[Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)

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**More democracy, not less**

The vultures are out again. The hubris that helped make Pervez Elahi chief minister of Punjab, the desperation that helped make Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain the actual prime minister of Pakistan, and the machinations that helped make Sadiq Sanjrani the chairman of the Senate “for the very first time”, is flexing again.

We now have another tsunami of lamentations about the illnesses that plague Pakistani democracy. To understand the irony, one may imagine a tumour wagging its finger at cancer cells for having the audacity to multiply without its permission. Hello? Oof, cancel culture is such a beauty.

Yousaf Raza Gilani is no Nelson Mandela, and certainly no pinup hero for Pakistani democrats. But no serious person that broke out into a smile upon learning of his victory in the Senate race for the Islamabad seat actually believes he is. Many reformers, strategists, and geniuses are convinced otherwise. Witness the sudden wave of long-winded whiny uncle posts in your WhatsApp. Poorly written rants don’t suffice as blueprints for Pakistan’s great new deal. And if Gilani is no Mandela, the rage against Pakistani ‘democracy’ isn’t the inside of James Madison’s brains either.

The reason Prime Minister Imran Khan is paying the extra baggage fees of carrying deadweight with toupees in his cabinet is not because the clown car moonlights as a think tank. It is because we are suffering from a collective breakdown in serious discourse. At least part of the reason for this is the weaponization of the media.

Traditional media has a lot to introspect about. But the sustained attacks on free expression globally and locally are not about integrity in analysis, or fidelity in reporting. The ‘fake news’ propaganda is about weaponizing social media to fight partisan battles. From the Trumpistas marching on Capitol Hill, to Bolsonaro’s bots in Brasilia, to Modi’s murderous mann ki baatein, there is an unholy global and local assault on our cognitive abilities and our central nervous systems. That’s why there are serious, decent and honest people who can, with a straight face, try to justify and defend the sickening assault on former minister for information Marriyum Aurangzeb outside parliament this weekend.

Partisanship feels so good because it forces binaries. The media is, like all other businesses, a binary zero-sum game. Either you make money, or your competitor does. In this race to the bottom, every issue is about whether you are good or evil. Every issue is about being on the right side of history or the wrong one. Every fight is a fight to the death. Luckily, the Generation X innovators that wrote the algorithms are also history’s first ADD generation. The only reason more people don’t die over funny cat memes, or whether the dress is blue or gold, or just how bad a current account deficit really is? There is a cognitive surplus of issues to be outraged about, immediately after the ones you are outraged about right now.

If you want to take a break from the crack pipe, settle down and switch it off. Pakistan’s Senate elections were as much a magnificent display of the majesty of inclusive federal design as they were a disturbing reminder of the low-quality human beings that populate the politician demographic.

Where else in Pakistan does Balochistan have 23 representatives, or nearly a quarter of the total? How else can Pakistani reformers – when their leaders put their money where their mouth is – be part of the apex decision-making structures of the country? How else would someone of the stature of Dr Sania Nishtar become a full cabinet member, as a senator? How else would the towering Sherry Rehman be able to command respect from all sides of the political spectrum? Where else can a public policy warrior like Ayesha Raza Farooq be afforded the chance to share her experiences and insights as a leader? All of this happens at the Senate of Pakistan.

Obviously, not every senator is a Sania Nishtar. But the Senate is a vehicle for the inclusion of people of the calibre of Dr Nishtar, Ms Rehman and Ms Farooq. As I write this on International Women’s Day, it is uplifting to see young Pakistani women assert their right to free movement, free thought and free expression. Among the Aurat Azad March are future senators. Some will mellow over time; some will get more radical. Weak men and the institutions of patriarchy and jahiliya will try to stop them. But Allah’s mercy, in the long run, will make Pakistani society as much a point of pride as Pakistan’s nuclear weapons programme, its capacity to respond to calamities and crises, its heroic soldiers and spies, and its long tradition of political dissenters that stand up for the rest of us, because not everyone has the courage, or gumption, or clarity required to identify and articulate the brokenness of things – when it is required.

Pakistan is at least a quarter century behind in its story of economic growth, and it is at least as far behind in figuring out its value as a regional magnet for trade and connectivity. The current military leadership, for all its weaknesses and errors, has established clarity inside and outside the walls of the establishment: Pakistan is open for business and gets it. This is why the advances in FATF due diligence and progress on regional peace are possible. But many a slip doth threaten clarity between the cup and the lip. This is no time for complacency.

Three examples of the serious potential for progress in today’s polarized circus should give all Pakistanis reasons for hope, and for caution.

One, the Afghan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, which was due to expire, has a short extension. It needs to be expanded and given institutional depth. An additional hybrid desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, with a DG, JS, or one-star level officer assigned to coordinate security issues for Afghan trade. A Pakistan that can nurse and shepherd a new APTTA in the midst of a disjointed and weak peace process is a Pakistan we can all be proud of.

Two, the Special Technology Zones Authority (STZA), which has a clear vision to establish islands of investment and growth can also serve many key strategic objectives, including showcasing Pakistan’s potential as a sink for great power collaboration, or at least co-existence. But if the SECP and SBP keep making industry-friendly policy that gets negated by IMF-fearing officials at the FBR and Ministry of Finance? The STZA will be DOA. It must not become victim to the “rules of business” and “this is Pakistan, sir”. If Pakistan is to grow, innovations like the STZA must thrive.

Three, the Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme, which paid out Rs12,000 to over 16 million households is the ultimate glue for citizen-state relations. It is not charity, and the government of Pakistan was not doing its people favours. It was just Pakistan working for more Pakistanis than it usually does. Instead of allowing BISP and Ehsaas to become distracted with a range of less effective social protection instruments – like food banks, interest free loans, and other conditional transfers – Dr Nishtar and PM Khan need to find ways of quadrupling, tripling, or at least doubling down on Ehsaas Emergency Cash. The coming budget will demand pain and sacrifice. Let the fat cats that can pay millions in bribes suffer for once. A massively expanded Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme is the clearest and most potent pathway to establishing the Madina ki Riyasat that even Imran Khan haters secretly wish to see established in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

For these three (and numerous other rays of hope), democracy can work, and has worked, just fine. PM Khan, and the democracy naysayers invested in him should pay heed.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.