**[Topsy-Turvy Land](https://www.dawn.com/news/1734643/topsy-turvy-land)**

[Rafia Zakaria](https://www.dawn.com/authors/410/rafia-zakaria) Published February 1, 2023

The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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In one of the books I read as a child, some naughty children ended up in a place called Topsy-Turvy Land. The place, as the name suggests, was one where everything was the opposite of the way it should be: humans walked on their heads, cars had wheels on top, windows did not open and doors did not shut. The children stumbled along, making mistake after mistake relying on norms and conventions to which they were accustomed. They were glad when the ordeal ended … it had been intended as a punishment.

Pakistani children, and even Pakistani adults for that matter, would likely fare much better than the youngsters in the story. The past three years have seen just about every established truth and assumption questioned.

As I began to write this, the country’s currency was in a free fall, breaking records of low value against the US dollar. Even though the rupee had begun to pick up somewhat on Tuesday, on the back of remittances and exports proceeds according to some analysts, the larger economic picture is looking bleaker than ever and one wonders how much more the currency will depreciate in the days ahead.

A few days ago, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar took to Pakistani television channels to tell Pakistanis that there would be a [Rs35 price hike on petroleum](https://www.dawn.com/news/1734227) products. The same government that wanted pats on the back for averting the threat of default earlier told people about the increase in prices a whole two days before the expected announcement. [Long lines for petrol](https://www.dawn.com/news/1734165/long-queues-at-petrol-pumps-across-the-country-after-price-hike-fears) could be seen everywhere in the country because people had been warned that this was just the first phase of these hikes, and that oil prices were set to increase even further when the new value of the country’s currency has to be used to compute prices. Perhaps some of you will be reading this article while parked in one of these interminable lines for petrol.

These are not ordinary times; they are truly terrible times.

The people in the lines for petrol are still better off than those who have no money to try. Quite recently, *Dawn* reported on the seven million jobs that have been lost in the country’s textile sector. This is a ghastly number when one considers the fact that there are towns and cities in the country whose entire economy depends on the textile industry. The closure of mills, including some without prospects of reopening in the near future, spells catastrophe for these places and the people who live in them and earn from the textiles sector. Given that one breadwinner in Pakistan supports a family of at least four or five people if not more, means that approximately 35m would have been affected by the closure of the mills. It is distressing to think how the auxiliary businesses that rely on the mills would also be affected.

As representatives of the textile industry told this newspaper, the current government “does not have any policy to end the various crises affecting textile producers and exporters”. Clearly, it is not prioritising the industry. The delay in opening letters of credit means that imported material cannot be procured on time and that means the mills won’t run. The reason this is particularly troublesome is that this industry actually generates foreign currency (which the country desperately needs) from its exports.

The current political set-up provides little hope for those who would like a return to some semblance of stability. The blame game between the current government and the previous dispensation, which was dramatically removed after its mysterious machinations had grown tedious and would have been boring (if the stakes were not so incredibly high), continues to mar the atmosphere. What both sides have in common is a lack of any real solutions; the fact is the country’s rulers past and present have partied too long and too often, high on the hog of earlier debts, all of which are now becoming due with terrifying urgency. Eventually, there will be elections, but any interference from other institutions would mean that the results will want legitimacy or permanence.

Pakistanis are accustomed to power outages but the recent outage that hit the country not too long ago is ample proof of the fact that the government quite literally cannot keep the lights on, or keep the gas flowing or even provide water, which in Karachi at least is in the hands of a huge mafia.

This price hike in the price of petrol will certainly make the provision of electricity and other basic commodities next to impossible. A sweltering summer awaits Pakistanis. The vagaries of climate change and glacial melt predict another year of floods and hunger. Where the rains once provided respite they now bring only more misery and destroy all that lies in the paths of rivers. Those who own these lands are too busy holding on to their power in the present to worry about what is to come.

These are not ordinary times; they are truly terrible times. It is difficult not to wonder whether the particular dynamics of wealth, poverty and inequality in the country is what makes this level of incompetence possible. The poor are silent because their existence has been reduced to a constant battle for mere survival. The rich remain smug and happy, continuing on with their shadis and mehndis where rivers of food and drink are wasted on a daily basis. The middle class writes articles such as this one, accursed with the unwanted gift of knowing that things are not about to get better, that a country whose wealthy pay no taxes, whose politicians are so deeply addicted to grift and where it is nearly impossible to discern the truth is not going to stop being Topsy-Turvy Land anytime soon.

*The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.*  
[rafia.zakaria@gmail.com](http://mailto:rafia.zakaria@gmail.com)

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