

The Business

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NA SPEAKER TO GIVE DECISION WITHIN 30 DAYS: AYAZ



Iran, Saudi shake hands

After six years Iran and Saudi Arabia are about to shake hands, reactivate embassies in each other's capital and possibly jointly work to strengthen regional stability. And the common friend at work for this is Iraq, which shares socio-economic and political commonalities with both sides – unlike the times of Saddam Husein who would take pride in posing himself as custodian of the pro-Arab anti-Ajam history of conflicts. But the present inheritors of Saddam's pride think differently as they know firsthand consequences of partisan politics in the Gulf region. They want the leaderships of the two regional powers to sit together and sort out their differences on the diplomatic table. And given that peace in Yemen, brokered by the United Nations, still holds there is a fair chance of Iran and Saudi Arabia turning the page on their bitter relationship. On this decently, Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhemi visited Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran after his meeting with Prince Mohammad bin Salman in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. His visits to the erstwhile rival leaderships constituted culmination of Baghdad's consistent contacts with both to help revive their contacts that are almost non-existent since the two countries closed their embassies in the wake of violence that erupted following the execution of a noted cleric in July 2016 in Saudi Arabia.

Will the Iraqi mission to bridge up the gaps of mistrust between Iran and Saudi Arabia, fed as these are by historical hostility and regional geopolitics, bear fruit? Given Prince Mohammad's mission ostensibly aimed at harmonizing the perceptions and perspectives hosted by his government and public with existing global socio-political realities and the Iranian president's efforts to gradually give up on his country's uncompromising mindset on regional geo-politics, is it the personal perceptions and their notions about regional peace at work? Or, are these considered long-term state policies? That we don't know because threats to this emerging bonhomie are no less fragile. Since the signing of the Abraham Accords a number of Arab states have established diplomatic relations with Israel, and if Saudi Arabia hasn't done yet it may give it serious thought in the light of US President Joe Biden's upcoming visit. But Iran's President is against "all forms of rapprochement" with Israel. Saudi Arabia also has concerns about Tehran's nuclear ambitions. And the Arab world is expected to draw satisfaction in the wake of resumption of nuclear deal Iran signed with world powers to confine its nuclear programme to peaceful use of nuclear technology. But the Arab countries of the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, can derive satisfaction from good news that Iran's indirect talks with the US on reviving the 2015 nuclear pact are going to take place very soon.

Focusing on people's problems

ABDUL SATTAR

We are in the most unfortunate age of Pakistan's political history where every political entity is trying to appease non-democratic forces. From a pliant prime minister to the 'revolutionary' opposition leader, everyone is trying to reach the height of flattery.

For them, appeasement is the only way to enter the power corridors of the country. Therefore, they do not want to take any concrete action that might help alleviate the suffering of more than 220 million people of this country, who are being crushed under rising inflation and poverty, falling living standards, paucity of basic amenities and the terrible spectre of hunger and starvation. But our political elite – from PM Shehbaz Sharif to Imran Khan – is not bothered about it. The former is adding to the woes of the people by opening the flood gate of inflation, while the latter is busy spending billions of rupees on holding political gatherings and protests.

It is believed that in the past, rulers and politicians were reluctant to carry out any anti-people agenda for fear of the people's reaction. The ruling elite would not resort to frequent price hikes, fearing it could infuriate people, prompting them to take to the streets and weakening these rulers' hold on power. Even the most popular leaders could not dare to take steps that might create resentment among the people and would keep an eye on the issues faced by ordinary Pakistanis. For instance, when, in 1953, the Khawaja Nazimuddin government was rocked by allegations that it was involved in creating wheat shortages, the then prime minister had to resign.

People's issues also dominated the politics of Ayub Khan where not only the working class fiercely guarded their interests but other ordinary Pakistanis

were also conscious of their rights and ready to protect them. When the dictator increased the prices of wheat and sugar, it created a political storm prompting the late poet Habib Jalib to criticize the ruler whose pro-rich policy had wreaked havoc with the lives of millions of Pakistanis, forcing them to live in poverty. It was during this time that the famous '22 families' term was popularized by some pro-people intellectuals and poets who held the elite class responsible for the suffering of millions of citizens.

Such policy did not go unnoticed and people resisted it at all forums. Students, workers, peasants, trade unions, women's organizations, professional groups, poets, intellectuals and several other sections of society got united to challenge the mighty dictatorship of Ayub, taking to the streets and criticizing him to the extent that he finally resigned and was sent packing in an unceremonious way.

During ZA Bhutto's time, politics on people's issues seemed to be everywhere, and these problems took precedence over everything else. The morale of an ordinary person was high, and s/he was ready to go to any extent to protect the few gains s/he made since the decline of Ayub. But, unfortunately, Bhutto unnecessarily dragged religion into politics, infuriating clerics and resorting to sledgehammer tactics against those who advised him to stick to the manifesto of the party. His policies strengthened the religious right-wing that managed to topple his government with the help of a dictator whose regime heralded the death of pro-people politics in Pakistan.

Zia patronized religious organizations and promoted sectarian outfits. This policy depoliticized people, prompting them to focus on the issues that were not concerned with day-to-day life. The use of religion as a political tool seemed to be the order of the day. Zia created a

number of organizations that still have the potential to change the entire political discourse within no time through their militant agitation or violent tactics.

PML-N founder Nawaz Sharif and other political leaders who came after General Zia tried to follow his legacy, introducing regressive laws, and did little to undermine the religious and sectarian organisations that hampered the democratic development and growth of the country. Like Zia, they also patronized such groups in a bid to enhance their vote bank. Such policy boomeranged on the right-wing Punjab-based political party with some extremists targeting the party in a lethal way. Nawaz was attacked at a religious seminary when a seminary student hurled a shoe at him. Another PML-N leader Ahsan Iqbal nearly escaped death when he was shot at a political gathering.

The reconciliation between the PPP and PML-N in the late 2000s led to hopes that the religious right-wing would be undermined, but the advent of Imran Khan on the political horizon once again gave space to this section. Many from the Jamaat-e-Islami and other religious factions joined the PTI during the last 20 years, especially after 2011, stuffing the party with obscurantist forces. Khan started employing religion as a tool for political purposes. He undertook a number of measures that appeased the religious right – from Darul Uloom Haqqania to the urban middle class with conservative inclination.

Political discourse once again shifted from day-to-day problems to religious topics. Instead of coming up with any concrete policies that could have extended support to millions of Pakistanis who were condemned to live a life of abject poverty, Khan, as the PM of the country, offered his religious sermons at a time when his party members and allies were allegedly siphoning off taxpayers' money right under his nose. From the PTI to PML-N, ANP to PPP, JUI-F to JUP, all political parties seem to have given up plans to serve the people. None of them is interested in solving the myriad of mundane issues that matter in the lives of millions. All of them want to raise religious, national or ethnic issues that cannot address poverty, inflation, shelter and unemployment. It is this attitude of the mainstream political parties that has disappointed the people.

The Awami Workers Party, Haqqoq-e-Khalq Party, Communist Party of Pakistan, National Party, Red Workers Front, the Struggle Group, the International Socialist, Pakistan Mazdoor Kissan Party, Pakistan Mazdoor Ittehad and a few other left-wing groups are among those political entities that are still raising the basic issues of the people. From land-grabbing in Karachi to climate-related catastrophes in Gilgit-Baltistan and from unbearable inflation to privatization of state-run entities, they are vehemently opposing the policies of the government which is creating problems for the people. Also, these parties are also trying to address gender- and minority-related issues, but, unfortunately, none of these parties is part of mainstream politics.

The policies of the current government are likely to increase resentment among the people. Before any religious right-wing group creates chaos on some petty matter, left-wing parties need to mobilize people and launch a movement to turn politics towards basic issues like poverty, hunger, starvation, lay-offs, privatization, deregulation and unemployment. They must join hands with women and minority groups to mount opposition to the government's anti-people policies and the regressive agenda of groups like the TLP. Only a politics focusing on people's issues can transform the country.

Should sky be the limit?

REEM WAHEED

Ever since innovation caught momentum in the mid-1970s, we've been hurtled forward into increasingly digital worlds with no sign of slowing down. The web has been credited as our liberator, giving us access to the information we need to make informed choices. The question remains: if this is what sets us free, why has it been used to control us? Twitter's algorithm has been proven to favour certain politicians; by pushing right-wing perspectives on people, it tries to manipulate its users' thoughts. The Facebook-Cambridge Analytics data scandal weighs heavily on our minds. A company not affiliated with Facebook had access to data people did not consent to give, and the latter profited off the information they had no right to share.

Now, most apps can track user data across multiple platforms. Corporations know far more about us than 86 percent of users are comfortable with, according to TechRepublic, and the fact that their measures are usually secretive does not inspire confidence.

Many have heard of Neuralink, Musk's brain chip designed to help people communicate with electronic devices using only their thoughts. Neuralink will not be invulnerable to hacking, and although the most any malicious force could do is cause minor muscle movements, the technology will likely be refined in the coming decades.

It may seem outlandish that people would even allow it to reach such a point, but just 50 years ago, smartphones were a dream.

This control might extend further with the help of an electroencephalogram (EEG), as Scientific American reports. It maps out your brain waves, leaving them open to interpretation by scientists. This would truly take "storing user preferences" to a new level. It's worth noting that no one will be forcing you to undergo this in the near future, but the technology exists. More complex technology will

exist soon.

But should it? All of this would certainly benefit mankind. Neuralink would allow for a Body mass index (BMI) to be calculated automatically, and Musk claims it can also cure insomnia as well as several other illnesses. It aims to allow disabled people to use computers, phones, etc.

EEG shows one's brain activity in real-time and makes it easier to screen for seizures, tumors, and Alzheimer's, just for example. It's only used in medical science, for now, and if its mind-reading function ever materializes, it would give people insight into their strengths and weaknesses. Doctors would also be able to detect suicidal thoughts and thus treat them better in patients.

Science in itself is a pure entity. Nuclear energy is an efficient and clean way to produce energy — it is human scientists who molded it into a deadly weapon.

Science should always be cherished, it is the people who need to be feared. That's why this writer will not go as far as to say that technology should be shunned — it is only the handler of it that poses a threat. Tesla stressed that the "horrors beyond your comprehension" would be man-made because none of this is natural.

Fears surrounding big corporations have been wrongly focused on the mechanics behind technologies when this is purely neutral. A piece of data is not to be turned away from or rejected. It is just stupidity to deny all that science has done for us when wielded right.

We are, however, presented with a conundrum. We cannot reap the benefits of innovation without suffering the human-imposed drawbacks. The current system, where an elite few have the world at their fingertips, is too deeply entrenched in society for anyone not equally as powerful to challenge. There is nothing we can do to change the future that we can see coming: one without autonomy.

No progress is inherently damaging, but there may be damage that comes with progress and unfortunately, there is no

fail-safe method for the common man to eliminate it — keeping in mind the realities of how the justice system works and how important status is.

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." If the worst happens and these advancements are used to harvest data users don't consent to give (again) and their circumstances are manipulated (again), they cease to be human. They aren't thinking for themselves. Are we sentient beings if we are trained to simply parrot what is expected of us?

A very bleak future seems to await us, but the more cynical may say we are already living in it. So what if we aren't having things picked up from our thoughts? The social media pages we scroll, and the news we watch, all are biased. All are designed to feed us a certain narrative. Our choices are already not ours, as great thinkers like Noam Chomsky suggest. It is only delusion that causes people to speak about saving their futures. Those will be decided by factors out of their control. Free will might not even exist in today's world.

Then again, on the brighter side, humans have always been influenced by the opinions of others. This is simply how societies function. If we are truly without will now, we never were and there's no need to give up. It should not be getting worse than it is. Stretching back to the beginning of living in civilized settlements, people have held common beliefs. These would be instilled via interactions with others, and would eventually become strong enough to be cemented as customs. Another glimmer of hope is that customs change. It has been established that change will be extremely difficult, but over centuries, it could happen. Monarchs fell, and billionaires can too.

Thus to answer the titular question: the sky should be the limit, but we must free ourselves from the people engineering the rocket to take us there. Will we be able to do it? Probably not, but we must try.

And will the sky be the limit? Probably, for better or worse.

Science on health

DERRICK Z JACKSON

First, the conservatives struck down New York's requirement for gun owners to prove why they should be allowed to pack heat in public. The ruling ignored, among many practical realities, that bullets are now the top killer of children.

Then, in overturning Roe v. Wade's constitutional right to an abortion, they not only denied a pregnant person's right to their own body, but they also ignored the fact that children born to mothers who are denied abortions face a 3-in-4 chance of being raised in poverty. Now comes the court's crippling of the most important federal weapon available to avoid catastrophic climate change and its associated killing of tens of thousands of Americans every year with fossil fuel air pollution. The Supreme Court sharply limited the Environmental Protection Agency's ability to slash carbon pollution from power plants. The justices told EPA that it can set carbon emissions standards based only on interventions at individual power plants. It cannot do what it tried to do under the Obama administration — establish national standards for coal-fired power plants under its Clean Power Plan. That plan would have cut plants' emissions by shifting to cleaner energy sources.

In siding with coal companies and a posse of Republican attorneys general (not coincidentally, the same ones who generally represent the most gun-happy states rushing to ban abortion), the Supreme Court metaphorically threw children under the tailpipe and into the smokestack.

In a craven denial of climate impacts amid the political influence of oil, gas, and coal companies, the court put children in the firing line of fossil fuel pollution and climate change, rather than rescue them from harm's way. The harms

of pollution and a hotter planet were reinforced earlier last month by the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM). Nine months ago, NEJM and a total of 200 health journals called for "emergency action" on climate change ahead of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26) climate talks in Glasgow, Scotland.

The talks ended with no serious agreements and carbon dioxide levels soaring to new records. In response, NEJM launched a special series of studies and analysis on climate change and air pollution that is already killing nearly 9 million people a year globally. The leadoff articles in the series included a commentary from Lisa Heinzerling, a Georgetown University environmental law professor, who crafted the victorious brief in the 2007 Massachusetts v. EPA decision where the Supreme Court said the EPA had the authority to regulate global warming gases. She wrote that a ruling against the EPA could have "dire" consequences for "the control of risks related to public health and the environment."

Another leadoff article detailed the effect of fossil fuel pollution on children, co-authored by Frederica Perera, director of Columbia University's Center for Children's Environmental Health and Kari Nadeau, director of Stanford University's Center for Allergy and Asthma Research. They cited United Nations data and reports showing that nearly every child in the world is at risk from at least one climate hazard, and 1 in 3 live with at least four overlapping climate and environmental "shocks," including air pollution, water scarcity, vector-borne diseases, and severe heat, storms, and drought.

Excerpted: 'Children Will Suffer the Consequences of the Supreme Court's Rampage'. Courtesy: Commondreams.org