much less likely to visit a medical facility than men. This is underscored by the high cost of quality healthcare, with families prioritising limited resources for men’s treatment as opposed to women’s.

Women’s health is impacted deeply by their place within the patriarchal family system which translates into the lack of decision-making regarding their health. Women have little say in the question of having children and are often reduced to a child-bearing role within the family, exposing an inability to imagine their role beyond that of a mother. The maternal mortality rate, though improved from 276 deaths per 100,000 live births (Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2006-7) to 186 (Pakistan Maternal Mortality Survey), is still too high. Women get insufficient nutrition because of the discrimination inside Pakistani households and are often the last to eat.

That is why healthcare must be imagined as a feminist issue, one



that the feminist movement in Pakistan must address as it is the site where patriarchal oppression, violence and exclusions play out in the most visceral sense — denial or provision of inadequate healthcare on the basis of gender means the difference between life and death.

Gender-based violence, a central concern of the feminist movement, is also a healthcare issue as survivors of violence and abuse need access to gender-sensitive physical and mental health services. We carry the trauma of violence and patriarchy in our bodies, the manifestations of which are complex and debilitating. The pay gap of Lady Health Workers is an issue of gender discrimination as it is a direct result of the undervaluing of their work because of their gender and the gender of the communities they serve.

A feminist approach to healthcare will force us to centre the needs of marginalised bodies within the healthcare system, ranging from basic things like designing medical centres to be accessible to differently abled persons. It would also mean the government fulfilling its promise to “review medical curriculum and improve research for doctors and nursing staff to address specific health issues of transgender persons” under Section 12 of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018. A feminist approach would ensure that these measures are not adopted as add-ons to the healthcare system, but are central to its very design.

Covid-19 has laid bare the stark structural inequalities of society and exposed the fragility of health systems worldwide. Pakistan’s health budget has been hovering around the one per cent mark, an indictment of the state’s priorities. A feminist vision of healthcare posits it as a matter of social justice and reframes it from an individual concern to a collective one. It is the responsibility of the state to provide universal healthcare, moving away from the privatisation model adopted by the incumbent government. As women march on International Working Women’s Day today, the theme for this year is the crisis of healthcare and care. They will demand universal healthcare, freedom from the ‘pandemic of patriarchy’, and a

What is terrorism?



MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

The Financial Action Task Force has announced that Pakistan would remain on its grey list for further monitoring for another four months. In this period, the country will have to improve its financial transaction mechanisms so that these are not misused by terrorists and criminals. Apart from other measures related to effective investigation and prosecution, and the implementation of eventual sanctions, Pakistan would also have to make more laws in order to comply with the mutually agreed action plan.

Pakistan amended or made almost three dozen laws during the past year to meet the FATF requirements. All these changes and new laws were essential to bring Pakistan out of the FATF’s grey list in order to dispel the negative impression about the country’s ‘soft stance’ towards certain militant groups. More than a year ago, the Supreme Court had also recommended that parliament develop a new and comprehensive legal definition of terrorism. Apparently, as the Supreme Court judgment did not detail any punitive consequences, the government did not take it seriously despite the fact that a

clear definition of terrorism would have not only brought clarity to counterterrorism functions but would also have improved the government’s performance in implementing FATF-related measures.

The legal community and law-enforcement agencies have been demanding an amendment to the definition provided in Section 6 of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) 1997, but the state has been reluctant to touch it. Ironically, the persisting, decades-long challenges of religiously motivated terrorism and violent extremism have failed to ‘influence’ the policymakers for that. In its judgement, the Supreme Court had observed that the definition provided in Section 6 of ATA 1997 had failed to capture the essence of terrorism and had often been misused for multiple reasons. The court was in particular concerned about the legality of the definition. In Pakistan’s legal or policy lexicon, the term ‘terrorism’ is still defined in a vague and contradictory manner, to the extent that it is not fully clear what ‘terrorism’ is and what distinguishes it from other forms of political violence.

Since its inception in 1947, the country has encountered several waves of political agitation and violent movements, which have been ethnic, linguistic, sub-national, communal and religious in nature. Violent religious, political and ethnonationalist movements continued posing security threats throughout the country’s history. Violent protests against religious communities, especially the campaign against the Ahmadi community in Punjab in 1953, insurgencies in Balochistan, ethnic and linguistic-based violence in Karachi, low-scale ethnonationalist violent agitations in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and sectarian conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan shaped the security ap-

proach of the state.

Organised religious movements for the enforcement of the Sharia, and sectarian disagreements, both of which turned violent time and again, posed a more complex security challenge for the state. Despite facing all these challenges, it took Pakistan 50 years to define terrorism in 1997, and even so, the ambiguities still surrounding the definition forced the Supreme Court to weigh in. All through the various legal measures that Pakistan has taken to deal with terrorism-related security challenges, the legal definition of terrorism has remained vague. It is far from being comprehensive and criminalises expressions of sectarian hatred and certain violent political acts, which are already listed as punishable offences under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC).

Pakistan does not have any official definition of extremism either and usually, extreme actions of religious hatred come under the PPC or ATA domain. Violence is an integral part of terrorism, militancy or insurgency, whereas extremism may employ persuasion manoeuvres to draw advantage. For example, the banned sectarian outfit Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan has consistently claimed to be a non-violent movement, but its leaders have often indulged in inciting violence against another sect and yet got legal relief by not being found directly engaged in perpetuating violent acts. Nationalist insurgents and religious militants use terrorism as a tactic to create chaos, disorder, fear and to undermine the state’s authority. They also employ other tactics to attract people and expand their support base, including via provision of social services for locals, offering alternative delivery systems, such as maintaining law and order and setting up informal courts as the Taliban did in Afghanistan and the UNSC-designated terrorist

group Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) did in Pakistani tribal areas. They also run their propaganda campaigns, and their activities other than violent actions have similar objectives, but can these too be described as terrorism? Section 6 (5) of the ATA does say that any act undertaken for the benefit of a proscribed organisation amounts to terrorism. When former TTP spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan surrendered to the security forces in 2017, he claimed amnesty on the ground that he had never been part of the TTP’s terrorist operations, rather his task was confined to running its media affairs. Hence the question: who is a terrorist? Are terrorists only combatant units or non-combatants as well? And does every action of a terrorist, even if non-violent, automatically and always amount to terrorism?

The confusion deepens when one tries to distinguish between terrorism and terrorists. Before his eventual indictment in a terrorism-financing case, the legal advisers of Jamaatud Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed had pleaded in court that he had never been found involved in any terrorist activity in Pakistan and he did get relief from the courts every time. There have been many other examples of this sort.

In a nutshell, parliament has to develop a clear definition of terrorism. Causing fear, violence, the deliberate nature of the act, targeting of civilians, disturbing the domestic, regional and global order, issuing threats (all this by non-state actors) are some common vital elements in every definition of terrorism.

However, all these expressions need to be defined as well. The task is not beyond the capacity of parliament and it can restrict the meaning of terrorism within the jurisdiction of the crime and political/ideological motives, and avoid broad interpretations and