**Eight months of a pandemic**

BY A R I FA N O O R 2020-12-01

THE second wave of Covid-19 has been sacrificed at the altar of politics in Pakistan. The entire debate seems to be about the carelessness or callousness of the political parties; for each side, the other is at fault for campaigning in Gilgit-Baltistan, or holding big PDM jalsas or the government-organised events. It`s an endless debate.

But, the obsession over which of the two sides is leading more people to sickness and possible death also shows how far we have come since the pandemic first began. For the current focus on using the virus for political ends is different from the discussions in March when it seemed everyone and anyone only spoke about the pandemic rather than now when it is politics through the virus.

When the numbers first began to go up at the beginning of the year, the clamour for a lockdown was deafening. The entire debate revolved around just that the need for a strict and immediate lockdown. The total number of cases in the country were under 1,000 when most of the provinces announce d a lockdown a word which will compete with `self-isolate` and `social distancing` for the word of the year for 2020 towards the end of March.

That this is perhaps not the major debate now, as it was back then, is not just due to the political environment but also to what we have all learnt in eight long months since those lockdowns began. In March, the perception was that a hard, strict lockdown would eliminate the virus, as had happened in Wuhan. We would all or most of us hunker down, venturing out only for food, and if we did it well enough, the virus would be gone from our lives. (Those who argued that a lockdown was a temporary measure to prevent the health system from breaking down or ramping it up were ignored.) This `elimination` seemed not only possible but also necessary because the projections of anexponential spread of the virus-spelled catastrophe for our overcrowded cities with limited, creaky healthcare. In those very early days, few made the connection between the younger population and the impact of the virus healthcare professionals painted a scary picture of people collapsing in hospital corridors and even the roads, as we ran out of equipment and health workers to help them.

But as weeks passed, it turned out that even with limited testing and unreported Covid-19 deaths, the health system did not collapse as had beenfeared.The younger population helped;on the downside the elimination was not as easy as announcing a lockdown.

It also appeared though a final judgement may still be awaited that a lockdown is also not the panacea it promised to be. India`s example illustrated this. It has been argued by some that the sudden lockdown and the connected movement of the migrant workers may have helped spread the virus rather than curtail it. However, one must always be very careful of drawing too close a parallel between the countries because India has far more urban centres than Pakistan and the density in cities is directly linked to the spread of the virus. Second, India`s connectivity with the world means the virus may have spread more widely than in Pakistan`s case.

The point of this ramble is to say that with the pandemic so much is unknown that views have changed rapidly within months about what needs to be done and why. And this is true not just of the government but also health experts the WHO itself changed its decision on the use of masks, which have now become the foremost tool to prevent spread; while in the first quarter of 2020, it was advised that masks be used only by health professionals.

Similarly, time and experience may also be one reason there is not so much pressure for a lockdown in Pakistan, even though the numbershave begun rising again because we now know it`s not the magic wand we had hoped it would be.

Add to this two other factors; the provincial governments are perhaps more averse to a lockdown because of their experience of its impact on the economy.

This is not limited to Pakistan; even in Europe, this time around, the lockdowns were not as severe as the summer ones for example, France went into lockdown in October; it shut bars and restaurants and non-essential shops but schools and factories stayed open. The north of Italy followed a similar route.

Second, the public at large is also less willing to adhere to severe restrictions the second time around this has been a point of concern in Europe where governments were aware that fatigue had set in. This is also a factor in Pakistan; not everyone who had willingly imprisoned themselves at the beginning of the year has returned to a similar level of isolation. This is also due to a sense that the virus is now simply a part of life rather than a life-threatening shortterm risk that would disappear if we suspended our lives briefly.

Perhaps this is why it is hard to even heed the health experts who are back on television, painting a gloomy picture as numbers go up. In March and April, their voice was impossible to ignore now they barely register.

And this is why the virus has now succumbed to politics. Because in eight months, we (and the political parties) have realised that it`s not going away in a hurry and that the cost to our society and healthcare is not unbearable. So onwards with the falsas and the conventions, and impatience to throw a government out.

One can only hope that our present knowledge of the pandemic is not as incomplete as it was eight months ago.  The writer is a journalist.