

The Business

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Subsidies withdrawal

The government has decided to extend Ramazan subsidies on five essential food items of atta, ghee, sugar, rice and pulses till the end of the fiscal year on 30 June 2022. This is without doubt premised on the rise in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) from 12.7 percent in March to 13.54 percent in April 2022, with core inflation (non-food and non-energy) rising from 8.9 percent in March to 9.1 percent in April 2022 and with the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) rising from 7.36 percent July-April last year to a whopping 22.89 percent in the current year (attributable largely to the eroding rupee value). Given that economic indicators take some time to reflect policy changes, the rationale that the PML-N-led coalition government needs more time as it has been less than one month has merit, yet what is extremely disturbing is that like the PTI's economic team, the current govt has, to-date, allowed political considerations to prevail over economic compulsions. The major responsibility for persistently high inflation during the previous govt's tenure lay with the massive rise in current expenditure of which subsidies are a significant component. One would have hoped that upon assuming office on April 12 it had hit the ground running to reverse policies that were a source of major concern. True, unlike newly-elected governments, the PML-led government does not have the luxury of a honeymoon period where politically unfeasible economic decisions can be implemented yet what is indefensible today is that while subsidies are being extended to combat inflation. In other words, in spite of the severe contractionary policies being implemented by the SBP, with implications on output in months to come unless some remedial measures are taken, inflation has continued to rise. One would hope that the government is consciously aware of the fact that the next Monetary Policy Committee meeting is scheduled on May 23 by which time one would hope that the Governor SBP has been appointed instead of relying on an acting governor. The govt may be waiting to make key appointment and policy decisions till negotiations with the IMF on the seventh review begin, scheduled for early this week. Those who argue that the IMF will be as inflexible as it was during the last weeks of the PTI administration in revisiting some of the agreed time-bound conditions/structural adjustments must remember that the situation has changed somewhat on two counts. First, PM Shehbaz Sharif's visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE have reportedly been successful though the exact amount of support has not been revealed due to the well-known habitual reluctance of these countries to make it public knowledge. The govt is required to dig in and begin to take some politically challenging decisions instead of extending packages that would fuel inflation further and which the coun-

Starving and veiled

RAFIA ZAKARIA

“Muslim women are not worried,” according to a spokesperson of Afghanistan's Ministry of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. This characterisation of Muslim women's feelings stems from the new rules issued by the Taliban regime on Saturday mandating a face covering for all Afghan women. Afghan women must now wear the burqa that covers them entirely, with only their eyes exposed, or they can wear an abaya, along with a hijab, and a face veil.



Warnings will be issued to the male guardians of those who do not comply, after which they could face jail time if their women relations still refuse to submit to the Taliban's diktat. Women government employees not wearing the face covering would be sacked, while male employees with women family members who defied the injunction would be suspended from their jobs, if they actually have one.

It is a predictable if dystopian situation. Half of the Afghans are estimated to be facing starvation as their aid-fed economy has collapsed. When the Americans left last August, about 40 per cent of the economy was propped up by foreign aid. In the aftermath of the American exit, very few aid organisations, if any, remain. This means that an end to food shortages is unlikely. The Taliban, perhaps petulant because of the lack of recognition they have received from the international community, may have calculated that it is better to do what they want and be who they are. Forcing women to veil themselves, it now appears, is a reflection of their authentic selves: obscurantist, intolerant and cruel. Most Afghan women are not surprised. While the Taliban may present the veil as a necessary requirement for all Muslim women, the actual reasons for its forced imposition seem to be political and strate-

gic. Over the past several months, the Taliban as a governing force have shown a complete inability to feed their people. The fact that the veil was not immediately imposed was a half-hearted decision as they made an effort to woo the international community and present a face that was not committed to the complete elimination of Afghan women from public spaces. That branding effort of 'Taliban-lite' fell flat on its face. In the world in which we live today, even humanitarian disaster is a competitive sport. Afghanistan may have been the ghastliest humanitarian crisis until this February, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine set the stage for a new one. Since then, the attention of humanitarian organisations and transnational lending institutions has been diverted to a conflict where those suffering are white and Western. The part no one says out loud is that it is easier for humanitarian organisations, whose boards are almost completely comprised of white Westerners, to have sympathy for them. So the aid is pouring into Ukraine, with Afghanistan and its now burqa-clad women wiped off the conscience of the world. It is easier to figure out the good guys versus the bad guys in the Ukraine conflict, which lends itself to the saviour narrative that accompanies the provision of aid to suffering countries. It is also worth noting that Afghanistan is facing tougher sanctions today than Vladimir Putin's Russia that has only seen a portion (and not all) of its currency reserves frozen.

The Taliban government has failed to make a case for their own country and the dire and tragic consequences are likely to include mass starvation. Instead of making Afghanistan hospitable to humanitarian efforts, they have appeared disinterested and outright hostile to any foreign presence. The latest edict on the veil could be a last-ditch effort to create a controversy and get some interna-

tional attention, perhaps even set terms for the rule to be rescinded if the international community provides emergency aid and the US releases Afghanistan's currency reserves. It is far more likely though that the Taliban, unable to showcase their power as a governing force in other ways, are doing so by forcing half the country's population into invisibility. Forced veiling creates a sudden and dramatic transformation of the public sphere, just the sort of reiteration of their power that the Taliban seem to crave. American feminists are not tuned in to the plight of Afghan women. Long gone are the histrionics over the burqa and the promises to liberate Afghan women. Instead, there is resignation, an attitude that suggests that most women like Hillary Clinton and feminist Gloria Steinem have accepted the fact that Afghan women must endure the brutality of the Taliban and quietly put on their face veils.

Last week's events in the US have further buried the issue of forced veiling in Afghanistan. Late last week, America's Taliban-equivalent conservatives scored a huge victory. A leaked Supreme Court opinion procured by a news agency revealed that the court has decided to overturn a landmark case (Roe vs Wade) that gave women the right to terminate their pregnancies. In some American states like Texas, this means that pregnant women cannot terminate their pregnancies even if they were at risk of losing their lives. Nor are there exceptions for rape, incest or serious genetic abnormalities. Other Republican-controlled states are getting ready to pass 'feticide' statutes, in which women can be convicted for murder if the baby they are carrying is stillborn.

It is a bleak moment for Afghan women. The veil itself is not the biggest issue facing Afghan women, but the Taliban's obsession with it means that they are uninterested in focusing on larger issues such as maternal health, immunisations, lack of education and malnutrition. The absurdity of it all is highlighted by the truth that Afghan babies are dying in huge numbers and all that the Taliban government has to say to their mothers is 'wear a burqa'.

India and its smaller neighbours: Geographical compulsions and challenges of coexistence — I

AMBASSADOR SHAHID MASROORGUL KIANI@

Even a cursory glance at the Asian geographical map reflects China and India, 'jutting' out as two huge states, hedged in the massively large canvas of other numerous states, from the tiny to the medium sized. As one then moves towards the South Asian region, the sheer physical size of India overshadows its other neighboring states; its huge population and equally large economy gives it the muscle to, at times 'intimidate' its smaller neighbors. Soon after independence, India and its leadership, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, an ultra-nationalist and one of the leading lights of the anti-colonial movement, in the initial post-independence period, were imbued with the spirit of ending the colonial rule globally, 'based on anti-colonial politics of a unified multi-ethnic and multi-religious grounds, with lofty ideals of universalism'. As independent India gathered strength, the admirers of this anti-colonial fervour faced disappointment; India, like its colonial masters was unable to avoid the pitfall of 'flexing' its muscles in its neighbourhood. This was felt more in the smaller states; the smaller neighbors, which include Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, who are all members of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), have expected that the 'bigger neighbor' would be generous in its dealing, but the ground realities are nothing which India can be proud of. It seemed that India had forgotten its struggle for freedom, and thus, ignored the legitimate aspiration of its smaller neighbors, who justly wanted to be treated equally on the principle of sovereign equality. India imposed unequal treaties on Nepal and Bhutan and going against a treaty signed with Sikkim in which its sovereignty was recognized, it was forcibly annexed.

As the Kashmir War was imposed on Pakistan right after independence, it was the first to feel the pinch of neo-colonial arrogance. India, under a system of government which was initially the Congress or its legacy, or its successor, much more unsophisticated in its governance, cannot be expected to be com-

passionate or fair to its minorities, especially Muslims, who constitute the largest minority in the country. India abandoned those moral principles, the message of Mahatma Gandhi, in which it used to take such pride, and resorted to methods of repression which probably exceed those of the rivals, anything the British ever wrought against their Indian colonial subjects since 1858. This was followed by the 'big brother' pinch felt to some extent in different periods by Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, but it was Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in particular who felt the 'pinch' by India. When these smaller neighbors of India feel visibly comfortable with China, it unnecessarily arouses India's suspicion. The regional record reflects that India is not willing to learn any lesson, and thus, no course correction in its foreign policy in the region is even contemplated. India messed with China and faced dreadful consequences in 1962 as it vacillated on the offer by China to negotiate the border demarcation. China's relationship in the region, particularly with its smaller neighbors, is aptly summed up by its leadership that 'China shall never seek hegemony nor seek advantage of its size to coerce smaller countries.'

On the other hand, India's foreign policy record towards her neighbors since independence, generally, was unquestionably interventionist, but sticking to its double standards, it remained strongly opposed to the interference of other major powers into the region. Of late, however, this strategy seems to have changed, not only because of India's changing outlook and ways, but also due to geopolitics and the emergence of China as a regional and global economic power with an impressive defensive shield.

India and Pakistan: A adversarial relationship reignited  
Ousting the British colonial masters from India was a cause on which Muslim and Hindu leadership led by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Jawahar Lal Nehru respectively, had no differences, even though they had, otherwise, an adversarial relationship. However, it was odd that the Hindu leadership had an unrealistic approach to the demand of the Muslims to have their homeland carved out of India.

The Muslims could not have exchanged colonial masters from the British to the Hindus. The transfer of assets to Pakistan was secular Nehru's first post-independence credentials' litmus test and he miserably failed. To many, the antagonism between Pakistan and India seems a bit odd, but according to Abdus Sattar, Pakistan's former Foreign Minister, "The roots of the antipathy can be traced to the history of Hindu-Muslim relations and contention between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League". Logically, seven decades are enough for the bitterness to boil over, but the incumbent Modi government's policies have vowed to continue on the same lamentable path, targeting the Muslim minority that critics say explicitly ignore Muslims' rights and is effectively intended to disenfranchise millions of Muslims. This stands as a testament to the foresight of the Muslims who had made up their minds in 1940 to lead their lives away from the prying eyes of the Hindus and their leaders.

Independence for states normally brings immense joy and celebrations and camaraderie with each other. These states, having suffered under cruel colonial rule, also stand in solidarity with other states who are struggling to break free of the colonial yoke. Pakistan had expected that India too shall abide by the agreement made to transfer the share - both monetary and non-monetary - to Pakistan in the spirit of camaraderie, and peacefully negotiate other thorny issues, ranging from sharing water, border demarcation to seeking the wishes of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. While it was not wholly unexpected of the Indian leadership to get over its antagonism to the new neighboring Muslim state, but to renege on most of the agreements and promises it had made to Pakistan and the then colonial British government, was shocking to say the least. Pakistan, a much smaller state, as compared to India, badly needed its share of the finances and instead, it had to be content with crookedly demarcated borders, especially in Punjab, which impacted negatively on Pakistan vis-à-vis the Jammu and Kashmir state, and, not surprisingly, the dispute which followed and its horrendous outcomes. Avtar Bhasin, a known expert on Pakistan-India

relations, did not mince any words when he stated, "Whether India likes it or not, Pakistan has come to regard Jammu and Kashmir as the core issue between the two countries. The entire discourse between the two countries in the last seventy years revolved around Kashmir". He sums it up, "If the problem has come to this pass, India has to shoulder much of the responsibility for it too" and that "India's biggest failure in Kashmir lies in the fact that in the last seven decades it allowed alienation among the vociferous sections of the population."

If one leaves aside the 1948 and 1965 wars, which were Kashmir dispute related, India's propensity to flex her muscles on her neighbors has never abated, even when the outcome has mostly been ordained - a humiliation. In an incident in the Pulwama district of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), in February 2019, in which paramilitary soldiers were killed as a result of a suicide attack, the Indian government, without any proof blamed Pakistan, even though Pakistan denounced the act of terrorism according to its stated policy on the same day. It refuted Indian allegations and termed it as an Indian attempt to divert world's attention from the excesses and grave violations of human rights in IIOJK. Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a televised address on February 19, responded to Indian threats by rejecting the alleged connection of Pakistan in the Pulwama attack and asking for evidence to corroborate the involvement of Pakistan and to share any actionable intelligence. He also made an offer of talks to India on all issues, including terrorism. The Prime Minister issued a stern warning to India that any attack from their side will be retaliated in a similar manner, but Modi's government remained unrepentant and the result was Pakistan Air Force (PAF) shooting down two Indian fighter jets in Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK).

In the continuing 'blurred' picture of Pakistan-India relationship, the initiatives taken by Pakistan currently reflect three significant developments that point towards a possible 'détente' in the bilateral relationship. First was Pakistan and India's Director General Military Operations' (DGMO) announcement of February 2021, to a recom-

mitment to the original ceasefire accord of 2003, reached four years after the Kargil War (for Pakistan, protecting the civilian population of Azad Kashmir from a hot LOC was a priority, especially given the escalation in violence during long spikes seen over the years). This agreement also aimed to reinforce confidence-building measures.

Secondly, the Kartarpur Corridor between India and Pakistan, which opened in November 2019, allows Indian devotees to visit Kartarpur Sahib gurdwara in Pakistan. The Kartarpur Corridor has strategic importance and can go a long way in bringing the two countries closer to diplomatic dialogue, since the two countries may turn over a new leaf to build strong ties, bury the hatchet, and increase people to people contact which shall spread love and bring peace in the region.

Thirdly, in a rare instance of cooperation in a tense relationship between the two neighbours, India sent the first shipment of 2,500 metric tonnes of wheat for Afghanistan through Pakistani territory on February 22, 2022. These three significant developments have the potential to break the ice of 'incommunicado' between Pakistan and India, provided India acts in a manner to bury the past and move forward in the larger interest of bilateral and regional peace. India has to realise that the decision to scrap Article 370 of its constitution in 2019, which had given IIOJK special status, has destroyed the region's identity. IIOJK is now a union territory and will no longer have an independently elected government. This alone should be an eye-opener. India has to realise that the situation in the post-370 scrapping is untenable and the population in the region is up in arms. The flip side is an all-out war between the two nuclear-armed neighbors that would lead to unimaginable destruction.

(To be concluded)

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