**Into the sunset**

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN 2021-02-11

RETIREMENT is a dress rehearsal for death, but with the additional burden of recurring costs.

Pakistan has a population of about 230 million, give or take 10m. Over 8.2m of them are already above the age of 65. Few of these senior citizens (other than those who have been in government service, or in uniform, or with golden parachutes) have the solace of a pension or, more importantly, access to the medical f acilities which they will need with increasing frequency. They eke out their fraying existence nibbling on their savings or dependent upon their families, or importuning God to provide.

Their latest af fliction is that they will not be eligible to receive the Sinopharm`s antiCovid vaccine (the only one they could afford), because its effect on geriatrics has not been fully explored. The ratio of deaths to births (last recorded as 7.5: 29.8) has moved a notch higher.

Fortunately, our leaders are not affected by such fears. Not for them the pains of monthly bills, the insecurity of old-age insolvency, the humiliation of craven dependence after a lifetime of productive contribution.

Their final years will be spent cushioned in state-of-the-art hospital beds in London or the US, ending in a guilt-lined cof fin.

Three of our leaders are already eligible for a pension, not that they need it. Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi is 75 years old, Nawaz Sharif is 71 years old, and Imran Khan is 68 years old.

All of them are older than German Chancellor Angela Merkel who, at the age of 66, has decided after four terms in office to retire from politics.

Chancellor Merkel`s life is a model of quiet endeavour and palpable accomplishment.

Trained in East Germany, she qualified as a chemist rather like Mrs Margaret Thatcher, with whom she has been frequently compared. Unlike Mrs Thatcher, Frau Merkel carried no cudgels in her handbag. The record of her four terms as chancellor should be followed by other leaders as a blueprint for national moderation and international conciliation.

Only a person with her deft touch could have handled the Brexit amputation when Great Britain, having liberated Europe from Germany twice (in 1918 and again in 1945), itself sought liberation from a successor generation of Krauts. Her singular domination of the European Union gave the EU an adhesion which none of its other 26 member states (including France) alone could provide. Her opponents criticised her policy regarding resident Turks in Germany and her treatment of refugee migrants, but would they have acted dif ferently? If Merkel did have a bête noire, it was the bête Russe Vladimir Putin, who knowingher fear of dogs, deliberately once brought his pet Labrador into their meeting. She attributed this to his need to appear macho.

Putin was trained by the Russian KGB, she probably by the East German Stasi. They understood each other perhaps too well.

Over the 15 years of their often fractious relationship, they never allowed their personal animus to retard commercial opportunities that were advantageous to both countries. Germany is now dependent on Russian hydrocarbons. The showpiece Nordstream-2 system of pipelines, for example, transports natural gas below the Baltic Sea from Russia to northern Germany. (Here, we are still gassing about IPI and TAPI pipelines.) Chancellor Merkel has survived US presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. She maintained Germany`s equipoise even when Trump tried to build a wall across the Atlantic. To President Joe Biden`s recent exhortation to his Western allies to join `a cold war of alliances` against the People`s Republic of China, Chancellor Merkel has responded with vigour. Referringto her discussions with President Xi Jinping, she reaf firmed at Davos their common belief in the need for `multilateralism in the world` and the importance to contain `naked international hegemonism`.

She went further, accusing the US of `internationaltyranny`.By the middle of this century, China and Russia will stand pre-eminent among nations. The United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Japan will have to yield centre-place in the leaders` photo line-up at Davos.

South American countries like Brazil, Mexico and Argentina are yet to fulfil their economic potential. African economies need to struggle harder if they are to reach `middle income`levels by 2050.

Where do we stand? Our population is the fifth largest in the world. We are a nuclear state. Yet, we behave like ingratiating puppies, grateful for rollovers of billions of dollar `deposits` from the Chinese, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Perhaps our ageing leaders should follow Chancellor Merkel`s example and retire from politics. Because, as VIPs, they are used to preference, they should be given the Sinopharm Covid vaccine first. It is only fair.

The country is already suffering from the after effects of their sickly governance. The writer is an author www.fsaijazuddin.pk