[**Art of the matter**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1717923/art-of-the-matter)

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WE need more art. Whatever inquiries into Arshad Sharif’s killing determine, his death will be a reminder of the limits of free speech in Pakistan — not least because he was forced to flee the country to escape thre­­­a­ts. And where speech is curtailed, images must prevail.

This may seem like an anachronistic argument in this newly dawned era of neutrality, in which it is seemingly possible to say what has always been concealed between the lines, when metaphors of boots and boys, thieves and traitors, are being discarded in favour of plainspeak.

But those who know Pakistan know that times of instability are the most dangerous — it is easier to trip over red lines when they are shifting. The coming months will show what levels of censorship and control persist once the political dust settles. For now, it is sufficient to remember that while press conferences hog headlines, disappearances and detentions continue, and an MNA languishes in jail for saying far less than those currently marching on the capital.

Rather than clear the air, pressers and political speeches are creating a fog of politicised rhetoric, blame games and counter claims, through which the lines between heroes and villains are blurred. Through all this, politics trumps meaningful priorities, key messages are lost and the voice of the people is erased. And that’s why we need more art.

Powerful art remains confined to galleries.

This call may seem counterintuitive at a time when the world’s obsession with art is being lambasted by climate activists. Just Stop Oil has caught the world’s attention by throwing soup at masterpieces, thereby outing people’s perverse prioritisation of paintings over the planet. It is a powerful protest, but it draws its power from the fact that art is considered sacred. Rather than denigrate art, Just Stop Oil highlights its influence, and the effectiveness of activism that engages with art. Indeed, by filming their acts of vandalism, the climate activists were creating new, powerful performance art.

Artists are also at the centre of Iran’s ongoing protests. Protests and social media alike are flooded with incredible images of women cutting their hair, a metaphor for rejecting the regime. The water in public fountains has been dyed blood red, and banners bearing Mahsa Amini’s image have been unfurled at New York’s Guggenheim Museum. Graphic art has spurred the simplicity of the protests’ message, ‘zan, zindagi, azadi’, and built solidarity.

Pakistan has its own history of provocative political art. Ijazul Hassan was imprisoned and tortured at Lahore Fort in 1977 for resistance posters against Zia’s dictatorship. Abdul Rahim Nagori’s ‘anti-militarism’ exhibition was banned. Artists such as Salima Hashmi and Lalarukh both painted and founded the Women’s Action Forum, seeing both as pathways to fight for women’s rights. Akram Dost Baloch was repeatedly jailed for using his art to assert the Baloch voice agai­nst Zia’s repression and regressive security policies. More recently, Adeela Suleman’s artwork on extrajudicial killings in Karachi was attacked by plainclothes men, and resulted in the closure of the 2019 Karachi Biennale.

Drones, suicide bombings, political portraits, gun shots and camouflage have become a regular feature of art over the past 15 years. But this is not enough. Pakistan’s visual artists widely exercise self-censorship, and our visual culture is still defined by the parameters established in the 1970s and 1980s, when figurative art was banned and performance art stifled. Today’s artists continue to fear their work being perceived as anti-state, and more terrifyingly, as blasphemous.

When powerful art is produced, it often remains confined to galleries or private homes, accessible only to a lucky elite. And even if dissemination were possible, Pakistani art would confront the reality of a lack of visual culture and literacy — many Pakistanis do not know that artworks are an act of interpretation and meaning-making, a site of discourse or resistance, an invitation to respond through more art. Truck art is a rare example of a mass visual culture.

It’s time to invest in art. We need it to raise awareness, express viewpoints otherwise marginalised, and to create solidarity (through the consumption and reproduction of that art). We need art to amplify that the lives and perspectives of others have value, and that alternative approaches are possible. Art can challenge power structures, and attempts to silence it only further empowers the art. Art weakens propaganda, and strengthens dissent.

And it is not just in the context of anti-authoritarianism that art matters. As Pakistan looks ahead to new and increasingly complex challenges — the ravages of climate change, the increasing disempowerment and exclusion of ethno-linguistic minorities at the country’s peripheries, the resurgence of militancy — it must find new ways of speaking about and tackling these ways that inhere in the arts.

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