

The Business

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IMRAN INSISTS US CONSPIRACY BEHIND HIS OUSTER



Dubious project

While it is hard to deny that all major cities and towns in Pakistan need better roads and thoroughfares, it is also true that most new construction projects in the country do not fulfil the requirements of environmental protection. For that purpose we need independent environmental protection agencies that do not consider any political expediency while giving approvals. Be it urban development projects in Lahore or the Malir Expressway in Karachi, a close scrutiny of these projects reveals gross violations of ecofriendly construction that should be a priority for environmental watchdogs.

The Malir Expressway is affecting thousands of people living near it and does not consider the environmental impact it will have on the areas it is passing through, and much beyond. The project received approval from the Sindh Environmental Protection Agency a year after construction began, and that too on dubious grounds. An expensive project -- its cost at the moment is estimated to be over Rs27 billion; and by the time it is completed, the likely cost may touch as high as Rs40 billion -- the most significant violation has been that local stakeholders have been nearly excluded from all approval processes, while major inputs form civil society have also been glossed over.

Local residents should have a right to raise their voice against any injustices committed in the name of development. The acquisition of land that the Sindh government initiated for the construction of the project did not take into account the adverse effects of the project. This is not only about the people living in the area, but is also about the agricultural capacity of Malir that is at stake now. Malir as a fertile land has a long history which the government must respect. People living in adjoining villages have earned their livelihood from Malir for centuries. Moreover, there are fishing areas and hamlets spanning over thousands of acres of farmland that will not survive in the aftermath of this egregious construction. Karachi has already lost most of its green areas, which have all but disappeared under concrete. The city's produce needs are increasing by each passing year, while cultivation areas are bulldozed with impunity. In what may be an ecological disaster, hundreds of species of birds and plants that are thriving in Malir find themselves at the mercy of a project that could nearly make them extinct in these areas. The Sindh government's expected near-total apathy regarding this controversial project has been disap-

Securing CPEC & Balochistan



MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

The suicide blast targeting a van with Chinese faculty near Karachi University's Confucius Institute was an attack on China's soft power. The terrorists seemed aware that the institute symbolised China's cultural and civilisational expression, and that China, more than others, was keen to project a soft image.

Secondly, the terrorists used a woman suicide bomber to draw greater international attention and increase the impact. This has triggered a debate on the changing dynamics of the Baloch insurgent movement.

As expected, the reaction from China was strong: the Chinese foreign ministry said that those behind the incident would have to pay the price. The statement will increase the pressure on the Pakistani government. This time, Pakistan reacted to the attack in a more coherent manner than in the past. When terrorists belonging to the banned TTP attacked a bus carrying Chinese workers near the Dasu dam site in 2021, the then government had tried to cover up the facts, declaring the incident was due to a technical

fault in the vehicle. It was only because of Chinese pressure that the government changed its stance and allowed Chinese investigators to help the Pakistani agencies investigate the attack. In contrast, following the Karachi University blast, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif rushed to the Chinese embassy to express his condolences and promised to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Mr Sharif's gesture may be appreciated by China, but to address Chinese concerns about security, the state institutions here will have to take measures that can satisfy Beijing. This is also essential for the smooth implementation of the CPEC projects. Pakistan has already invested a large amount of money in protecting Chinese nationals and securing CPEC projects. A Special Security Division was created in 2016. It comprises two light infantry divisions (reportedly, the first was created in September 2016 and the second in 2020), with 15,000 troops each. The SSD also has support from 32,000 security personnel forces of the Frontier Corps, police and Levies, apart from a dedicated intelligence network to prevent or neutralise terrorism-related threats.

The Chinese companies working on CPEC-related projects are satisfied with the security measures, as the Global Times, a state-owned Chinese newspaper, recently reported. However, the cost of security, to which China contributes, is very high.

Secondly, the entire approach to safeguarding CPEC is very conventional and mainly based on protecting the work sites and escorting convoys of engineers and workers. Chinese companies remain apprehensive about the security of their staff in major urban centres. Many Chinese working in Pakistan in small industries, such as restaurants and the manufacturing sec-

tor, do not get proper security cover.

The cost of security is also a major factor that makes CPEC projects more expensive. According to a media report, Pakistan has again postponed the approval of a Rs36 billion project meant to provide security to Chinese nationals engaged in the construction of the multibillion-dollar ML-I project. The latter is a mega project requiring a large security blanket. Besides, managing, training and screening of security personnel is also a critical aspect about which the Chinese are concerned.

Conventional security for CPEC projects is essential, but state institutions cannot ignore the strategic and political context. Cursing external elements alone cannot solve the problem. There is also a need for deep introspection and a review of approaches. A thorough review is required of Pakistan's policy towards the Afghan Taliban, who have not fulfilled any expectations related to terrorism threats in Pakistan emanating from across the border. The proscribed TTP are enjoying the full patronage of the Taliban regime, who give them access to the weapons left behind by Nato forces. Similarly, Baloch insurgents are still using Afghan soil to hide and to hatch terrorist plots against Pakistan.

The causes of unrest in Balochistan are well known and have been repeatedly discussed on these pages and elsewhere. State institutions are experimenting with selective measures — ranging from reconciliation to amnesty — to address the problem of insurgency. However, nothing has gone well because all such initiatives are poorly designed, and the purpose has been to isolate the insurgent leadership rather than bring fighters back to normal life. The security establishment is engaged in a broader dialogue

with the Baloch people, especially the youth. It is important to understand the perspectives on the ground. But first, it should lead to a change in approach, and second, political actors should also initiate such processes. Like the other provinces, Balochistan deserves a free and fair election, and this is crucial to creating a dialogue.

Fulfilling this demand won't cost much, and would, in fact, be a great leap forward in addressing the grievances of Balochistan and reducing insecurity for Pakistanis and foreigners in the country. If the state is sincere in isolating and demoralising the insurgent movement in the province, it will have to address the issue of the Baloch missing persons. Every suspect involved in terrorism and anti-state activities will have to be brought within the orbit of the rule of law. The judiciary will have to be efficient and decide such cases on a priority basis to give the message that justice is being done.

After ensuring this, the state institutions will have to focus on enhancing their analysis skills. No doubt, Baloch militancy has become a more lethal movement and is indigenising itself because of the current leadership of its groups. The Balochistan Liberation Army's Majeed Brigade has become notorious for using lethal tactics with an element of surprise.

The quick changes in its operational strategies make the job of law-enforcement agencies difficult. After the Karachi attack, the probability of using female fighters and suicide bombers in more complex guerrilla operations has increased. The law-enforcement agencies need to be vigilant. There is a need to study the tactics and strategies of the terrorist organisations across the world; the BLA is not averse to adopting the tactics of the religious terrorist groups as long as these serve its purpose.

The crucial war of narratives

ABBAS NASIR

With Hamza Shehbaz finally in the saddle as the chief executive of the PML-N's power base of Punjab, he will now have to focus attention on good governance and delivery, if he wishes to consolidate his political hold on the province.

This wrenching of the reins from the unwilling hands of the PTI was achieved, despite the PTI trying every trick in the book and, legal experts say, going beyond the pale of the Constitution. This had enabled the governing party, and the PML-Q faction allied to it, to delay the inevitable, but not more. The law prevailed in the end.

Seeing his son and key loyal lieutenant for the past two decades occupying the seat of power in Punjab would normally be viewed as a great source of strength by the prime minister, as he would not then be distracted by issues in the heartland of his support base. However, this could be a double-edged sword as there has been justified criticism of why the PML-N could not find even one suitable leader from the party to take up this position, preferring,

instead, to 'keep it within the family'. Each move by Hamza Shehbaz will be put under the microscope by the PML-N's opponents and whatever remains of the independent media in the country, to see if his nomination and ascent to the highest office in Pakistan's most populous province is based on merit or owes itself to nepotism.

He can't afford to falter as the PTI, with its aggressive and divisive campaign after the loss of office, will target him relentlessly for acts of omission and commission. His handling of the Imran Khan-led protest march to Islamabad could be one of the first tests of his nerves and skills.

In the initial months of his first stint in office, he will have to deal with a major law-and-order challenge as his government's jurisdiction extends from south Punjab to the Attock Bridge, beyond which is the PTI's citadel of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

If the protest march reaches even a quarter or less of the two million people that Imran Khan has promised to bring to the federal capital to force immediate elections, a large contingent of his supporters will have to come from KP and urban Pun-

jab. Logistics will matter. So will his hold over the administrative machinery. He will be tested, but it is too early to say whether he can handle the challenge firmly, yet also with kid gloves, in order to avert a major crisis and prevent the situation from spinning out of control.

To my understanding, the role played so far by Hamza Shehbaz has been to attend to issues of members of the Punjab Assembly and to address demands of constituency politics, including deciding on and running the PML-N set-up at that level. In terms of his achievements in that area, PML-N insiders say he has acquitted himself well and that the party rank and file as well as leadership have faith in him. How far has that role, even if he was successful at playing it, equipped him to run the government is another matter.

He may turn out to be an effective manager and a sure-footed administrator like his father, but his one serious handicap is his lack of charisma. Just like Shehbaz Sharif, no matter how hard Hamza Shehbaz tries, he does not make that electric connection with, or charge up, supporters like his cousin does. Whenever Maryam

Nawaz Sharif addresses supporters, her bond with workers/supporters is instantaneous and one feels they are on the same page from the word go. Paradoxically, despite lacking in charisma and possessing below average oratory skills for a national leader, Nawaz Sharif quickly established his presence on the same page as his PML-N support base. The truth is that charisma too goes just that far and not beyond. In any case, neither father nor son have the luxury of learning on the job for a full five-year term as, in the best case scenario, they can only be in their respective offices until next August.

However, their success and their party's success in the next election will hinge on this short stint as the challenges facing the country are immense and, with a paper-thin majority, there are compromises inherent in the delicately assembled 'national unity government'.

They will have to tread with care and, at the same time, with speed. Understandably, during Ramazan, things work at a different pace, but after Eid major issues, particularly those to do with the economy, will need to be addressed — and addressed

with vision and heart. Reducing the burgeoning deficit will be painful, no matter how imaginative the ideas that are put to work. I am sure great minds are at work to plot the best course forward. Let's hope the best course isn't one that inflicts more pain on the shirtless. At the same time, those at the helm have to be mindful of the impact on the public mind of the constantly divisive message being pulsed by three to four leading lights of the last government. Their common refrain are warnings of bloodshed. These may be tiresome for some of us but can be seen as a signal by the PTI cadres, an instigation.

I'd be the last person to suggest administrative measures against anybody, but surely the government of the day needs to acknowledge that it has so far conceded a walkover to the current opposition in the battle of narratives. This can be costly as this week's events in Madina showed. Surely, something needs to be done to counter them. Those in positions of authority need to state with one voice what is acceptable and what isn't. Such appalling behaviour can't be ignored and shouldn't be rewarded.

DR FARRUKH SALEEM

Imran Khan wants to invade Islamabad with his 'two million' supporters. Fawad Chaudhry is going on about 'civil unrest'. Sheikh Rasheed is chattering about a 'civil war'. Our politicians are playing their dirty political games in the midst of a serious economic crisis. If this continues there will be disastrous consequences. To be sure, one of the two has to be buried — bury the 'economy' or bury talk of 'civil unrest'. The biggest burden on the state of Pakistan is the government of Pakistan. The government of Pakistan loses so much money on a daily basis — and if these losses can be managed a majority of our financial problems will disappear in thin air. I will quantify five of these daily losses.

Petrol/diesel: On February 28, ex-PM Imran Khan announced two major subsidies and one tax exemption. That Monday, Imran Khan slashed the price of petroleum products by Rs10 per liter and electricity tariff by Rs5 per unit plus tax exemption

Daily losses

for companies and freelancers in the IT sector. The ex-PM said that "there would be no increase in petrol and electricity prices until the next budget" and that "your electricity bills will go down by 20 percent to 50 percent."

We consume around 20 billion liters of petrol and diesel a year and the ex-PM's announcement of February 28 would mean a daily loss of roughly Rs3 billion or a monthly loss of around Rs100 billion. This is Rs100 billion that the government does not have.

Gas: As per research conducted by Engineer Arshad Abbasi, around "126 billion cubic feet of gas is lost in this country every year." This means that the 'economic value' of Unaccounted-for-Gas (UFG) is almost \$4 billion a year. Lo and behold, we lose \$4 billion worth of natural gas a year. That is a daily loss of Rs2 billion a day every day of the year. En-

gineer Abbasi claims that "plugging methane emissions and leakages would hardly require \$500 million." Yes, if we plug the UFG hole we will not need the IMF.

Electricity: Imran Khan took the oath of office on August 18, 2018. That day the circular debt in the electricity sector stood at Rs1,140 billion. On April 10, PM Imran Khan was ousted as the country's prime minister following a vote of no-confidence. By April 10 the circular debt in the electricity sector had risen to Rs2,500 billion. That is a loss of Rs1 billion a day every day for the past 1,331 days of the PTI government.

Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs): There is a bloodbath going on in our PSEs — PIA, Pakistan Steel, Pakistan Railways etc. PSEs are taking on additional debt of Rs700 billion a year. The govern-

ment doles out roughly Rs900 billion a year in what the government calls 'grants'. On top of that, the government hands out around Rs200 billion a year on what the government calls 'subsidies'. In 2018, PSEs accumulated losses were estimated at Rs1,400 billion. The same has since doubled. That is a loss of Rs1 billion a day every day for the past 1,331 days of the PTI government.

Commodity operations: Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation (PASSCO) claims that it provides "food security at national level...undertake import/export of different food grains...carry out agro business..." Whatever PASSCO does, at the end of the year it loses around Rs180 billion a year. That is a daily loss of Rs500 million. Solution: There already is a \$300 million World Bank supported 'Strengthening Markets for Agriculture and Rural Transformation (SMART)' programme in place. SMART calls for disbanding PASSCO. The only way out for the new government is to get rid of these daily losses.