**Hope in a time of despair**

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In these unprecedented times, the world seems to be hurtling into a dark abyss. A myriad of crises, spanning political, economic, financial, and climatic dimensions, looms over countries, casting a haze of uncertainty over their futures.

Across 55 nations, including Pakistan, the pressing issue of economic challenges and particularly debt sustainability forces governments to grapple with the agonizing choice between servicing debts and delivering essential services such as quality education, a clean environment and affordable energy. This struggle is exacerbated by the rising cost of living and the diminishing value of national currencies.

As the global landscape teeters on the edge, peace itself faces a serious threat. Two nuclear states – Israel and Russia – are engaged in protracted warfare across their national borders. Racist, religious and regressive tensions and conflicts are on the rise everywhere, often turning violent in such unexpected places as Canada, France, and New Zealand.

It is difficult not to include climate change in the present set of blights afflicting countries and communities in different parts of the world. While climate change is heating up the globe, it is cooling down economic activities and darkening and disrupting lives and livelihoods at a massive scale. In fact, it is threatening the very existence of several large cities and many tiny island nations.

Democracy is under pressure in every nook and cranny of the world. It can be argued that citizens across the globe, frustrated with the limited choice of political leadership they have, are witnessing the re-rise of populist strongmen who thrive within their own countries mainly by demonizing those outside them.

The events around the sacking and then reinstatement of Sam Altman as the CEO of OpenAI highlight the divide between the doomers and boomers of artificial intelligence. The fear of the unknown of unbridled generative technology remains a major challenge.

All these challenges are unfolding within a particularly complex contest. On the one hand, the era of superpower domination is coming to an end and along with it we are witnessing a decline in the capability of these superpowers to have and maintain monopoly over global peace and conflict. On the other hand, several middle powers are emerging at the expense of older superpowers, sometimes expanding their area of influence rather aggressively.

Secondly, and equally importantly, technological innovation and its concurrent and inexorable rise in the power of tech companies is severely undermining – and even eroding – the ability of individual states to control, censor, and manipulate information to their sole advantage.

If you are not already feeling depressed enough, let me make things even murkier by mentioning that the space for the third sector – independent evidence generators, collectors, and disseminators (comprising critical research and independent media) – is shrinking rapidly.

But, of course, the way forward to change what’s wrong with the world around us is not merely to malign others and mourn our own plight.

We need to find light at the end of the tunnel; it is about keeping hope in times of despair. But where will this light originate from? Where will this hope spring from?

The short answer is – from us, from people mulling, collectively and individually, over the possibility of a tomorrow that is brighter, more prosperous, more peaceful and more inclusive than today.

Here I must add that our hankering after such a future is not just a matter of sitting, talking and walking away, of merely dreaming during the day and hoping wishfully during the night. It, in fact, is premised on new realities that are unfolding around us by the day – or perhaps by the moment – one blogpost, one tweet, one TikTok post at a time.

Let me summarize these new realities for you one by one:

More than 70 countries, housing more than half of the world’s population, will conduct elections in 2024; these include India, the world’s largest democracy, and the United States, the world’s richest democracy. Within South Asia, elections will also take place in Pakistan and Bangladesh. When more than 50 per cent of the world’s population will exercise its right to choose, our hope and confidence is that it will be for the better, not the worse.

The public outrage over violence in Gaza – particularly in the countries of the Global North, which have traditionally stood behind Israel silently and unconditionally – indicates that states cannot get away with their conventional stances on cross-boundary invasions and disputed territories as easily as they could until now.

As the world leaders meet in a major fossil fuel exporting country, the UAE, for COP28, the push for renewable and clean energy will dominate the discussion. Renewable and clean energy is not limited to solar and wind only. The emerging sources of renewable energy – mining of green metals, lithium, copper, and nickel, will redraw the energy map. We hope this shift will empower the previously powerless while also ensuring equitable, affordable, reliable, and sustainable access to clean energy sources across all counties and communities.

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), a global alliance of middle powers, is expanding as six more countries are joining it. China, in particular, has established itself as a major economic player in many parts of the globe through its Belt and Road Initiative which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

The rise of these middle powers will certainly lead to demands for the restructuring of both the West-dominated global economic and financial architecture and the superpower-centred political system of the world – as manifested in the structure of the United Nations.

The internet and artificial intelligence are changing almost every traditional mechanism, including in education, healthcare, and the workplace – even in courts and policing. They are similarly transforming relations between employees and employers and between producers, consumers, and everyone in between them. They are also making the production, dissemination, and consumption of information more democratic and pluralistic than before.

The dark tunnel may be long. It is indeed scary to be passing through it – as we are all doing now – but there is optimism that the light at the end will be as bright and reassuring as the darkness is overwhelming. The 200 speakers from 19 countries at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute’s recently held 26th annual conference highlighted the immense opportunities to reach this light without causing harm to humanity and the climate.

However, it emphasized the need for collective action, improved governance, preparedness, and a reevaluation of priorities to shape a tomorrow determined by today’s actions. The choice is ours, how quickly we can bring our house in order to reach the light at the end of the tunnel.

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