

The Business

Chief Editor

Irfan Athar Qazi

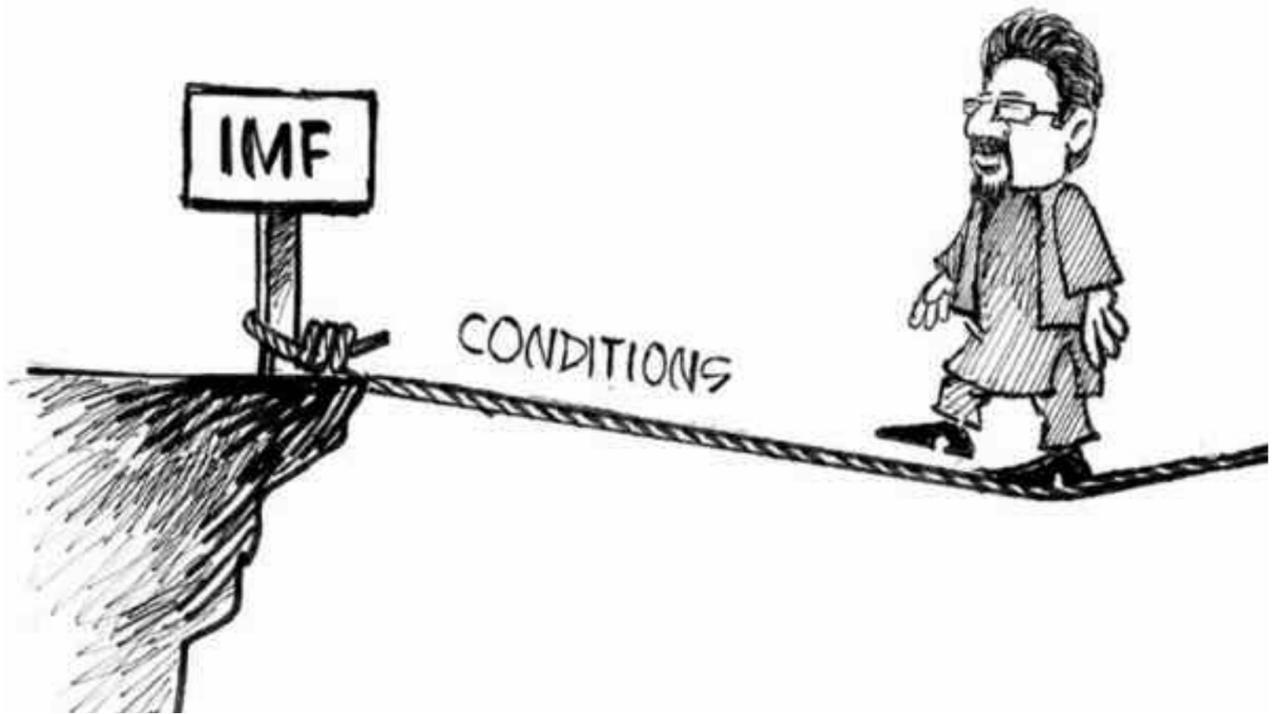
E-mail: editorthebusiness@yahoo.com

thebusinesslhr@gmail.com

Tijarat House, 14-Davis Road, Lahore  
0423-6312280, 6312480, 6312429, 6312462  
Cell # 0321-4598258

1270-B, Peoples Colony No I, Off: Chenone  
Road, Faisalabad, Ph: 041-8555582

ISLAMABAD / RAWALPINDI  
N-125 Circular Road, Ph: 051-5551654,  
5532761, Cell # 0300-8567331  
KARACHI  
3rd Floor Kehkashan Mall 172-I Block II PECHS  
Opp Rehmania Masjid Main Tariq Road  
Ph: 021-34524550, Cell # 0300-8251534



## Fragile peace

Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August last year, Pakistan has been trying to convince the Taliban regime to eliminate all terrorist hideouts in their country. Pakistani soil has time and again become a target of terrorism in the past decades and it is now time that the current rulers in Kabul take notice of such repeated violations of international law. The situation on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been worsening over the last few weeks. Despite the fencing of the border, the ISPR has reported that three soldiers posted in the area were martyred in North Waziristan after firing across the Derawar sector. There have also been other incidents of firing across the Durand Line in that area, despite efforts by the Pakistani authorities to fence it off. At the same time, Afghanistan continues to battle a serious terrorist threat within its own borders. Three days ago, an attack on a mosque in Mazar-e-Sharif killed 12 people and injured others while another attack on a mosque in Kunduz on Friday took the lives of 33 people, including children. The attacks have been claimed by the Islamic State of Khorasan. Whereas the Taliban claim they have defeated the ISK, it appears that this force is still able to wreak havoc when it chooses to do so. This is bad news for Afghanistan's stability and its future.

Afghanistan and Pakistan need to work together if terrorism incidents are to be brought to a halt. To do so, Pakistan must open up talks with the Taliban government – as yet unrecognized by the world – to determine what the most effective strategy would be. It is unfortunate that while Pakistan has consistently supported the new government in Afghanistan, on the condition that it uphold human rights, the firing over the border continues. There is no solution but to work out an agreement through dialogue and talks so that this violence can stop and at the same time Pakistan can possibly help Afghanistan overcome the internal threats it continues to face.

What is needed right now from the Taliban regime is a two-pronged approach to violence and terror. First, eliminate TTP bases that are on Afghan soil. This is important for regional peace and cooperation. Afghanistan and Pakistan have never had smooth relations, but the recent turn of events could threaten the fragile peace that has been worked on. Second, the Taliban are facing a real threat from the ISK; this threat needs a proper strategy to be countered. The Taliban government must recognize that the only way forward for both countries is to work towards peace both within and outside its borders. Pakistan can urge the Taliban to do more on the counterterrorism front, while also offering support on other issues and working out a way to keep the borders at peace. One hopes the Taliban regime sees the benefit of cooperation and good neighbourliness.

## The conspiracy that wasn't

DR NAAZIR MAHMOOD

Ever since Imran Khan faced a defeat in the vote of no-confidence in the National Assembly, the former prime minister and his coterie have been talking about a foreign conspiracy. Now once again the National Security Committee (NSC) has confirmed that there was no such conspiracy to topple the Khan government.

The NSC issued a statement clearly stating that the telegram came from the Pakistan embassy in Washington. It means that there was no letter or memo sent by any foreign government to threaten Imran Khan and his government. Interestingly, in the latest meeting of the NSC, Pakistan's former ambassador – Asad Majeed – was present to give a first-hand account of the events and talks that did or did not take place.

It was a wise move by the new government to call the ambassador so that he could in person clarify any misgivings or lack of communication. His briefing to the committee covered both the content and context of the telegram. Since the National Security Committee is the highest forum for coordination on security issues, there is no question of lack of integrity in its members. Nobody can cast aspersions on such an apex body which includes in its fold both civilian and military leadership, especially when a democratically elected government is in power. The chiefs of air, army, and naval forces were present in the meeting as was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee. There were ministers of all relevant ministries and the meeting was chaired by the prime minister himself. When such a top leadership is in consonance and examines the contents of the communication, there is no question of any partiality or favouritism or vice versa. The meeting has reaffirmed the decision of the last NSC meeting and now this discussion should have ended. But the former prime minister is in no mood to end or suspend the campaign that he launched nearly a month ago.

The PTI chairman and all its leaders and activists are pedaling a highly dangerous narrative that Imran Khan was ousted by a 'foreign conspiracy'. This they are doing by continuously referring to a cable containing 'evidence' of the conspiracy. In a time when Pakistan is beset by so many other economic and security threats, it is a pity that the top leadership has to engage in investigating a conspiracy that wasn't. If repeatedly the country's NSC has to hold meetings to review a non-issue,

its time and energies are being wasted. The whole narrative of the PTI is now revolving around a supposed 'intervention' rather than 'conspiracy'. It is true that no foreign interference should be acceptable under any circumstances, but first there has to be some evidence of interference.

It seems that both Imran Khan and Shah Mahmood Qureshi are intent on twisting the story to suit their own ends. Even after the latest statement by the NSC, they are sticking to their guns without realizing how much damage they have already done to the country's diplomacy. Their pack of lies is increasing by the day as they lead their followers to believe that the PTI stance has been strengthened. The PTI leaders are issuing one statement after another and endorsing each other's false opinions. They have mastered the art of fabricating and twisting 'conspiracies'.

The relentless onslaught of the PTI on the country's institutions including the judiciary, the NSC, and parliament is not only damaging these institutions but also tarnishing the credibility of Pakistan's Foreign Office. For any democratic system to thrive – or at least survive – people's trust in the country's institutions plays a crucial role. Not that we cannot criticize institutions, we can. If they violate human rights or betray the constitution, one can decry or even deride them. But for that there has to be some evidence; you cannot target individuals and institutions just on the basis of some conjecture.

It is becoming clear that the PTI is trying to divert people's attention from its own corruption and incompetence in office. It is a cover-up attempt to hide its own siphoning off and mismanagement, from the Toshakhana scandal to the helicopter splurge. If you look at Imran Khan's politics of the past 25 years, it has revolved around a couple of reductionist strategies like any other populist leader who does not want his followers to think much.

First, he consistently boasted about his Cricket World Cup win, as if it was his personal victory. Then he concocted a yarn over corruption and in his spinning there were other spin masters who applied condiments to his petri dish. Many of his erstwhile promoters are now either retired or transferred. Once in power, he himself relied on mostly 'imported' advisers and assistants. Then he reignited his old love for the Taliban, thus antagonizing the European Union and the US. To top it all, he visited Russia right on the day when Presi-

dent Putin was invading Ukraine. Imran called it 'interesting times'. His foreign policy was never independent; in fact he had no foreign policy at all, or any policy for that matter to guide any department or ministry. Most of the time he was just shooting in the dark, and that is what he is doing even after his ouster. In his blatant attempt to subvert the constitution, he refused to follow constitutional provisions and violated all democratic norms. He even infected his own party members to use them for violating their oath of office. People like Asad Qaisar and Qasim Suri and his selected governor and president who held federal offices and who were supposed to act in accordance with the constitutions put their own personal loyalty to the Khan over the constitution, the country and its federation. The speaker and deputy speaker tried to dismiss the no-trust move.

Even after the court's verdict, they attempted not to hold the voting. Their loyalty lay with their master and not with the country and its constitution. That was the real conspiracy; and now they want people to forget their own conspiracies against the country and focus on an imaginary conspiracy theory. Imran Khan and the PTI are dragging the country to an abyss of civil war that Fawad Chaudhry hinted at.

The entire PTI leadership was clueless about governing a country. They led the country into an age of bewilderment and pushed it to the brink of collapse. They had no real-time understanding of internal or foreign affairs, and possessed only some rudimentary knowledge of as critical a matter as education. Their digital drama was highly exaggerated and in fact was a digital disaster. During Imran Khan's devastating premiership, Pakistan lost whatever competitive advantage it could have in the world, or even in the region. So, what has changed of late? A lot has – and for the worst as most of the country was sliding towards un-governability.

Misogyny has metastasized to target women journalists who have been constantly on the receiving end. PTI zealots have mastered the art of misbehaviour and badmouthing. Any remaining decency in Pakistani politics and society has been supplanted by degeneration. Those who should have received some training in politics have been groomed as criminal gangs. The PTI has left a sick economy, but wants its followers to run in circles around its leader – and the chant has moved from corruption to a conspiracy that wasn't.

## Battle with 'alternative facts'

ABBAS NASIR

Economic stabilisation through tough, unpopular measures such as withdrawal of the fuel subsidy or a cut in development expenditure, against the backdrop of public mobilisation by the Imran Khan-led PTI, seems a daunting challenge for a new coalition government with a wafer-thin majority.

The latest fuel subsidy was given early last month in a desperate gamble to remain in the saddle by a government facing a united opposition, desertion of allies and dissension in the ranks of its own parliamentarians as a no-confidence motion was around the corner.

Although when it announced the subsidy, instead of a regulator-recommended increase, the government said it would manage the cost of the nearly Rs400 billion subsidy till the summer from higher than expected revenues and savings in other areas.

But the widening deficit in less than two months since the subsidy was awarded is sounding alarm bells in the corridors of power as it is abundantly clear the gamble was meant to thwart a likely no-confidence move at the time, and would have been withdrawn as soon as the danger was averted.

Two things have happened since. One, the vote was successfully carried and the prime minister, despite trying every trick in the bag, including some constitutionally questionable ones, could not stay in office, and one of his arch rivals was elected and sworn into office.

Second, the former prime minister has not taken kindly to his constitutional ouster from office and has embarked on an aggressive mass mobilisation campaign, relying on incendiary, populist slogans and is threatening to take to the streets to force an immediate election.

This week, the government categorically said that parliament would complete its term and elections would only be held next year, but Imran Khan's aggressive campaign, seemingly backed by some renegade elements in a key institution, continues to cast doubts

about the incumbents' longevity. And this element makes any possible attempt to balance the books fraught with danger. The withdrawal of the fuel subsidy will further spur the back-breaking inflation, particularly for the poor and middle classes, and the voting public will likely punish those it sees as responsible.

When your life is a relentless struggle to put food on the table, it is not surprising that the short-term, rather than the long-term memory, informs your reactions. Who will remember the PTI's mismanagement and decisions that brought the economy to this pass?

The most likely target for the people's wrath would be the hand that signed the withdrawal notification. That is why Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif shot down the first summary for a fuel price rise. But this can't be sustained for too long, as the widening deficit and Islamabad's commitment to the IMF dictate a changed course.

Perhaps mindful of the consequences of raising this poisoned chalice to its lips the government may consider other options as well to reduce the deficit. And these include a cut in development expenditure.

The proponents of this course argue that roads and bridges and other infrastructure can wait and all the savings from these areas be used to provide targeted relief to the most needy. However, this path isn't easy either.

Even if parliament is able to complete its term, it has some 16 months to go. Can the governing coalition afford to stay development expenditure in the country, including in swing constituencies, where such projects will likely deliver a political dividend and may be a determinant of who forms the next government?

Some independent economists have high hopes of Finance Minister Miftah Ismail. Even then, given the very few options at his disposal, one wonders if he can pull a rabbit out of his hat. His credentials are not in doubt; how much elbow room he has is.

If meeting these challenges was not enough, the government may have to address

another issue that may be equally, or even more, important. Let me explain what I mean. In the Jan 31, 2021, issue of the Dawn's magazine 'Eos' centre spread Carmen Gonzalez, my partner who has been a BBC and Instagram editor, and I covered the topic of 'fake news'. Here are a few paras from that piece:

"In January 2017, the 45th president of the United States of America was being inaugurated in front of a crowd that — let's say — wasn't as large as expected. The live TV images spoke for themselves. The new president's press secretary swiftly declared this was the 'largest audience to ever witness an inauguration (...)' on the globe'. Challenged about her blatant lie, her response was truly Orwellian. She said her views were 'alternative facts'.

"Entering truly dystopian territory, Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani told an astonished Chuck Todd of NBC, 'Truth isn't truth!' And to complete the Orwellian scenario, Trump gave a speech in July 2018, where he said: 'What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening'. Like Orwell warns in 1984, once you are told 'to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears', you can expect total alienation.

"The 'alienated' assaulted the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, provoked by Trump's 'alternative facts' in a reminder of our very own 2014 'D' Chowk dharna. Trump claimed to have won the November 2020 presidential election. Official data shows Joe Biden got seven million votes more than Trump, giving him 51 per cent of the vote, and 306 seats of the US Electoral College.

"But these 'alternative facts' resulted in five dead, dozens arrested; lawmakers' and their aides' children terrorised in the crèche inside the Capitol and the US legislature besieged by an inflamed mob. A recent Reuter/Ipsos poll showed 68 per cent of Republican voters still believe the election was rigged, which means a whopping 50 million Americans have no faith in their democracy anymore." Need I say more about what we need to tackle head-on?

## CM or PM?

DR FARRUKH SALEEM

A PM is about policy. A CM is about projects. A policy is "a course or principle of action adopted or proposed" by a PM. A project "is a series of tasks that need to be completed to reach a specific outcome." The PM is the policymaker. A "policymaker is someone who creates ideas and plans, especially those carried out by a government." The CM is a project manager. A project manager is a "professional who organizes, plans, and executes projects while working within restraints like budgets and schedules."

Populism will not work. Reforms will. Populism is a "political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups." Populism never works. What we need is structural reforms. Structural reforms are "measures that change the fabric of an economy, the institutional and regulatory framework in which businesses and people operate. They are designed to ensure the economy is fit and better able to realize its growth potential in a balanced way."

The CM spends. The PM mobilizes resources. CMs get 57 percent of all federal revenues under the National Finance Commission Award – without moving a finger. The PM must mobilise resources for debt servicing Rs3 trillion; defence Rs1.4 trillion; running of the civil government Rs500 billion; pensions Rs500 billion; subsidies Rs700 billion and grants Rs1 trillion.

The CM can be a one-man show. The PM is about team-work. A one-man show is a "situation dominated by or reliant on one person." Teamwork is the "process of working collaboratively with a group of people in order to achieve a goal."

The CM is about projects. The PM is about the economy: inflation, unemployment, industrial production, exports, imports, current account and GDP. The CM

is about projects. The PM is about foreign relations especially with the United States, China and Saudi Arabia. The CM is about projects. The PM is about cross-border terrorism. The CM is about projects. The PM is responsible for loadshedding, shortage of petroleum products and life-saving drugs. The CM is about projects. The PM is responsible for SBP reserves. The CM is about projects. The PM is also responsible for the IMF, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

Yes, the CM is also about law and order. But the PM must tackle the Rs5 trillion budget deficit, the \$20 billion current account deficit, the Rs54 trillion national debt and the \$130 billion external debt. Yes, the CM is also about performance. But, the PM must manage the rupee-dollar parity (looks like the PM's honeymoon with the dollar is over).

The CM can claim 'budget surpluses' because billions just get credited to provincial accounts under the National Finance Commission Award. The PM always has to face a 'budget deficit' because there's not much left after disbursing to the provinces and the defence allocation.

The path from CM to PM is a learning curve dependent on four variables: attention, memory, processing rate and sequencing. Attention is the "ability to focus on information and tasks, and ignore distractions". Memory is the "ability to retain and recall information". Processing rate is the "speed at which a person is able to accurately process incoming information". Sequencing is "placing the detail of the information in its accustomed order". Wait and watch. Time has a 'wonderful way of showing us what really matters.'

The writer is a columnist based in Islamabad. He tweets @saleemfarrukh and can be reached at: farrukh15@hotmail.com