

The Business

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Israeli impunity

Perhaps not many today will remember Rachel Corrie, the young American activist who was killed by an Israeli Defence Forces bulldozer in 2003. Israel got away with that — just like it has gotten away with its relentless oppression of the Palestinian population. The occupying force has never been afraid to use the impunity it knows it has. And now it has killed an Al Jazeera reporter in a blatant act of violence that the world must at least condemn in the strongest words. For decades now, the world has looked away as Israel has unleashed terror on Palestinians. Will they speak up now, after Al-Jazeera's Shireen Abu Akleh received a live bullet in her head at the hands of the Israelis and lost her life? The Palestinian journalist was reporting on an Israeli military operation in the city of Jenin where Israeli security forces have intensified their raids in recent weeks. The surge of violence in the past couple of months has been conveniently ignored by most of the Western media. According to reports, Israeli forces have also wounded another reporter Ali Samodi who works for the Jerusalem-based Quds newspaper.

In keeping with its propensity to blame everyone but itself for its crimes, Israel is trying to sell the narrative that possibly Palestinian gunmen fired the shots that hit and killed Akleh. However, the fact is that Israel remains one of the most dangerous countries for any journalist doing their job well. Human rights activists and watchdogs have been highlighting Israel's highhandedness for long now, but the state of Israel has never given much weight to condemnations and protests and has continued to try and silence the voices of Palestinians who have been deprived of their homes and are under constant threat of violence and destruction.

If Israel can kill a prominent journalist like Akleh, one can only imagine what happens to other citizens in the occupied territories. Gaza and the West Bank have been on the receiving end since long, but the world is not holding Israel accountable for its misdeeds. Israel has hardly ever held its soldiers accountable and in fact such tactics receive indirect approval from the state. Targeting the press has been an old strategy of Israeli forces to deter reporters from covering their crimes. This cold-blooded murder must stir the world. Israel has been committing extreme violations of human rights which must draw immediate attention from world bodies including the United Nations. Temporary ceasefires may end direct raids for some time but till the architecture of occupation is still standing, Israel will continue its brutal ways. At some point, this system of apartheid that Israel has imposed will have to be ended.

A perfect storm

S. AKBAR ZAIDI

There are two dominant trends — closely interlinked and overlapping — which will determine the shape and path ahead for Pakistan over the next several months, perhaps the next couple of years. The first and most obvious is the precarious state and nature of Pakistan's economy; the second pertains to the hostile and confrontational politics-in-opposition of Imran Khan.

To start with, perhaps the current government needs to clarify whether the economy is being run by a former finance minister sitting in London or by the current one. Their narratives, usually at odds with each other, add confusion to an increasingly non-existent economic reform programme, undermining confidence.

Weeks after taking office, the coalition government has no plan, perhaps not even a clue, at a time when the global economy is being hit hard by war, supply chain disruptions, and an impending economic crisis, leading to rising inflation, currencies and interest rates, globally. The government needs a clear plan, beyond blaming the previous government, of what it hopes to achieve. It was always aware of how bad the economy was, and this was one of its main rallying cries. If it does not have the courage to set things straight, it should not have embarked on its present adventure. The economic slide, while clearly a manifestation of mismanagement by the previous government, in addition to its inability to undertake structural reforms, has become worse over the last few weeks. Even positive expectations and hope about what the current government could achieve are swiftly fading. The brief breath of fresh air is evaporating, and the real stench of failure and a dying economy is becoming manifest.

Sadly, the IMF, with its stringent conditions, continues to be this government's only hope, dominating and determining economic policy. Yet, the conditions required to get a tiny loan from the IMF on expectations that other donors will follow, will

add to a huge inflationary spiral to the already persistent 13 per cent-plus inflation rate. A weaker rupee, growing imports, expanding and unmanageable current account and fiscal deficits, all create a perfect storm on which IMF conditions to remove petroleum subsidies will add much fuel to an already incendiary situation.

This government's biggest problem and Achilles heel is that it does not know how long it will be in power, and the uncertainty in its tenure will undermine all initiatives. After an election, no matter how fragile the economy, every incoming government expects that it has some years ahead and has opportunities to either wait and see or experiment with possible solutions. This government has no such cushion or luxury.

While it is easy to label him as one, Imran Khan is no fascist, and for anyone to call him that is a lazy and an incompetent understanding of the notion of fascism and its features. He is merely a right-wing populist authoritarian leader, similar to many male leaders across the globe currently and in the recent past. There is little doubt that he is hugely popular and can draw large crowds wherever he goes, no matter what he says. He also has a large public presence across the media. Yet there are a number of flaws in his understanding of what such a following and what such populist support imply. This is not 2014 and he is no longer an unknown, untested, bankable, political leader. Moreover, he no longer has the formidable support of Maulana Tahirul Qadri, without whom his dharna would have fizzled out much earlier than the 124 days it lasted. He is also not considered Mr Clean any longer, as increasingly he is forced to defend individuals close to him and his wife. In addition, many of his former close allies have abandoned him and have many a tale to tell. Perhaps most importantly, his backers and handlers who helped him and put him in power are angry that he has admitted how some senior generals became his 'eyes and ears', naming one in particular.

While his support in key circles may have waned,

a key perspective missing in Imran Khan's political understanding is that the popularity of one individual, no matter how exaggerated, is insufficient to win elections in a parliamentary system. A hundred and seventy seats need to be won, and allies, collaborators, opportunists and electable associates are required in each constituency, no matter how popular the leader may be. Constituency politics is critical here and every seat counts as much as any other. Authoritarian populism works best under a presidential system, but a few electoral party machines can deliver similar results. While a number of such populist leaders have such parties functioning at the constituency level, the PTI is not one of them. Popularity is an important, though insufficient, criterion to win parliamentary elections, something Imran Khan needs to understand quickly. With the economy and oppositional politics perfectly entwined, with consequences for both, the upper hand, for now, rests with the incumbent government. No matter how many hundred thousand appear on Imran Khan's call later this month, they will soon disperse. A power show, is after all just that — a show of support and strength, but not necessarily of winnable seats. The government in office has the ability to play a long hand and outmanoeuvre the belligerent leader of the opposition. The advantage which the government has needs to reveal itself when it meets the IMF next week, albeit at high short-term cost. All indications suggest that this government intends to stay in office at least till November, when the important decision about the COAS will be made. This is the arena where Pakistan's gravest and most persistent failures of political economy repeat themselves, whether manifest through manipulation in the 2018 elections, or now, by supposedly turning neutral. The current and growing political contradictions within the ruling elite underline the fact that old structures, institutions and arrangements are no longer workable, and that only a radical and people-centred restructuring can provide an alternative future for Pakistan.

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

AMBASSADOR SHAHID MASROORGUL KIANI@

The only option is for accepting Pakistan's continued offer to work closely to design systems that would be more compatible with the aspirations of the people of the region, of which the best option is to adhere to United Nations auspices, the right to self-determination of the Kashmiris on both sides of the Line of Control, a right they have been denied to this day.

India and Nepal: Juggling borders and the economic factors

Governments in landlocked states continue to juggle, keeping the neighbouring states 'pleased', especially those who are blessed with access to the sea, and keeping their population burdened as they are paying high prices for even products of daily use. In this context, Africa and South Asia have woeful tales to share. On the other hand, since the end of the Second World War, fatigued with wars, massive loss of life, and economic devastation, Europe rightly realized the futility of remaining at odds and chose cooperation, which leads to peaceful coexistence; the result is a population that is prosperous and contented.

Nepal is one of the landlocked South Asian states on whom geography has thrust challenges, which at times, it was unable to cope with; India is one of its neighbors accompanied by a long list of coexistence travails. Nepal, rightly feels that being a sovereign nation, it should be able to make decisions in its national interest. Successive governments of Nepal and its people also had no ambiguity that free transit and trade was their right. Nepal also believed that exercise of these rights should not be considered an anti-India act, but its experience proved otherwise. Since, the signing of the Nepal-India Treaty of 1950, which the people of Nepal believe was imposed on their country by India, Nepal has been in discussion with India to return Nepal's territory, encroached by colonial Britain by the imposition on Nepal of various 19th Century treaties. However, India continues to behave as if it has inherited the colonial policy as the successors of the British. India, due to

its size, geopolitical location, and economic standing globally, has been able to 'sell' its narrative to major powers. The 1950 treaty with Nepal allows an open border system, and citizens of both countries do have the provision of equal treatment in the economic sphere. The treaty is known to be quite partial and Nepal has been made dependent on India, ranging from trade, economy to employment, and has little freedom in signing agreements with other countries, particularly within the region. Kiriti Nidhi Bista, the then Prime Minister of Nepal, had in 1969, called for 'nullifying the unjust treaty'. Dr. Shashtra Pant, a well-known Nepalese author, considers the 1950 India-Nepal treaty as 'detrimental to Nepal's sovereign position and prestige, that obscured its image in the international arena'. The desire of Nepal to become independent and self-sufficient, has been hampered because of India's neo-colonialism. A major part of Nepali media is directly or indirectly run by Indians, of which misinformation to Nepal's citizens is a direct result.

In the recent past, India imposed an economic blockade against Nepal, and has serious reservations as Nepal has shown a growing inclination towards aligning with China, and the Chinese model of economic engagement through loans and the Belt and Road Initiative, over what it considers an interfering policy of India. As compared to India, with which Nepal continues to have territorial issues, Nepal and China amicably settled the border demarcation in 1960; China ceded over three hundred miles of its territory to Nepal. The people of Nepal desire to escape from the web of Indian policy which aims to weaken and subdue them by dividing them into castes, religion, gender, and other related issues.

India and Sri Lanka: Tests of geographical proximity and ethnic mix

Sri Lanka's pivotal location in the Indian Ocean has 'forever' attracted the attention of major powers during the British colonial and post colonial period, especially by India, its northern 'big brother'. Colombo, the globally known Sri Lankan port is a jewel in the Indian Ocean. Of late, the United States and India have been concerned about China's focus on strengthening its economic

and trade ties with Sri Lanka. In its dealing with Sri Lanka, as compared with India's policies of arm twisting, China has employed economic incentives which have been applauded by the successive Sri Lankan governments and its people. Sri Lanka has been known to steer away from global politics, but it seems that its 'ship' has not been able to navigate the 'turbulent waters' of Indian global and regional ambitions and the politics of Tamil Nadu, its southern province, which overlooks the northern part of Sri Lanka.

Despite continued denials, India has not been able to come out of the 'cloud' of complaints by prominent Sri Lankan politicians about her 'overbearing' attitude and interference in the country's internal affairs. Sri Lanka's ethnic mix of Sinhalese, who are in a majority, followed by Tamils and Muslims are like an 'albatross' in the country's neck. Sri Lanka fought two decades of Tamil insurgency, during which successive governments in India and Tamil Nadu had been known to support the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who battled the country's security forces to establish a separate Tamil homeland. Ultimately, the secessionist movement was crushed by the Sri Lankan Government. Kunwar Natwar Singh, an Indian diplomat and politician, who served as the Minister for External Affairs, admitted in one of his writings that the Tamil Nadu government in 1986 had financially assisted the secessionist LTTE and that the LTTE had extracted monetary payment from the Indian government before they expressed their willingness to accept the Indo-Sri Lankan agreement as a political reality. He may have summed up this state of interference by maintaining that the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had 'mishandled' the Sri Lankan ethnic issue and it was no surprise that it 'failed'. The three-decade armed conflict between the successive Sri Lankan governments and the LTTE, cost an estimated 60,000 or more lives and according to one estimate, the costs of conflict since 1983 may at least be equivalent to twice the 1996 GDP of Sri Lanka. The lament is that this human and economic cost which was inflicted on Sri Lanka, despite the country having low in-

come but for long enjoyed a reputation for high levels of social indicators, comparable to those of much richer countries and well above those of its sub-continental neighbors. Even though, India has strong economic and trade ties with Sri Lanka, it is still miffed at Sri Lanka's growing economic ties with China. Economic relations with China, in particular, have gotten stronger during the last 20 years, with China emerging as the biggest bilateral lender and FDI provider to Sri Lanka. India continues to use its muscle and the Tamil card to intimidate Sri Lanka. For India to 'claw back' its once upon a time position as the leading economic and trade partner of Sri Lanka, is an uphill task when the competitor is China, virtually the world's leading economic power.

The importance of respecting sovereignty and adhering to coexistence

Since the end of the Second World War and the setting up of the United Nations in 1945, the United Nations Charter has been the guide for states, in which "respecting the sovereignty to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours" forms one of the significant parts. The declaration of the first Asian-African Conference at Bandung in 1955 laid special emphasis on the The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which are based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. It is surprising that while India is a signatory to the United Nations Charter and the declaration of the first Asian-African Conference, its record in the relationship with its neighbours, especially the smaller ones is least enviable. Abdu Sattar, one of the most prominent foreign policy practitioners of the past, had summed up the dilemma of the states of South Asia and had India in mind when he stated that the evolution of relations between these states can be understood in the secular paradigm of a conflict between a more powerful state seeking domination and its less powerful neighbors aspiring to protect their rights.

Instead of its foreign policy pushing policies that embody respect for the sovereignty of its neighbors and practicing coexistence,

history records that in the past seven decades, India has been embroiled in either conflicts or browbeating with its neighbours. It looks as if India aims to establish hegemony in its neighbourhood and desires to conduct relations with them on its own terms. India is breathing down the neck of Nepal and Sri Lanka and they hardly have elbow room to maneuver their foreign policy in furthering their national interest. If it means enhancing ties with China, there are numerous obstacles in their path. India's relations with Pakistan are in an incommunicado mode and several of Pakistan's offers to reengage have been spurned by India. Kanwar Natwar Singh has summed up India-Pakistan relations as they have been 'accident-prone'. "The future lies in the past. Kashmir is the ultimate hurdle. We have to deal with Pakistan in a pragmatic manner if we are not to make a mess of the relationship."

Instead of SAARC emulating the best of the European Union and ASEAN as regional organisations, India stonewalling the holding of SAARC Summit in Pakistan, has put a brake on this regional organisation to play its role for the common good of the region. The growing trend of Hindu nationalism under the government of Prime Minister Modi has disturbed all these smaller states, which they interpret as India becoming autocratic and possibly more aggressive. India's continued suppression of minorities and annexation of illegally occupied portions of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir state is depriving South Asia of enjoying the fruit of trade, connectivity, and economic integration. If India desires respect in the neighborhood, it has to spurn its yearning to dominate its neighborhood and instead embrace the true spirit of coexistence and respecting the sovereignty, in which lies the salvation of the region.

(Concluded)

The writer holds a Masters in Political Science (Punjab University) and Masters in Diplomatic Studies (UK). He has served in various capacities in Pakistan's missions abroad and as an Ambassador to Vietnam and High Commissioner to Malaysia. (Courtesy Monthly Hilal)