**The West Pakistan model**

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Two excellent recent columns have marked the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Bangladesh – the first was by Dr Ishrat Husain in ‘Dawn’, and the second by Mihir Sharma in ‘Business Standard’. Each one juxtaposes the two larger South Asian nations from which Bangladesh emerged and identifies a slew of reasons for why Dhaka has sustained a remarkable story of economic growth in the 21st century.

Despite having the same post-colonial administrative and political legacies that have seemingly saddled India and Pakistan, and despite having an elite that shares many traits – including an overdeveloped military and strong religious nationalism – somehow Bangladesh has been an economic dynamo compared to the utter dysfunction of Pakistan’s Brahmins-only economy, and the sputtering and stalling story of the Hindu Rashtra being built by the RSS in India. Both Dr Husain and Mr Sharma’s excellent articles deserve a thorough reading. They stand up exceedingly well on second and third readings too.

One aspect of Bangladesh’s story that may make admirers of the country’s recent success a little queasy is the authoritarian instinct and the rent-seeking freedom that is a clear thread throughout the reign of the now three-term leader of the country: Sheikh Hasina. Prime Minister Hasina has held the highest office in her country for a total of 17 years, of which the last 12 have been consecutively. Like all South Asian dynasts and matriarchs, an ecosystem of graft and bribery surrounds her and her closest advisers. Occasionally, this ecosystem is challenged, but the overall formula for Bangladeshi growth keeps chugging on.

It is not just the issue of corruption that would perplex simpleton Pakistani and Indian urbanites that both swoon at Bangladesh’s growth and snarl at the corruption in their own countries. It is also the quantum of freedom afforded to dissent in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi civil society is allowed to work freely, as long as it is in the service delivery business. If a service-delivery NGO decides to develop feelings for the constitution, or for freedom of expression, or for better treatment of the opposition, PM Hasina rolls up the red carpet and walks away. Mohammad Younus, the legendary founder of Grameen Bank, learned this the hard way. Numerous others warn of the dangers this poses to Bangladesh.

A series of questionable tribunals to hold East Pakistani loyalists to account for failing to support the independence of Bangladesh created a major stir. Since then, Bangladesh has hacked away at civil liberties on the back of many excuses – the most potent being the rise of Daesh. Many Bangladeshi dissenters have to respond to accusations of being religious extremists – whether they indeed are, or not.

None of these facets of governance is unfamiliar to Pakistanis (or Indians). Since 2014, India has embarked on the replacement of a secular state with a Hindu extremist regime. This project has the full-throated support of the ordinary Indian – as Narendra Modi continues to return overwhelming favourability numbers across the country. The results are there for all to see: India’s remarkable economic growth has sputtered and stalled. In the years to come however, India will return to high growth numbers, in part because of its very strong cohort of Generation X and millennial human capital, some of the best on the planet, and in part because of an immensely empowered and strong private sector that underpin the Indian economy.

Since 2011, the Pakistani uber elite (its military and intelligence establishment) has successfully engaged in a regime manufacturing process, culminating in the swearing in ceremony of Prime Minister Imran Khan in August 2018. The hybrid regime that was supposed to be a Pakistani governance dream come true has come unstuck since PM Khan decided to withhold the notification of the DG ISI earlier this year. Yet for three glorious years, Pakistan was supposedly unburdened by the three factors that PM Khan and his clown car of message amplifiers insist are what has been holding Pakistan back all these years: corrupt kleptocrats, a compromised media, and NGOs that do the bidding of ‘the West’.

Now, let’s revisit the juxtaposition with Bangladesh. And for fun, let’s be really West Pakistan about it, because really, if you have had the misfortune of being anywhere near the horse manure of propaganda churned out this year to unburden young Pakistanis of the sins of the men running this country in the late 1960s and through 1971, you know that this is a place that is very much stuck in that time, and that mindset. With all the sneering contempt of a proper West Pakistani then, when we compare the state of Bangladesh on those three metrics, what do we see?

Well, we see that NGOs in both countries are in retreat. We see a press and news media in both countries that is in retreat. But in one country, we see a kleptocratic government running the show. And in the other, we see a supposedly clean and honest leader (with no kleptocracy behind or ahead of him) running the show. And the economic catastrophe is in which country? And the economic superstar is which country? What is it that has enabled Sheikh Hasina with all her contradictions and weaknesses, so good at governing Bangladesh? And what is it that makes Imran Khan, with all his supposed strengths, so bad at governing Pakistan?

These questions merit deep and serious reflection because the people that are responsible for forcing PM Khan into a leadership role he was neither suited for nor capable of are already bored with him, and searching for a new elixir. A slew of coincidental opeds, YouTube videos and blog posts have generated a small galaxy of demands for a timeout for democracy, for a reset, for a rolling back of Pakistan’s federal structure.

Some argue that the problem isn’t Imran Khan, but that Mr Khan doesn’t have enough power – “make him President!” They argue this \*after\* the PM’s defiant refusal to notify a new intelligence chief! The tragicomedy that is the public discourse churns on, shamelessly and effortlessly as the Pakistani elite takes turns oohing and aahing at the latest inanity and trite governance formula to emerge from among their own.

Bangladesh tried all this. From late 2006 to the end of 2008, Bangladesh had a hybrid system, with shaven and perfumed technocrats running the economy, and judges tasked to clean up the political system. Murder, graft and corruption charges were laid at the feet of Sheikh Hasina and her competitor of over four decades: Khaleda Zia. Bangladesh marked the 2009 new year with a post election party in which Sheikh Hasina did all the celebrating.

Is the path to economic prosperity in Pakistan as simple as handing the Bhutto-Zardaris or the Sharifs the keys once again and letting them have their way with the treasury? Absolutely not. But misdiagnosis, and continued adherence to fallacious analysis in Pakistan is going to generate more failure for Pakistan’s uber elite. Of course, this ‘failure’ is of an abstract nature. When you retire honourably with enough land to build airports on it, and the burdens of your failure are left for DCs, ASPs, MNAs, MPAs and talk show hosts to explain, then ‘failure’ is really a relative term.

Nevertheless, Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and a host of other less relatable storylines all confirm the invalidity of the anti-corruption narrative to which the Pakistani elites remain wedded. Perhaps this is because this tripe, let’s call it ‘the West Pakistan Model’, works wonderfully well for the elite. After all, in the current regime’s more than three years, it has zero convictions, zero in asset recovery, and massive amounts of new wealth among the already wealthy to show for it. An international corruption case involving the country’s most enterprising real-estate entity ended with a settlement that was negotiated and delivered by the country’s anti-corruption czar. The prices of essential commodities, including sugar, are decided upon in a manner not dissimilar to how mafia bosses decide on the street prices for narcotics.

Bangladesh meanwhile, corruption and repression included, keeps on keeping on. Bhala kaja ebam abhinandana!

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