

The Business

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Corona third wave

The National Command and Operation Centre has announced stiff measures to restrict activities contributing to the sharp rise in Covid-19 cases. Aside from re-imposing some restrictions, such as closure of commercial activities by 8pm, ban on all types of large indoor gatherings, complete shutdown of amusement parks, reduced presence in courts, and stringent protocols for tourism, the forum also decided to impose broader lockdowns in 10 cities where the positivity ratio is greater than 8 percent. Residents of these areas are to be informed about the duration of lockdowns. Since people will not be permitted to move freely except for emergencies they will be advised to store food items or order them through online services. The cities/districts identified for "high impact interventions" are Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, Peshawar, Swat and Muzaffarabad. It is worth noting that except for the last two, all these cities are either in the PTI-ruled Punjab or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, or the national capital under the party's federal government. It is possible that these statistics are reflective of better testing facilities and greater public cooperation in Punjab and KP as well as Islamabad than in other parts of the country. That though makes the results no less worrying.

It is pertinent to recall here that in a TV talk show a few days ago, Punjab Health Minister DrYasmin Rashid disclosed that a sample testing of 300 people with Covid-19 infections showed 70 percent presence of the British variant, which is extremely contagious. That seems to explain the high incidence of this deadly virus in big cities of Punjab as well as in AJK capital Muzaffarabad. Which underscores the need for strict application of test and trace rules. Just as important is to ensure firm implementation of SOPs. Another point is to be noted is that the public was seemed relaxed in the recent past that there is no threat of the virus and the government machinery also care free in this connection.

A major reason for the resurgence of Covid-19 is a general relaxation of precautionary measures. When the coronavirus first struck the government displayed a highly efficient approach to the situation. On the one hand, smart lockdowns were enforced in the worst affected neighbourhoods. On the other hand, a test trace service was established for people arriving from other countries. But after a while complacency set in. Most people will not comply with such a simple requirement as wearing a face mask in public places unless they are made to pay fines. The new course of action to prevent the spread of the disease must include penalty for violators of SOPs.

Economics of vaccines

SHAHID MEHMOOD

COVID-19 brought the world to its knees. The Covid vaccine has been the most sought-after product. However, as governments around the world rush to vaccinate their citizens, some aspects need deliberation and clarity. For instance, what explains the short supply of vaccines? And there's the lesser discussed (but very important) aspect of non-production of vaccines in Pakistan.

A lot of what is taking place has economics at its core. First, the all-important question of vaccine supply. Despite the significant price incentive at present, why can't pharma companies ramp up production to address the huge supply-demand gap?

Vaccine production is a complex process. It requires research worth millions of dollars. Then there is the need to set up production facilities to precise specifications (eg stainless steel bio-reactors), arrange for needed raw materials (tubing, plastic bags, etc), and finding relevant human capital. In short, it's an expensive endeavour, which won't be undertaken unless the right incentives are in place. Even with all the facilities, ramping up production in the short run is very difficult because certain requirements can be difficult to meet.

Two recent examples illustrate this well. The Serum Institute of India (SII), which is the world's largest vaccine producer, hurriedly set up a new facility last year to increase production, but it caught fire. Similarly, Moderna had to discontinue production at a facility in Belgium because it couldn't meet the quality criteria.

Supply constraints are another factor. The head of SII recently com-

plained of the US ban on raw material exports (such as specialised bags, which the US wants to be available for domestic production first, aka 'vaccine nationalism'). There are other raw material shortages too (cell culture media, single-use tubing, specialised chemicals, etc) because every supplier wants these to be present for domestic production given that it's difficult to meet added demand in the short run.

Another way to ramp up production would be for firms with under-utilised infrastructure to share facilities with vaccine-producing firms. Two main issues emerge here: firms would be reluctant to share vaccine formulation (it is expensive intellectual property acquired after substantial investment) and facilities may not be of the same quality. Briefly, pushing present infrastructure to produce more can have negative repercussions, which explains, to a great extent, why there's a substantial difference between the supply and demand of vaccines.

An important aspect is the funding of vaccines by governments. The US, for example, has been funding vaccine research since the 1960s. The mRNA technology (used in Moderna and Pfizer vaccines) came about, partly, due to \$150 million grant to pharma firms by the Obama administration. Similarly, Russian Sputnik vaccine research was financially supported by Moscow's health agency. Why publicly fund research into vaccines? As Covid-19 and historic episodes like the Spanish flu and bubonic plague ('black death') aptly demonstrated, viruses have the potential to bring the world to its knees, causing massive financial and economic losses plus utter misery. It is perfectly sensible and logical to pre-

empt such a catastrophe. Since viruses also mutate over time, it requires constant research plus investment in infrastructure, which in turn requires extensive financial resources. Pharma firms will only be willing to devote the required resources if there is a good demand for vaccines. In a manner of speaking, government support ameliorates fears of investment going to waste. It's a win-win situation for both the industry and government: companies get much-needed financial support to lessen uncertainty, while the government gets the vaccines it requires for public welfare.

Now we come to another very important topic. In Pakistan, not a single vaccine of any kind is being produced despite over 700 pharma firms. Why is there no domestically produced vaccine, or even a semblance of an effort to produce it? In our immediate neighbourhood, India has the world's leading producers such as SII (Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine — known locally as Covishield — and Covaxin), Bharat BioTec (Covaxin, CoraVax), Biological E (Johnson & Johnson), Zydus Cadila (ZyCoV-D), Hetero BioPharma (Sputnik V) and Dr Reddy's Lab (Sputnik V). SII, aside from providing millions of Covid-19 doses within India, is in commercially contracted to providing 900 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine and 145m doses of Novavax globally. While exports are held up at the moment, imagine the scale of Indian vaccine production with the local authorities aiming to administer 600m doses within seven months, meaning about 85m doses a month.

As stated, pharma firms are incentivised to take up vaccine and drug research through public financial support. Contrast this to Pakistan's

predicament, where the pharma industry is being charged tax in the name of 'research' (the Central Research Fund or CRF) since 1976, equivalent to one per cent of its gross sales. Put another way, the government's message to the industry is: leave research to us and just pay for it. While the industry has obliged, the government has utterly failed. There is little or zero research to show for. Where did all that money since 1976 go? Officials remain tightlipped. What we do know is that there is not a single FDA-approved lab (international gold standard) nor any international-level infrastructure established through public expense.

The CRF is only one example of adverse regulations that disincentivise research. For example, successive governments have been obsessed with regulated drug prices that have led to many adverse outcomes (Indian government did away with this fascination in the 1980s, following which the industry really took off). Imagine that from 2001-2013, drug prices were 'frozen' while production costs went through the roof. Since that time, the shortage of critical drugs has become a regular feature and many leading multinational firms have packed up and left Pakistan. Similarly, India is earning \$34 billion from 'toll manufacturing' in the pharma industry, while our government doesn't allow it, or only to a limited extent.

Thus, to put it briefly, there is complete absence of right incentives to produce vaccines in Pakistan. Given what the world and Pakistan has been through, likely effects of any future pandemic, and the adverse outcomes of our regulations, it's time to get our policies right in terms of pharmaceutical industry.

PDM protest dust begins to settle down

SAJID ZIA

The PDM protest dust has begun to settle down after the PPP has clinched the Opposition Leader slot for Yousaf Raza Gilani in the Senate. The Zardari-led PPP move has triggered much ire in the PML-N. The leaders of this party under the banner of Maryam Nawaz Sharif appear to have failed to take stock of the situation correctly and look at things that unfolded during different stages of the PDM movement, objectively and pragmatically.

The PML-N, undoubtedly the largest political party in Punjab, is being insidiously squeezed in the mainstream politics, which does not auger well for the national politics. However, the Party still enjoys a noticeable support at the public level which is, in the given situation, open to erode if the party remained without quality leadership for a longer period of time, and failed to grasp and catch up with the changed situation.

The former President Asif Ali Zardari through a shrewd political insight has gained much so far from the PDM and still looks forward to capitalizing on the joined strength of the 11-party Opposition alliance, to secure the lost ground in Punjab and KPK, and even in Balochistan when Sindh already remains to be the power base of the PPP.

What game Asif Zardari played in the wake of the defeat of Yousaf Raza Gillani in the Senate Chairman election and after getting him elected as leader of the Opposition in the Upper House has been well picked by Maulana Fazlur Rehman. As such the Maulana is also quietly conceding to the fact that the PDM game is over and the game of the individual interests has started wherein he has to carve out room for his party to stay in politics and stay safe. That was why Maulana Fazlur Rehman did not pass any remarks in support of Maryam Nawaz after NAB recalled the notices earlier issued to her for an appearance on March 26 for interrogations. He also favoured Gillani for Opposition Leader office notwithstanding the fact the PDM meeting had decided to award this position to the PML-N. His senators also stayed neutral between PPP and the PML-N when their respective strength was counted for deciding the Senate Opposition leadership.

Both PPP and JUI-F appear to have agreed on the parliamentary politics instead of the agitational politics which the PML-N had pursued in the PDM as its mainstay to pave the way for Nawaz Sharif's safe and respectable return to the country and his stay in domestic politics. Now two main components of the PDM have covertly acquiesced to the PTI government and created a good chance of give-and-take with the power that be.

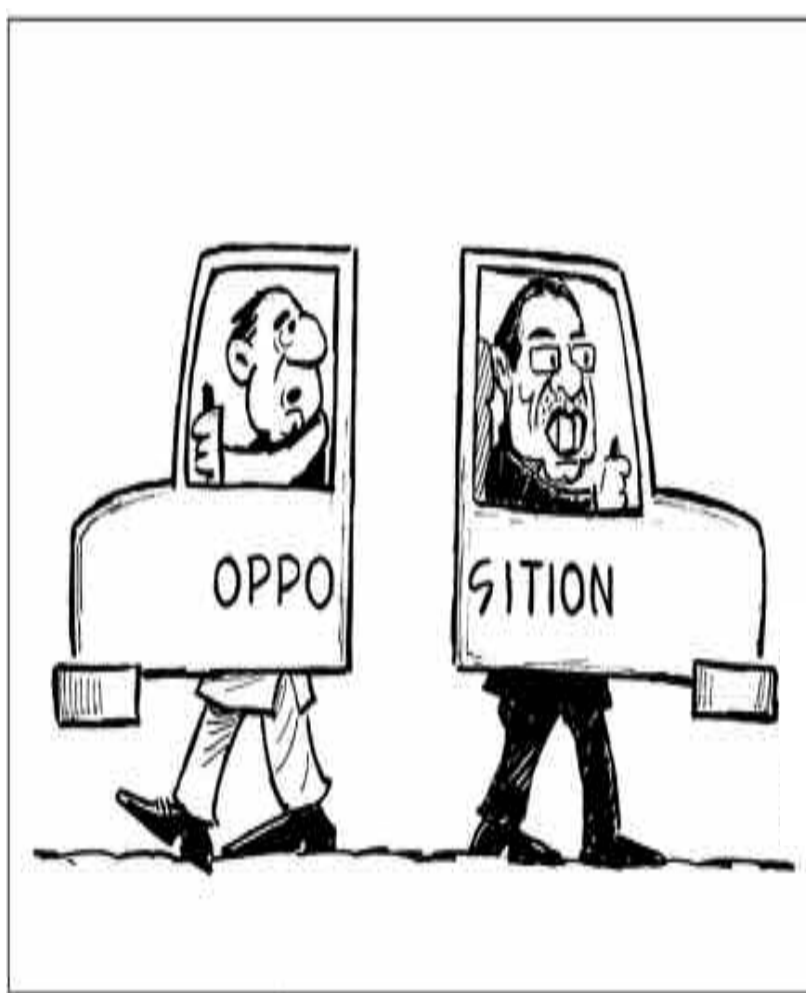
Asif Ali Zardari as a matter of fact has played on a larger political canvass wherein he not only targeted the Government but also his partners in the alliance. He played

well and played carefully to ensure his win both in case of the PDM victory or defeat. In the view of the political pundits, Asif Zardari now eyes the election next general election in 2023 and his vehement insistence on the unity of the PDM and the playing parliamentary politics aim to yield him much lucrative ground before the election. Meantime 2023, he may be in a position to run with hounds and hunt with hunters while the PML-N left with little choices by then. Zardari knows that if he has to regain the lost ground of the PPP in Punjab and consolidate the party footholds in other two provinces and emerge as a potential political rival of the PTI in the next election, he should not mind cutting the PML-N to size.

The PML-N in this background had taken a very shortsighted view of the Zardari-led PPP and presumed that his Party through the jointed protest at the PDM platform, would serve its interests. How naive this thinking was! Could it be possible that Zardari would sacrifice for the PML-N to let it come to the power again?

The PML-N, which primarily revolves around Nawaz Sharif, failed to pose in the Opposition according to its size. Previously after the last elections, Shehbaz Sharif attempted to get the due according to his party strength and partially succeeded by securing the office of the Opposition Leader in the National Assembly. Shehbaz Sharif then had played very well as he drew the Party limelight and do's and don't in the new situation to wait for the right time. Contrary to that this time around, the PML-N under Maryam Nawaz Sharif has performed over emotionally than showing reason. It clearly evinced the secret intentions that the main object of the Party is to protect Nawaz Sharif and his questionable deeds than sincerely rising for the masses. A mainstream PML-N behind the Maulana became diminutive and confusing for the popular mind when standing with the PPP which had been its traditional rival in the past.

Master politics of tricks, Asif Zardari fully played up the overemotional condition of the PML-N first ditching it on quitting the assemblies and sacrificing the Sindh government on the altar of the PDM's collective interests and then at the time of Senate Opposition Leader. In this scenario, the second-largest party after the last election, the PML-N, somewhat stands aloof and aghast at the moment. It has suffered a loss but still not all gone. The PML-N too has the champion clever politicians of such game who are expected to take the front seat very soon. The PML-N is all out against Imran Khan and his government. And Zardari will not mind if the PML-N continued to bleed and deplete energy while pitting against the government as it will suit its purpose both towards the government and the Opposition. So let's see how the PML-N comes out after almost everything stands open in the PDM in a changed political scenario.



Changing the past

GHAZI SALAHUDDIN

Eman, in the religious framework.

Here's a riddle for you. Why do I think of Milan Kundera when I drive past the Teen Talwar roundabout in Karachi and am in a pensive mood?



Naturally, when posed with such an outlandish linkage, you would expect some clues. So, I do have one for you. When I was driven from the old Islamabad airport to the city, there was this sight on a hillock on the main highway that excited the same thoughts.

Since the riddle has to be solved quickly, let me explain that the Teen Talwar monument is dedicated to that motto of the Quaid: Unity, Faith and Discipline. This is how the Quaid had put it. But the order in the slogan, as written in large letters on the slope of that hillock in Islamabad, is different. It is: Faith, Unity and Discipline. And that is how it is officially prescribed now.

What is exceptional is that the motto is in right order — first Unity, then Faith and after that Discipline. This is how the Quaid had put it. But the order in the slogan, as written in large letters on the slope of that hillock in Islamabad, is different. It is: Faith, Unity and Discipline. And that is how it is officially prescribed now.

Why would anyone mess around with a pronouncement of the Father of the Nation? Historical facts have to be accepted as they are. But during Ziaul Haq's military rule, the order was changed.

But there is a catch in how Faith is translated. Readily, it is

However, it was initially also translated as Yaqeen — and I have the evidence that is, in a way, writ in stone at the Teen Talwar, which was designed and built before Zia's time. Here, the Urdu inscriptions are: Ittehad, Yaqeen-e-Mohkam and Tanzeem.

Having come thus far, I have not yet clarified why this motto, in both orders, reminds me of Milan Kundera, the famed Czech novelist who became a citizen of France. The reason is a Kundera quote that I am frequently reminded of, in some specific situations. It is: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting". It is rather disturbing for me that they can so offhandedly tamper with a public utterance of the Quaid or, really, with a fact of history. The motive could be to further Islamise the Quaid's vision. If this calls for a proper study of an issue of history, I am not going into that. Incidentally, there have already been some discussions on how the order in the motto is changed. Nadeem Farooq Paracha had delved into it in some detail in his column in 'Dawn' in October 2017.

Actually, while staying with the thought of how we deal with history and with our past, I want to move on to what is more topical. These days in the month of March bear memories that are unbearably hard to remember and to forget. In addition, powerful forces have been at work to, if I may bor-

row an expression from the digital world, 'photoshop' the images of our history.

This week, we celebrated Pakistan Day which falls on March 23. Then, it was March 25. And, yes, March 26. In addition to what happened on these dates in the past, we have developments that are taking place in the present. One example is the surreptitious notification of the PPP's Yousaf Raza Gilani as leader of the opposition in the Senate on Friday and its likely impact on the opposition alliance. In any case, the problem of coming to terms with this week's dates of March is very much with us. In this respect, I have another, somewhat longish, quotation of Milan Kundera. This is it: "People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past".

There is something here that we can easily understand. One power that autocratic leaders or regimes often desperately seek is to change the past and use it for strengthening and justifying their hold on power. That is why prescribed textbooks distort history and it becomes hazardous for historians and researchers to objectively explore the past and venture into forbidden territories.

This week, the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of LUMS, in collaboration with the National Institute of Pakistan

Studies of Quaid-e-Azam University had organised an online conference to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1971 war. It was to begin on March 23. But LUMS had to cancel the event, the heading of which was: 'War, Violence and Memory'. As an aside, LUMS was forced to cancel a talk on missing persons in Balochistan in 2015.

When we celebrate the Pakistan Day on March 23, much of our focus stays on the Lahore resolution passed on this date in 1940. But March 23 became Pakistan Day when the 1956 constitution was promulgated on this date. The constitution was abrogated by Ayub Khan but Pakistan Day has survived. That is how BBC World's This Week in History has identified March 23 in 1956 as the day when Pakistan became the first Islamic Republic in the world.

We do not seem to be much concerned about another anniversary that falls on March 23. On this date in 1931, Bhagat Singh, a socialist revolutionary, was executed — hanged — in Lahore. He was only 23 and is remembered as a folk hero in India's freedom struggle. History, to be sure, is not a simple tabulation of events and the past will always have its mysteries to carefully explore and examine. For that matter, why is it not possible for those who had organised the LUMS conference and those who got it cancelled to sit together within the precincts of an institution of higher learning and confront the truth of a past that exists in our consciousness and our conscience?