[Abdul Sattar](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/abdul-sattar)

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**Our lives matter**

The recent spike in Covid-19 cases across the country, including AJK and GB, has created great concern among health experts, hospitals workers and various sections of society. The surge in cases seems to be adding to the woes of common Pakistanis who fear that the country’s faltering health system would be overwhelmed by the phenomenal increase that has been witnessed in the last four weeks, with more than 14000 cases in the past seven days alone.

In some areas, hospitals and health facilities are already running short of beds and other equipment while the onslaught of the pandemic will also affect health workers in great numbers, making it impossible for the government to arrange additional staff members on an urgent basis.

The gloomy situation seems to have worried every Pakistani but it seems politicians and the ruling elite are indifferent to the plight of the common citizen. First, it was the opposition that held mammoth gatherings in Gujranwala, Karachi and Quetta. The government, instead of demonstrating political sagacity, came up with its own version of political hysteria assembling tens of thousands of people in Hafizabad. No political party dared to question the rationale of holding elections in Gilgit-Baltistan amidst the fears of the coronavirus. Large gatherings in GB that were held a few weeks ago will demonstrate their effects in the coming days with people facing the brunt of the political imprudence that has been in vogue for more than two months now.

This all has created a spectre of disaster, leaving a pall of uncertainty across swathes of Pakistani society. People are fearful about their future and well-being. The pandemic continues to ravage city after city, town after town and village after village. The government seems to have realised its mistake, announcing cancellation of all the opposition rallies but the opposition remains adamant. The parties of the PDM that were vociferously demanding a complete lockdown in the past are now hell-bent on holding large gatherings. They think that such gatherings will earn them the support and sympathies of people, creating a situation where they would be in a position to topple the government.

What they ignore is the spectre of a virtual fear. If the virus cases continue to rise and if mortality remains unabated, the situation will force people to stay in-door or at least prompt them to avoid large gatherings that offer them nothing except ‘empty promises and unrealistic slogans.’ A number of people have noticed the hypocrisy of politicians with regard to the pandemic. The political elite is taking extreme precautions for itself: holding private family events that require a corona test for entry but asking people to attend large gatherings that may be brimming with virus carriers. This seems to have created an impression that politicians care about their own lives and those of their loved ones but when it comes to the lives of the common people, they have nothing to offer to them.

This hypocrisy has not gone down well with several sections of society. Pro-government analysts have lambasted politicians for this dual standard, questioning the rationale of setting one standard of risk for their families and another for common Pakistanis. This has badly dented the reputation of PDM leaders and a lacklustre response at the Peshawar gathering is a reflection of the people’s mood. It is, therefore, prudent for the opposition to cancel the rest of the political rallies until the pandemic is over or a vaccine is available for Pakistan. After all, they tolerated this regime for more than two years because of internal compulsions and policy matters. If they do this for the sake of the people, it will not harm them politically.

The opposition should also be mindful of the changing weather. Extreme fog and bad weather could hamper the flow of traffic in Punjab. If the opposition has to cancel the Lahore rally owing to the smog or fog, then it will give an opportunity to its opponent to lambast the alliance. If they decide to arrange it amidst the smog and fog and if the numerical strength remains unimpressive, this will create an impression that the people are not interested in the agitation.

More than 7000 people have already perished because of the contagion that has also rendered millions of people jobless and affected education, businesses and commercial activities. The country is not likely to have access to the corona vaccine that has already been bought by rich and powerful countries. It is not in a position to come up with its own vaccine because health, education and research have never been a top priority of any government. Successive governments have showered favours on obscurantist elements that have created only bigots and rigid forces.

But what is done cannot be undone. Even if we decide to spend billions of dollars now, we cannot make a vaccine in weeks or months, which is what we badly need. What the opposition can do is help the government come up with a joint strategy to deal with the contagion. It might debate the ways to get the vaccine from the top multinational companies. Pakistan is said to have allocated one hundred million dollars to secure a vaccine for health workers. The country may need millions of dollars more or possibly billions of dollars to get a vaccine. Instead of pumping a large sum of money into political gatherings, the opposition should donate this amount for government anti-corona efforts.

Hospitals are running short of supply; medical staff need essential equipment. Provincial governments and the federal government should sit together and devise a mechanism to deal with this grave situation. The PPP in Sindh needs to remember that even if this government is toppled, it will not be able to defeat the contagion that is playing havoc with the lives of Pakistanis. Delivery of services on the ground is the only thing that will greatly impress the people. If people continue to be devoured by the virus and if lives continue to be haunted by it, the people will not blame one political party but hold all political forces responsible for the catastrophe.

Therefore, politicians should pay attention to saving the lives of the people instead of settling scores with each other. The blunders of the government are not going to end here. The opposition will get a chance to account for all the government’s wrongdoings. But this is the time to force the government to rectify its mistakes. This is a chance for the opposition to pile pressure on the government to do the right thing. This is the moment that should prompt the PDM to compel the government to mend its ways.

The leaders of the opposition should show magnanimity and support government efforts while also pointing out the flaws in the government's anti-Covid policy. They should do it not because it would benefit the government but for the sake of millions of Pakistanis. Their approach will prove that the lives of ordinary Pakistanis really matter.

The writer is a freelance journalist.

Email: egalitarianism444@gmail. com