

The Business

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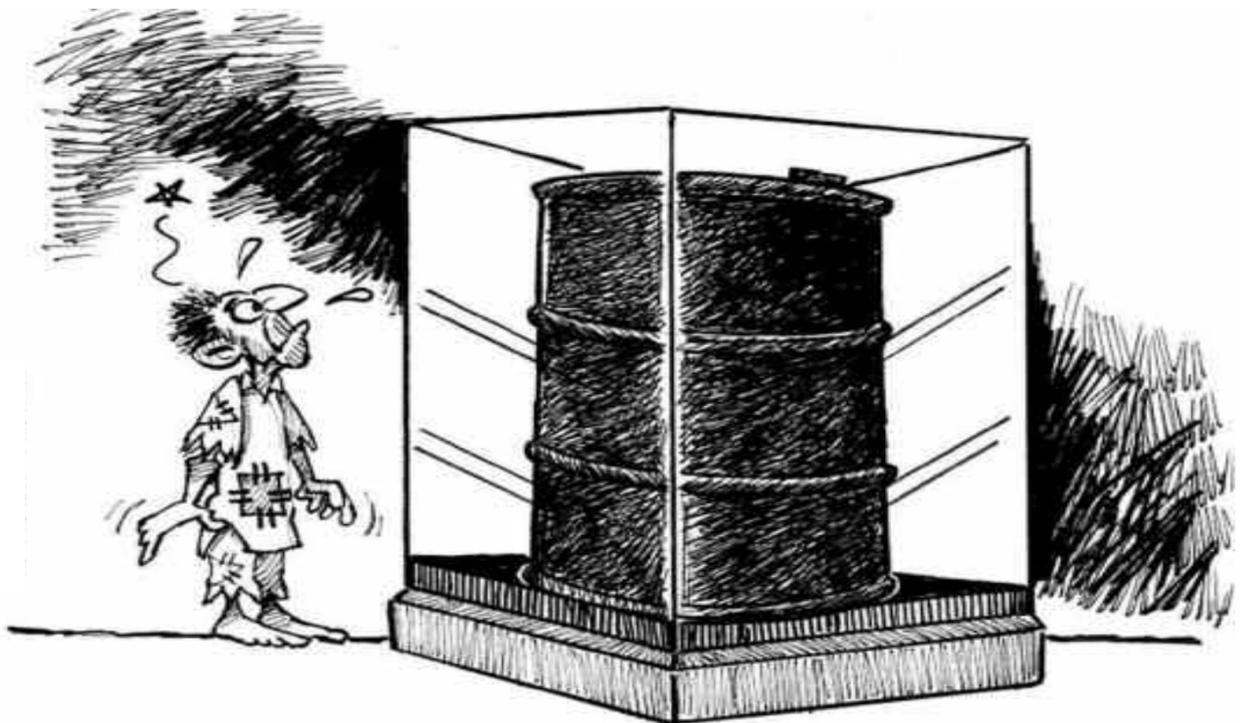
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Punjab Budget subsidies

The Punjab Rs 125 billion surplus budget, if delivered by the end of next fiscal year when elections would be looming large on the horizon subject to parliament being allowed to complete its tenure. It would still imply a shortfall of Rs 675 billion in the federal budgeted revenue of Rs 800 billion under the head of provincial surplus. The envisaged contribution of Punjab in the federal provincial surplus would have been considerably higher than the 16 percent that the province's budget surplus indicates and, disturbingly, further highlights the fact that while setting the federal provincial surplus the Finance Ministry in general and the Finance Minister Miftah Ismail in particular may not have engaged in meaningful consultative discussions with provincial finance ministers including in Punjab where the Prime Minister's son and his unconditional supporter is the chief minister. The total budgeted outlay for next year is 3,226.4 billion rupees and in a marked deviation from earlier PML-N budgets the allocation for infrastructure development takes a distant second place at Rs 216.68 billion to social sector development budgeted at Rs 1.083 trillion, perhaps indicative of the changes wrought in the political narrative by the Khan administration. Production sector is budgeted at Rs 127.32 billion or four percent of total outlay.

One would not be remiss in assuming that the International Monetary Fund would have serious reservations at the high priority accorded to subsidies, especially as these appear to be largely untargeted. However, true to form the PML-N-led Punjab government allocated the highest-ever to Annual Development Programme (ADP)—685 billion rupees—a tradition that is as evident in federal budgets as in provincial budgets though lack of fiscal space due to a reduced divisible pool collection by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR). In addition, salaries have been raised by 15 percent, above the Consumer Price Index of 13.8 percent year-on-year in May 2022, while pensions have been raised by five percent, well below the CPI—a discrepancy that is inexplicable given that utility and food prices, the major budget item of a pensioner, have risen by over 20 percent.

The Punjab government envisages raising tax collections by Punjab Revenue Authority from 155.9 billion rupees in the outgoing year to 190 billion rupees next fiscal year—a 22 percent rise in spite of the continuation of reduced sales tax on services for 30 plus sectors and a 44 percent raise in revenue collected by the Board of Revenue, the controlling authority in all matters pertaining to property, that includes enhancement of rates of luxury houses from July 1, enhancement of stamp duty from one to two percent in urban areas, and harmonization of PRA procedures with FBR and other revenue authorities. Austerity measures include a ban on purchase of new cars, a ban on purchase of air-conditioners exceeding 5 million rupees next year, ban on medical treatment abroad, ban on air travel.

Democracy on ventilator

RAOOF HASAN

Imagine a plane descending precariously through exceedingly turbulent weather with every passenger on the edge of the seats. Imagine a ship caught in stormy waves, bending from one extreme to the other, struggling to navigate the way forward.

Imagine Shehbaz Sharif, lording over the outcome of a vile contrivance, feigning to be in command with no access to controls. Imagine Pakistan—a country on the verge in the hands of the Sicilian mafia and associates, fighting desperately hard to shrug off the deepening perception and effects of a conspiracy having altered its course.

In these times of imponderable eventualities, some people seem exceedingly determined to further bruise the painful gashes which have already been inflicted upon the country. Is it that seeing blood has become a favourite pastime of the orchestrators and compromised is their stock? Is it that the country has been condemned to breathe on the bloated egos of those entrenched in positions of power, in the maintenance and promotion of whose narrative the survival of the state rests?

Is there no breaking free of this stranglehold whose tentacles are digging in deeper with time, laced with ever increasing quotients of venom and spite? Is there no inhaling some whiffs of fresh air, no hearing some songs of hope? It appears that the thick layer of gloom that hangs over has blocked all remedial paths which should instead be kept open and functional.

What is this confusion about conspiracy and why is it disowned so often? Though there is no ambiguity, let's walk the steps anyway to get

some clarity. After the receipt of the cipher, a special meeting of the NSC was convened to discuss it which was attended by the top civil and military brass. The statement issued at the conclusion of this meeting read: "The Committee expressed grave concern at the communication (read: cipher), terming the language used by the foreign official (read: Donald Lu) as undiplomatic. The Committee concluded that the communication amounted to blatant interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan by the country in question (read: US) which was unacceptable under any circumstances".

The statement went on to say that "the Committee (read: NSC) decided that Pakistan will issue a strong demarche to the country in question, both in Islamabad and in the country's capital, through proper channel in keeping with diplomatic norms".

The matter did not end there. In the 38th NSC meeting convened by Shehbaz Sharif on April 22, the matter (of the cipher) was deliberated again and it found a mention in the statement issued at its conclusion: "The NSC, after examining the contents of the communication (read cipher), reaffirmed the decisions of the last NSC meeting". But, strangely, it goes on to mention that "there has been no conspiracy".

When the 38th NSC meeting "reaffirmed the decisions of the 37th NSC meeting", it, inter alia, also acknowledged that the communication amounted to "blatant interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan by the country in question (read: US) which was unacceptable under any circumstances". It also owned up the decision of issuing the demarche to the US.

If there had been no conspiracy, how do we describe an act of "blatant

interference" in the internal affairs of Pakistan? And what is the basis to justify issuing a "strong demarche" to the concerned country? Indeed, these are strong words followed up by robust action. What was the need for all this? Did the two NSC meetings go wrong in drawing the conclusions and then reaffirming them? Or is it that we are now trying to understate the importance of what the NSC meetings took appropriate note of?

Also, is it that while "blatant interference" had taken place (duly acknowledged in both NSC meetings), there had been no "conspiracy"? Let me raise a simple question here: how does 'interference' take place? Is it preceded by some discussion, some planning, formulating some strategy, and putting the dots together for proceeding further with the chartered plan? Or does 'interference' just drop out of the sky deserving a 'strong demarche' to be served to some offending country?

Let me put the matter in the right perspective. It is always 'conspiracy' which is hatched first that leads to 'interference' in the internal affairs of a country, or achieving any other objective that may be envisaged as part of the initial planning. No interference can take place without a plan or a conspiracy to do so. In that case, what is this fight about? If some egos feel bruised, or some feathers feel the heat by using the term 'conspiracy', even acknowledging "blatant interference in the internal affairs of the country" is no less condemnable. Merely omitting the use of the word 'conspiracy' does not, in any conceivable manner, lessen the gravity of the ultimate action which, in the existent parlance, has been acknowledged as "blatant interference" in Pakistan's internal affairs by two succeeding meetings of the NSC.

The inability to recognize the real challenges is plunging us deeper into crises. We remain stuck in the past and its policies, and are reluctant to alter course to adjust to the constantly changing realities and secure a position that would insulate us from harm's way. We remain enamoured with a romance that, if it ever were there, has been dead and buried for long, leaving behind a bitter taste which is accentuating the national malaise. This slide must stop. This frantic pursuit of phantoms, this peep into a bottomless abyss must be aborted. The past is to learn from, not to repeat its rabid mistakes.

No state can prosper without strong, credible and accountable institutions. Simultaneously, if they begin trespassing their constitutional redlines, the state would be rendered weak and wobbly. Somehow, this is what Pakistan is faced with at this juncture and all pretensions of things being right are false and fabricated. Its constitution has been consigned to the racks, its democracy is on a ventilator, its judiciary delivers no justice, and its institutions are gravely infected. The state is in dire need of an urgent course correction.

The unfortunate part is that, instead of facing the stark realities, we are again espousing contrived narratives. Having failed us often in the past, the results are not likely to be any different this time around either.

Gradually, the signs of a state tearing apart are becoming visible. One only lives in utter bewilderment of this grave penchant.

It is in situations like one smelling of conspiracy that Shakespeare would always come to one's rescue. Lady Macbeth's words are an apt reminder of the deepening paralysis around us: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash the blood/Clean from my hand?"

Strengthening CPEC



SHAHZADA IRFAN AHMED

In this crucial time when our country is facing economic instability, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—with a massive \$62 billion investment plan—can play a key role as a 'game changer' for the national economy, especially for the development and prosperity of Balochistan.

The significance of this multi-billion-dollar corridor is, however, poorly understood. This is a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to connect more than 60 countries across Asia, Europe and Africa. CPEC promises to open up new vistas of socio-economic development and employment opportunities for the people of Balochistan.

We can say that Balochistan, and Gwadar in particular, is the linchpin of this mega project. This project will contribute to the development of the whole province and address various economic and social problems there. Gwadar will be transformed into an economic hub after the completion of several projects under CPEC. It is heartening to see that more countries are taking advantage of the investment opportunities offered by the special economic zones there. With the construction of the western route of CPEC, property value has skyrocketed in areas where these roads have been built. Other cities like Qalat, Quetta and

Zhob will also become more vibrant with the completion of the planned road network which will give a boost to economic activities and other development projects under CPEC.

Numerous road and transport, energy, education and training, industrial and other socio-economic projects are also being carried out under CPEC. Energy projects include a 320MW China Hub Coal Power Project, and 300MW Coal-Fired Power Project at Gwadar. Likewise, connectivity projects encompass the 19km four-lanes East Bay Expressway Gwadar which is near completion, linking the Makran Coastal Highway N-10 to the Gwadar Port. Those under construction are Zhob-Quetta, Kuchlak (N-50), Khuzdar-Basima Road (N-30), Hoshab-Awaran Road Section (M-8), Nokundi-Mashkel Road, Awaran-Khuzdar Road Section (M-8), up-gradation of DI Khan (Yarik)—Zhob, N-50 Phase-I, Mashkel-Panjgur Road and Quetta Mass Transit.

Upgradation and development of fishing, boat-making and maintenance services to protect and promote livelihoods of the local population is being carried out under the Gwadar Livelihood Project. As a matter of fact, CPEC will affect the province economically, commercially as well as geographically. A positive impact is likely to be a step towards mitigation of poverty and reduction of unemployment. It will be a catalyst for change in the shape of reduction of inequities among undeveloped provinces. Soon after PM Shehbaz Sharif took charge as the 23rd prime minister, he turned his attention towards CPEC which had been started by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

In his maiden speech in the National Assembly after winning election, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had said that his government would speed up the construction of CPEC. He had previously spoken highly of CPEC several times, calling it an ambitious blueprint to transform Pakistan into a major emerging economy so that the less-developed parts of the country could enjoy the dividends of development.

The corridor will not only help and

benefit Pakistan and China but the whole region, including Afghanistan, Iran, India, and the Central Asian Republics.

Road, rail, and air linkages will lead to a win-win model for all and is considered a real hope for a better future with growth and development of the economy. India and Afghanistan will sooner or later join this project.

Per a market pundit: "Pakistan may have some leverage in Afghanistan, but as far as CPEC is concerned, it cannot afford to miss this once-in-a-lifetime chance, especially when the people of the country are getting desperate for the promised future."

Unfortunately, there are those that are working on an anti-state agenda with the support of foreign countries and have been trying to undermine the development of the province by targeting state institutions, security forces and also Chinese nationals. In a span of just one month, the city of Karachi witnessed three bombing incidents—a suicide attack on Chinese teachers at the University of Karachi's Confucius Institute in which three Chinese language teachers and their driver were killed; and bicycle and motorbike improvised explosive device (IED) blasts in the densely populated Saddar and Kharadar areas targeting Pakistan Coast Guards and police. Moreover, there is no doubt that CPEC is the game-changer in the region and beyond. Both the Pakistani and Chinese leadership need to place special attention and focus—with dedication and commitment—to promoting CPEC and OBOR as a success story. They need to do this with strong political will, wisdom, vision, for real economic growth and common prosperity for the whole region through regional connectivity.

We should strengthen deep strategic cooperation with China and use CPEC to develop infrastructure, hydro-energy resources, and industrial cooperation for real dividends and long-term industrialization. No doubt, CPEC is not only for our economic growth but in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and will bring transformation through regional connectivity.

Minority task force

DR RAMESH KUMAR VANKWANI

It is a matter of great honour and privilege for me that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has appointed me chairman of a task force with a status of federal minister. The newly-constituted task force, comprising five senators and nine MNAs from minority communities, will be responsible for overseeing minority issues in line with the directions of the honorable Supreme Court.

Here, I also would like to thank all political parties, especially religious parties, that unanimously passed a resolution in the National Assembly in my favour to prioritize the issue of minority rights. It is also a great honour for me to have the trust of my fellow parliamentarians. I have been in parliament for the last two decades and I have tabled many bills to introduce new legislation or seek amendments for the public interest at large. Despite my very tough schedule, I ensure I am available to extend immediate help in case any segment of the community faces an issue beyond their local reach. My presence in parliament also helps maintain close coordination with other fellow parliamentarians to promote interfaith harmony.

I have represented the Hindu community before the honourable Supreme Court on many issues, such as kidnappings and abductions, forced conversions, restoration of temples and holy places, job quotas, and most recently to seek prohibition of alcohol beverages in the name of non-Muslims. I believe that by doing this social work, I am contributing something to make our society peaceful where everyone enjoys their rights.

The detailed decision of June 19, 2014 by the Supreme Court for the protection of minorities reflects one of my most significant struggles in the legal field.

The judgment is, no doubt, among the few such actions by the judiciary that attempts to address and ensure the rights of non-Muslim citizens. I am very hopeful that now all pillars of the state would be on one page on this issue, with the coop-

eration of the media. Although the role of the task force as advisory in nature, the decision by the current government to follow the unanimously passed resolution can be termed historic for various reasons.

First, it is an undeniable fact that minorities in Pakistan are facing numerous issues despite their unconditional love for the country. Forced conversions and forced marriages of underage minor girls belonging to the Hindu community have not been controlled yet. Such an unwanted situation creates a sense of insecurity and panic among the vulnerable minority communities. However, this can be overcome with the help of this task force.

Pakistan has a rich heritage and great potential for faith tourism. On several occasions, I have highlighted this issue that our holy places and historic sites are in dire need of protection by government institutions.

Most recently, our temple in Korangi, Karachi came under attack by some extremist elements, who attacked it in response to the persecution of Muslims in India. I believe that now I will be in a better position to preserve and safeguard our places.

I have visited many foreign countries and observed that the main objective of any welfare state must be to provide social and economic equality to all citizens regardless of their religious affiliations. Under the task force, I will try my best to play my due role in ensuring fair standards of living, access to justice, education, job opportunities and freedom of expression.

I would like to dedicate this new responsibility to Quaid-e-Azam, whose August 11, 1947 speech is still a ray of hope for all patriotic non-Muslim minorities.

I would like to assure everyone that the task force, under my chairmanship, is ready to accept the toughest challenge to implement what Quaid-e-Azam had promised with non-Muslim citizens 75 years ago. I pledge to complete all tasks with the support of all my colleagues, human right activists and the non-Muslim community.

I thank God Almighty who has enabled me to do something good for my country