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**Yippee ki yay 2020**

As much as we all rightfully lament the scars of this Covid-19 inflicted year, there are many lessons that we should be carrying with us into the new year in 2021, InshaAllah. I summarise a few of these below.

Lesson 1: Pakistan is not always unlucky. The original first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was supposed to destroy the healthcare system, take hundreds of thousands of lives and leave the streets of Pakistan in a hot, viral mess. But the most significant aftershocks of the first wave were all focused on the question of what exactly happened, and why Pakistan was able to see off the first wave without anywhere near the damage that it was expected to wreak.

Every single explanation includes the element of good fortune, or a Covid-19 miracle. Even the very people assigned to deal with the pandemic (and therefore, fully incentivized to claim all the credit for Pakistan’s successful handling of the pandemic, especially through the first wave), all agree that there were factors that prevented a much more calamitous first wave for Pakistan, that science is not able to account for.

Through the first two decades of this century, Pakistan has endured a military dictatorship, incompetent political leaders, corrupt government officials and a terrorist insurgency that all conspired to destroy Pakistani self-belief and self-confidence. You see it on cricket fields, in conferences, on social media and throughout the self-effacing analysis of Pakistan’s greatest challenges. One major source of this lack of self-belief or self-confidence is the idea that the country is somehow cursed to live out the same cycles and the same processes over and over and over again. But the Covid-19 miracle did happen. And it happened to this country. So, smile. Allah Mian loves Pakistan, and He loves you. Long may such miracles repeat themselves, and long may this Love continue.

Lesson 2: Province-province and provinces-centre relations CAN work, even in a time of intense political bitterness and partisanship. Whilst the Covid-19 miracle explains a part of the reason why Pakistan did so much better than most countries in tackling the first wave of the virus, it does not explain all of it. For that we have to look closely at the NCOC, the daily briefing venue in which, perhaps like never before, the provinces and regions, the federal government, data sciences, the military and public health specialists came together to frame the national response to the pandemic.

Among the many things the NCOC did was to evaluate and establish the pandemic hot spots that needed stricter implementation of the SOPs, warn government about the critical spreading factors, create an avenue for national consensus on issues like school closures, restaurant openings, and perhaps most of all, track the vital signs of Pakistan’s public health system – including but not limited to the number of operational ventilators and CPAPs available to citizens, the procurement of vital medicines, and in the early days, the allocation of personal protective equipment (PPE) to jurisdictions, by need.

Pakistan’s low fatality and spread numbers were a blessing, but they were also engineered through an innovative method of establishing and implementing consensus around robust evidence and key baseline standards. The credit for this goes to the NCOC, and especially its leader, Asad Umar, as well as both Dr Zafar Mirza (first) and Dr Faisal Sultan (thereafter). The military’s role in providing the muscle and speed that the NCOC needed was crucial – if the existing administrative and political structures had been asked to do this, they would have failed (as it did, between February and March 2020).

Perhaps least celebrated but most certainly deserving of praise were the leaders of the provinces: from Taimur Khan Jhagra and Mahmood Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to Zahoor Buledi and Jam Kamal in Balochistan, to Yasmin Rashid in Punjab. More than any other province, despite being in political opposition, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, Health Minister Azra Pechuho and many others in the Sindh Cabinet forged a clear, evidence-based response to Covid-19 that helped shape the overall national response, once the discussions moved from Twitter and television talk shows, into the serious and performance-neutral confines of the NCOC. The NCOC is proof that Pakistan’s federal design is indeed the only way forward for Pakistan, and that when a crisis hits, the country’s institutions and politics all bend in service of the people. Now if only the extraordinary can be made ordinary and routine!

Lesson 3: Pakistan and Afghanistan relations can be improved. And these need more engagement, not less. Ever since Mohammad Sadiq was appointed Pakistan’s special envoy to Afghanistan, the depth and breadth of the relationship has grown. Massively. In part, this is because Sadiq was a brilliant diplomat throughout his career at the Foreign Office, and helped single-handedly establish a model for how Pakistan should approach modern day Afghanistan (short synopsis? Like an extremely important sovereign state that deserves deep and abiding respect). But in part, the improvement in relations between Pakistan and both the Islamic Republic in Kabul and the Islamic Emirate in Doha, is due to the immense respect Sadiq commands within Pakistan, and especially his persuasiveness on issues that had long been deemed lost causes.

Issues like the number of border openings and the manner in which the openings are managed matters to Afghanistan a lot more than some of the social media hashtags and talking points that triggers so many Pakistani hawks. As hawkish as they come on Pakistan’s national interest, Sadiq is the rare diplomat that not only understands and prioritizes the country’s security, but has the ability to transform those concerns into proactive diplomacy.

The Foreign Office has many young Sadiqs that will be ruined by skewed incentives and a crooked and underhanded postings and transfers system. Reformers would do well to study Sadiq’s career, his methods and his effectiveness. Two dozen Sadiqs at BPS 19 are constantly on the precipice of being ruined by a system that rewards the wrong behaviours. At stake are the most important relationships that Pakistan has. In 2020, Sadiq proved (again) that Pakistan Afghanistan relations can be improved, quite dramatically, when those entrusted with the responsibility to improve them, give it 100 percent and care deeply about people on both sides of the border.

Lesson 4: Protests matter – but not always for the protesters. The Pakistan Democratic Movement or PDM has been agitating for an end to the reign of Prime Minister Imran Khan, and for many Pakistanis, the full-throated protests of the PDM have been a breath of fresh air. After several years of a subdued political discourse in which slowly, but surely, many of the incidental freedoms of expression Pakistanis have traditionally enjoyed, were evaporating. Politics is not a saintly tradition, and so the PDM is no march of saints upon an evil citadel. In fact, it is often hard to decipher what exactly Maryam Nawaz Sharif, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari are agitating for, other than for their families’ ‘rightful’ places in seats of enormous power.

But the PDM has given oxygen to the voices of leaders like Akhtar Mengal and Mehmood Achakzai. Deem them whatever we may, but when peripheral interests become voices of anguish, the mainstream should start to listen more carefully. We need not take offense to every rhetorical flourish if we are to grow and prosper as a unified and strong nation. The PDM demonstrates the vitality that Pakistan’s periphery adds to its mainstream, and reminds us of the need for more, not less inclusion. More, not less tolerance. More, not less heart.

Lesson 5: All nightmares come to an end. Whatever 2021 may have in store for the world and for Pakistan (InshaAllah, it will be better in every way, than 2020), we know that in ten days, the year of the pandemic will close to make way for the year of the vaccine. There will be glitches. As a resource-constrained and science-deficit country, Pakistan will depend on others for the vaccine. The rich will get it sooner than the poor. But a year of vaccinations is better than a year of infections. To great mental health, peace in spirit and in kind, and the capacity to retain your optimism, always. Here’s saying goodbye. Yippee Ki Yay 2020.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.