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**Balochistan: in a state of despair**

Balochistan’s development landscape is worsening day by day, leading to more despair and distress. A province that suffers from multiple crises is no way politically and economically equipped for a positive takeoff. The series of recent bombings, as well as economic stagnation, unemployment, declining education and health indicators are a wakeup call for policymakers that all is not well in Balochistan.

Missing from national policymakers’ thoughts as well as media attention, Balochistan is in a state of slow-motion collapse.

Since PM Imran Khan and his cabinet’s tenure started, they have not bothered to initiate a multi-stakeholder dialogue to develop a workable strategy and framework to uplift Balochistan from poverty, frightening unemployment, alarming education crisis, vanishing livestock and a deteriorating agriculture sector and vanishing industrialization.

The PTI government has not inquired about the prolonged conflict in Balochistan, and its causes and impact on society including verifiable politico-economic audit of fancy packages and promises announced from 2003 to 2018 by successive governments.

The current federal government has no policy for Pakistan’s strategically significant and economically potential province which can address Pakistan’s looming energy, revenue, industrialization and internal security challenges. In long run, government policies are more harmful for the economic and physical security of Balochistan.

The development and security challenges are overshadowing the hope and expectations that were rekindled after the 2018 elections. The disappointment began with the lukewarm start of the provincial government in August 2018. Less political and exclusive in nature, the current provincial government stopped all development projects for more than a year.

Since Balochistan’s overall economy is reliant on government resources, its poverty-stricken population suffered heavily from the total developmental shutdown. In addition, the government didn’t bother to move from the statues quo to experiment a pro-growth developmental model which Balochistan needs desperately to stop the overall decline in social indicators.

The political confusion, inexperience, little knowledge and lack of confidence shattered people´s hope. People were expecting a robust leadership to inject a new level of energy in the provincial craft. In addition, the social media savvy generation was expecting to see a technologically compatible governance and development models and programmes.

Development experts were anticipating innovative, self-sustained economic growth policies and strategies to stimulate the stagnant provincial economy and engage the growing youth population in the province. But to no avail.

What is wrong in Balochistan and what can be done to undo the despair? This is not rocket science; the problem lies in flawed political and economic development policies and strategies. Defective and unproductive political engineering of the past many decades has elevated a special class of the ‘political elite’ in the province. With little vision, they care little about futuristic strategies. They are not bothered about strategies for socio-economic challenges that are exacerbated by an outdated governance, management and development model, functioning in the province.

In addition, there haven’t been any efforts by Islamabad’s political-security elite to initiate a national debate and sober discussion with the province’s political stakeholders to understand and address the looming social and security challenges, that are resurfacing after a brief period of enforced calm.

With such a strategic land and sea mass and economic potential, Balochistan deserves area size attention rather than population-based focus. Unremitting ignorance has the potential to increase insecurity and violence that is fuelled by the growing despair amongst the politically conscious youth.

Undoubtedly, Balochistan’s foremost challenges are the result of poor and ineffective governance, including a deteriorated economic structure.

Balochistan’s tumble-down socio-political and economic system provides a great opportunity for Islamabad to turn the unruly province into a model region via governance, and economic, cultural, and scientific and technological developments.

In addition, the population deserves various people-oriented welfare schemes and social safety nets to improve public life in many aspects, such as education, healthcare, infant mortality, maternal mortality, potable water, electricity, safe housing conditions, and sanitation facilities.

There are many successful lessons from China and many other developing nations with regard to poverty eradication. China’s targeted poverty-alleviation work in the country’s less-developed areas has achieved remarkable outcomes through specific measures taken by the government.

Chinese President Xi Jinping concept of “targeted poverty alleviation”, which refers to “better education, more stable jobs, higher incomes, more reliable social insurance, better medical services, more comfortable living conditions, a more beautiful environment and a richer cultural life”, is a perfect blueprint that needs to be locally tailored and implemented in Pakistan’s poverty affected regions.

In 2018, I had initiated a series of debates and discussions in the Balochistan Assembly on the flawed PSDP process and overall institutional issues in Balochistan’s outdated Planning and Development Department (P&D), which is responsible for the designing and implementation of the annual development plan known as Public Sector Development Plan (PSDP). The P&D is incapable and facing a serious issue of professional expertise for designing, drafting, developing and implementing pro-people and economic growth development strategies.

Despite agreement with my suggestions for reforms to restructure the P&D department and result-based long-term PSDP and development budget, the government of Balochistan ignored the recommendations of the Balochistan Assembly and presented a usual annual plan (budget), lacking the very basics of growth and pro-poor development principles.

For instance, in 2019-20, the PSDP’s pertinent growth and production related areas and departments received a dreadfully low share, with agriculture getting 3.2 percent, livestock 0.6 percent, fisheries 0.7 percent, industry 0.8 percent, minerals 0.2 percent, and power 2.4 percent, a pattern of resource allocation and planning going on since the inception of the province.

Balochistan’s political leadership could learn from the East Asian economies, which provide a useful lesson to strike a better balance between pro-growth and pro poor policies.

While discussing pro-poor growth strategies, John Page, chief economist of the World Bank for the Africa Region, mentioned that the development strategies pursued by all of the first generation high performing Asian economies – Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore Taiwan (China), and Thailand – have been characterized as “shared growth strategies”.

These strategies consisted of two components. The political elites fostered growth by encouraging high savings, long-term investments, and upgraded organization, technology and management.

Growth was at the centre of the public policy agenda. But highly visible wealth sharing mechanisms – such as universal primary education, land reform, and free basic healthcare – were put in place to induce non-elites to support the growth process.

Balochistan is suffering from intense multi-dimensional poverty (MPI), near to collapse social structure and standards. This requires a long-term development and investment strategy and a result-oriented implementation plan, upgraded planning, development, management and administrative system coupled with modern technology.

Moreover, a stable political system along with a carefully planned development budget with justified allocation of resources could create miracles in Balochistan by reducing long-term social and security risks.

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