

The Business

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Democracy and dystopia



RAFIA ZAKARIA

In Ireland, ordinary people are hoarding firewood, afraid that they will not be able to heat their homes in the upcoming winter owing to the Ukraine-Russia conflict. In Iran, protests against the regime have continued into their fifth week. Last weekend, Evin prison holding political prisoners (which means anyone opposed to the regime) burned, with reportedly some female prisoners on the roof of the prison screaming ‘down with the regime!’ Next door in India, Hindu extremism has become so entrenched, such a delicious intoxicant that now the ruling party is calling for an economic boycott of Muslims. In the meantime, OPEC decided to reduce oil output despite knowing the dire condition of fuel inflation all over the world.

It is undoubtedly a dystopic universe. In Pakistan, we have our own tableau of discordant ‘realities’. Some

areas are still under water with displaced women and children dying for want of assistance. The videos of their hapless condition play in a loop on various television channels, even as ordinary people become desensitised to them. ‘What more can we do?’ they wonder, embroiled as they are in their own particular stories of want and desperation. The price of staples has risen exponentially, bloated from unchecked inflation which the government has not been able to control. The much-promised growth phase, as in previous years, is nowhere in sight. The flood relief website asks citizens to donate money, but the numbers also say that only a very tiny percentage of recipients have actually received the help. This is denied by various ministers but there are really no official numbers released that back that claim. If pictures are any evidence, it appears that help has not got where it should. If this mess weren’t enough to baffle and befuddle, elections were held in 11 constituencies in the country last weekend. The surreal nature of these is that voters had the option of voting for a leader who will not be joining parliament. As the results show, the vast majority did just that. So enfeebled and disenfranchised are the Pakistani voters that even non-representation, a nullifying variable in the democratic equation, seems attractive to them.

Nobody in power belonging to any party cares about the ordinary Pakistani’s general disillusionment with democracy, submerged as they are in the details of this or that electoral loss or victory. When the new government came to power a few months ago, politicians continued to rule in their own

own ethnic constituencies. This model has worked in the past; Pakistanis have voted along ethnic lines with great regularity and continue to do so now. At the same time, demographics have changed this milieu in that patterns of urbanisation have delivered a mixing of various ethnicities that was not present before.

Urbanisation and the improvements in economic conditions that result from it have produced their own kind of Pakistani voter. Those who have moved from villages where their elders are still under the thumb of this or that feudal leader or corporate farm owner or industrial farmer, may be less interested in voting unthinkingly for whatever party their leader belongs to in that moment. This means that the party leaders who have relied on these once-guaranteed seats as bastions of support cannot count on them with the same certainty that was once the case. There is also an argument that funds at the provincial level are being spent unevenly on rural areas where feudal and ethnic ties still provide guarantees and less so on cities. For instance, the current government is trying to expand the agricultural sector even though no tax revenue is extracted from these areas because agriculture (for the sake of guaranteed constituencies) has never been taxed. In the meantime, the urban voter who sees trash piling up, no clean water and constant blackouts is not happy. There was a time when this was true only of Karachi; now it is the truth in every city of the country.

Then there is the complex and pressing issue of being a country in a crisis and in want at a time when so many countries, not least the US and those of Europe, are enmeshed in their own

challenges. The attention Pakistan or Iran or Afghanistan could draw is diminished by a global context that is itself dystopian. If the midterm elections in the US upset, as expected they will, the Democratic majority, their place will be taken by isolationist Republicans who are not interested in helping Ukraine or anyone for that matter. Similarly, if the fuel crisis in Europe continues to intensify and Europeans have to go without adequate heating, the political cataclysms from that spectre will be divisive and likely far more authoritarian, calling into question the cohesion of the EU itself.

There will be no external saviours for Pakistan this time. All the allusions and accusations of this or that party being allied with the United States are in this sense blather. The ‘war on terror’, in which the West bizarrely pilfered billions even trillions of dollars to fight a largely overestimated enemy, is over and Pakistan cannot extort rents on its basis anymore — no matter how dangerous President Biden may think Pakistan is. The question that remains then is whether Pakistanis, after all our varied experiments with democracy, will continue to value the latter as a basis of governance.

The indications are bleak. Brazil, India, Hungary and even Italy seem to be drifting into fascism or at least towards fascism- and authoritarianism-friendly governments to seek protection from an unravelling world order. They will not actually get that imagined protection, but then, politics never has been about realities; it is about perceptions. The game is the same in Pakistan, and the survival of the country’s democracy, not so fledgling anymore, depends on it.

Cut in oil production

The Democrat lawmakers in the House of Representatives have introduced legislation requiring the removal of critical US military assets stationed in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a counter measure to the OPEC+ decision to cut production by two million barrels per day starting from November. The proposed legislation states in no uncertain terms: ‘If Saudi Arabia and the UAE hope to maintain a relationship with the United States that has been overwhelmingly beneficial to them, they must show a greater willingness to work with us — not against us — in advancing what is now our most urgent national security objective: the defeat of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine.’ The Saudis have suggested that the US ups its own domestic supply which at present remains untapped as the cost of its extraction is higher than the cost of importing it from OPEC. The sum of the military assets currently stationed in the kingdom and the emirates include 5,000 troops, and air defence systems such as Patriot missile batteries and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. The legislation by the three US lawmakers is no doubt in response to the anticipated rise in the price of oil in the US market come November which, in turn, is expected to negatively impact on the Democrats’ hopes of maintaining a majority in both houses.

The Houthi missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, most recently in January this year, were intercepted with the United States Central Command (Centcom) acknowledging that the US military ‘engaged’ two missiles aimed at Al Dhafra airbase which hosts around 2,000 US servicemen with ‘multiple Patriot interceptors.’ ‘In addition, there is the possibility of regional powers taking advantage of US withdrawal to launch their bid to change the regional status quo. The key question for the Saudis in the event that this legislation is passed is whether an alternate source of providing the same level of security can be procured? While the US does have state of the art defence systems yet one would assume that these can be replaced by procuring similar systems from other countries as well as increasing the number of troops.

The US-led alliance, particularly the European Union, is at present facing massive economic pressure due to not only disruption of fuel supply from their traditional supplier, Russia, in the aftermath of sanctions after the Russia-Ukraine war, but also from their own public increasingly disgruntled. However, today the over-use of sanctions that bite not only the sanctioned but also those that impose the sanctions together with a selective use of taking the moral high ground (Ukraine must be fully supported while the sustained practices reminiscent of apartheid in South Africa against Palestinians and the people of Kashmir for example continue to be



Justice for Pakistan?

FARHAN BOKHARI

As Pakistan’s coalition government locks horns with former prime minister Imran Khan to force the latter to step back from his coming protest march, real-life issues across the country remain more than half neglected.

The destruction caused by this year’s floods continues to unleash widening consequences for people in their daily lives. Across the streets of Pakistan, there is little relief in sight for ordinary households suffering from rampant inflation in daily lives, notably targeting low-income consumers.

For Pakistan’s mainstream households, the battle against fast-shrinking personal budgets remains unending. In brief, the matter of justice for the broad majority of Pakistanis has never been similarly in danger of being lost. Across the power corridors of Islamabad, the twin primary obsessions remain the immediate response to Imran Khan’s plans while keeping the country solvent. And it is just hard to fault the ruling

structure and its leaders for appearing to neglect the fast downward slide in living conditions across the grassroots of Pakistan. With the ruling structure’s survival prospectively at stake, tackling longer-term challenges must take a back seat. As for Khan, the obsession with tearing down the ruling structure to return to power indeed appears to overlook the enormity of challenges surrounding today’s Pakistan. With the lives of more than 33 million Pakistanis or a seventh of the country’s population clearly disrupted from recent floods, the human catastrophe across the country has few precedents in Pakistan’s 75-year history. Though the earthquake of 2005 took a larger death toll with more than 70,000 casualties, the country did not face a similar sense of alarm over the future. Tragically today, the floods have come as a powerful reminder of more similar tragedies induced by climate change to follow in the coming years.

Aside from a UN-led global appeal for aid to Pakistan along with the government’s own decisions to help the victims, the one yawning

gap is much too big to be ignored — the matter of assuring justice for the most vulnerable Pakistanis. This year’s catastrophe has badly exposed gaps in state provided administrative systems in key areas like healthcare or education that have eroded over time. Even before the floods, ordinary Pakistanis drew little comfort from the state coming to their rescue in their darkest hour with ordinary citizens forced to turn towards state provided healthcare or education to serve their needs. Besides, the assurance of a fair system of law and order vanished long ago from Pakistan. With scores of well-documented accounts of the police only delivering injustice in one case after another over past decades, it is clear that Pakistanis became deprived of their fundamental right to security. The destruction caused by the floods has unleashed a palpable sense of alarm across Pakistan. But fixing the damage will be more about fixing the rot than dealing with just the immediate challenge. Given the enormity of the damage, Pakistan’s political foes must opt to halt their ongoing turf battles and

focus on first agreeing to tackle the immediate and long-term challenges faced by the country.

For the sake of argument, even if Imran Khan is successful in forcing a change of regime in Islamabad, he will face daunting challenges that will only undermine a future government. On the contrary, a new way forward must be built upon Pakistan’s political rivals agreeing on three equally vital reforms for the future. First, Pakistan’s bleeding economy must be rescued from its growing indebtedness caused by a largely loss-making public sector. Entities such as Pakistan International Airlines or Pakistan Railways or Pakistan Steel Mills, to name some of the most prominent proverbial white elephants, together gobble up billions of Rupees in annual losses. Consequently, Pakistan has been saddled with recurring debt year after year from loss making companies. Given the resistance from powerful factions to sweeping reforms, notably privatization of such entities, it is vital that Pakistan’s leadership stakeholders together agree on tackling this

curse. Second, with the law and order maintenance clearly left in tatters, a series of bold reforms are necessary with the full backing of all political parties and institutions across the board. Without guaranteed maintenance of law and order to protect Pakistan’s citizens, the country’s political, economic and societal future will remain in jeopardy. Unless sweeping reforms are undertaken with the backing of all stakeholders, it is hard to imagine Pakistan’s return to stability in the foreseeable future. Finally, contenders for Pakistan’s leadership must agree to reform the structure of political representation. Tragically, today’s structure — from the grassroots to parliament — has outlived its utility while positions of leadership are left only for those with deep pockets. Unless the mantle of leadership becomes accessible to individuals across the board, it is hard to imagine future elected representatives becoming more attuned to issues along the grassroots of Pakistan. And that, sadly, will keep elected representatives detached from the lives of their constituents.

MEDEA BENJAMIN AND MARCY WINOGRAD

The US has a history of nuclear extortion. In 1950, during the Korean War, President Truman said launching nuclear weapons was under ‘active consideration’ against Chinese troops in North Korea. In 1953, President Eisenhower—who later denounced the military-industrial complex—threatened to order a nuclear launch if the Chinese refused to negotiate an armistice in the Korean War.

In 1969, during the Vietnam War, President Nixon secretly ordered B-52 nuclear bombers on high alert to pressure the North Vietnamese to surrender. Nixon subscribed to the ‘madman theory’ — make your enemy believe you are mad enough to use nuclear weapons and the enemy will fold. But that theory proved ineffective, with US troops fleeing Vietnam in 1973 after an estimated 2-million Vietnamese lay dead, nearly 60,000 US soldiers in body bags. The list of US nuclear extortion threats continues in 2007 with President George W Bush stating ‘All options are on the table’ should Iran pursue a nuclear program.

In 2017, President Donald Trump—in the wake of North Korean missile testing—threatened North Korea with ‘fire and fury ... the likes of which the world has never seen before.’ In 2020, the US deployed B-52s, dual-capable of conventional and nuclear weapons, flying over the Black and Baltic seas to simulate attacks on Russia’s military bases and ports.

Nuclear extortion



The uncomfortable truth is that as long as there are nuclear weapons, we are all hostage to those few individuals who can order their launch. On the anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the answer is not to build more nuclear weapons, but to return to the arms control treaties Bush and Trump abandoned and to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to abolish nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. At the Democratic Party fundraiser, President Biden also said, ‘‘We are trying to figure out what is Putin’s off-ramp? Where does he find a way out?’’ The way out is for President Biden and every member of Congress to immediately call for a ceasefire, support peace negotiations and end the weapons shipments that risk Armageddon. Skeptics argue diplomacy would set a dangerous precedent allowing any autocrat from a nuclear-armed nation to hold the sword of Damocles over our head. In reality, the stage for nuclear blackmail was set long ago, in 1945, when at the close of WWII, President Truman dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and three days later Nagasaki to irradiate and annihilate an estimated 200,000 people in an explosion of fire and a rain of ash. The stage for nuclear extortion was set when President George W. Bush in 2002 abandoned the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM)

Treaty that capped the number of missile systems the US and Russia could deploy to destroy incoming missiles. Both countries had recognized that defensive missile systems could escalate the arms race with the development of new weapons to overcome the defensive shields, and that such shields—if promised effective—might encourage a country to launch a first strike without fear of retaliation. The stage for nuclear blackmail was set in 2019 when former President Donald Trump ripped up the US-Russia Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

Before this, the two superpowers had destroyed almost 3,000 short and intermediate range missiles. As recently as last year the US Congress, in violation of its commitments under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), voted to continue funding a trillion-dollar nuclear ‘modernization’ program. As part of this decades-long nuclear rearmament, the US will replace 400 Minuteman Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM’s) on hair trigger alert in the midwest with 600 new nuclear missiles. These new missiles buried deep in underground silos will pack nuclear warheads that are each 20 times more powerful than those the US dropped on Japan. From explicit threats to implicit threats, the US has resorted to nuclear blackmail throughout the years. President John F. Kennedy resolved the Cuban Missile Crisis, not with weapons but diplomacy. The US offered to remove nuclear weapons installed in Turkey in exchange for the Soviet Union’s removal of missiles from Cuba.

Excerpted: ‘Nuclear Extortion? Abolish Nuclear Weapons’.
Courtesy: Counterpunch.org