**Climate Change - Hoping against Hope**

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Twenty-eight years is a lot of time to state the obvious. It took 194 countries more than two decades to reach a consensus on something that is taught to Grade-8 students. A total of thirteen days coupled with several sleepless nights, even going into a day’s overtime; produced an agreement to contribute to global efforts to transitioning ‘away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly and equitable manner.’ Recognising the needs of the ongoing ‘critical decade’, the global North and South reiterated their resolve to ‘achieve net zero by 2050’ during the recently concluded 28th Conference of Parties (COP28) held in Dubai- a city built on petrodollars.
Throughout the Session, the discussion remained focused on either ‘phasing-out’ or ‘phasing-down’ the global use of oil, gas, and coal. The seesaw debate was finally balanced in the middle as parties kept swinging the agreement up and down by pushing the drafting screen alternatively through their respective countries’ interests.
Indeed, it was a typical UN show. Full of good intentions, flowery expressions, and broad smiles but miles away from preferring common interest over self-interest. However, let’s be pragmatic. How could the United States - being the world’s topmost oil producer or for that matter OPEC- the world’s largest oil cartel, possibly agree on phasing down fossil fuels let alone phasing out? Hence, the COP was bound to desist from using strong language against fossil fuels while completely disregarding the loud cries coming from across the table.
The yawning gap between the two diametrically opposite arguments was obvious. One side would wish to eliminate the ‘root cause’ of the problem while the other would consider the proposal as ‘racist and colonial’ capable of wrecking economies in the region. On the other hand, using diplomatic language, the powerful side would just call it an ‘ambitious’ agenda requiring further discussions. The ultimate objective was to reach a consensus without crossing any redlines so that all parties leave the room with hope if not completely satisfied. The agreement was enough to conclude the Conference on a happy note but by no means was it good enough. It fell short of expectations. In all probabilities, some of the high-risk and most affected countries particularly the low-level islands that are facing the danger of extinction might not remain on the map of the world by 2050 to witness ‘net zero’.
Was there any explicit commitment to phase-down or phase-out or even reduction in the use of the main culprits responsible for the global warming crisis? Regrettably, the answer is, no. COP 28’s agreement on fossil fuels called for ‘transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner’. Were the expressions ‘just’, ‘orderly’ and ‘equitable’ defined and explained empirically. The answer is again, no. Did the Conference even support appeals for a ‘phase-out’ of oil, gas, and coal; the three ‘perpetrators’ that together account for around three-quarters of the emissions responsible for the planetary crisis? The answer is no. Was it the first time that the world committed to no net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 or keeping warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels? The answer is no. Will the world be able to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 43 percent by 2030 compared with 2019 levels? The answer remains no. It was a recommitment to a commitment reiterated in almost every Climate Change related meeting. Finally, was it the first time that the world debated on a global exit from fossil fuels? The answer is yes…!!! If nothing else, at least the future COPs will have a new talking point to ‘emphasise’ and ‘reiterate’.
Getting planet Earth rid of fossil fuels was not the only subject discussed during COP28. Different sets of countries made promises and pledges to the Loss and Damage Fund (LDF), renewable sources of energy, nuclear power capacity, food & farming and health. As all such promises and pledges are to materialise not before 2030 and 2050, it will not be surprising if the future COPs also kept on ‘reiterating’ their vows by making suitable changes thereon. The good news is that the LDF was finally launched during COP28 with announcement of pledges in millions and billions of dollars but still falling short of the agreed upon figure of $100 billion a year.
Even here, the pledges were made without agreeing on the Fund’s requirements, criteria, disbursement, and finalisation. How much will be paid and by whom on ‘Adaptation’ and energy-related ‘Mitigation’? This remains a mystery. When will the remaining 154 countries come up with their respective Adaptation Plans as only 40 countries, including Pakistan, have so far fulfilled this important requirement? Not known. When will the developing countries feel the urgency and importance to have their plans projectivised, credible and bankable? Not even considered.
Pakistan, however, took the Conference seriously. Unlike in the past, Pakistan’s participation in COP28 was both visible and substantive as the official delegation led by Minister Ahmad Irfan Aslam saw the Secretary MCC&EC and Pakistani diplomats burning the midnight lamp in presenting the country’s perspective with forceful arguments. This was also the first time that all provinces of Pakistan were represented and got the opportunity to share their respective issues, challenges, and achievements with the global community. To top it all, Pakistan’s civil society remained omnipresent during the Conference, robustly highlighting the importance of collective ownership, covering the whole range of national, subnational, and international issues as well as challenges of climate threats faced by the country. Pakistan pavilion that organised as many as 29 side events remained busy with a constant stream of visitors.
A little bird that provided us with inside information summed up the proceedings of COP28 as follows: It was a step forward in the right direction. Full stop. Looking at the performance of the United Nations, particularly its inability to stop the Gaza onslaught and the inhuman treatment meted out to the people of Jammu & Kashmir, even a step forward in the right direction should be celebrated. It helps us in keeping our hopes alive. As Fyodor Dostoevsky once observed: To live without hope is to cease to live.