**[A lost future](https://www.dawn.com/news/1833125/a-lost-future)**

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COLLEGE campuses across the US have erupted into student demonstrations and sit-ins protesting the genocide in Gaza. Students across every religious denomination are involved. Columbia University, my alma mater, has been most prominently in the news. Not only for being the first set of students to call out their university, but also for the harsh retaliation by its administration. The university’s current president is a woman of Egyptian descent — Baroness Nemat ‘Minouche’ Shafiq.

Great progress around women’s and minorities’ rights has been made since the turn of the century. More and more, we see men and women of colour populate what used to be the domain of ‘white’ Westerners. There was much celebration when Shafiq was announced Columbia’s next president. In the UK, Rishi Sunak became the first prime minister of South Asian origin. Pakistanis had witnessed the journey of Malala Yousafzai from a traumatised child victim of extremist violence to a young woman at ease in the company of Western political and social elites. While controversy surrounded her, she epitomised struggle and achievement to me.

Today, conversely, as we watch six months of the Israel-Palestine war unfold, with a continuing genocide occurring before our eyes, the role of women and minority-origin leaders in the Global North seems like a sinister reprisal of the old colonial mantra of divide and rule.

The 1990s were a different period, especially for the youth. There was heady victory in the air — whether in Pakistan or even the US. The return of Benazir in 1988 had galvanised hope in our breasts — and it was still alive and kicking. President Bill Clinton’s government felt fresh and exciting, and his choices for who would join him in his administration showed a genuine desire for inclusivity. Take, for example, his first national security advisor — Anthony ‘Tony’ Lake. He was one of my college professors, and I remember, when the course ended, thinking to myself that if there were more like him in the US administration, the world would be a better place.

In those few brief years, good seemed to be ahead.

The hope that globalisation meant carving a better future for everyone was propelled by events of the time. Watching on TV the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organisation, historically dubbed the ‘Battle of Seattle’, and studying it later, it became clear to me that there were ‘protesters’ on both sides of the barricades. Those on the inside believed they would be able to bring about better policies by participating in the process, while those on the outside created the pressure that would achieve global publicity. I read the columns of the inimitable Robert Fisk, writing on the Middle East, with awe and delight in the way he clearly understood the view from the other side (our side). The fall of the apartheid government in South Africa and Nelson Mandela’s reconciliation process brought us face to face with what our higher selves could achieve.

But this did not preclude the darkness that was also present. The Balkan conflict and genocide of Muslims, the genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda — these were hauntingly terrible events that told of existing failures in attitudes by governments and the UN system. Good and evil, present side by side. Yet, in those few brief years, good seemed to be ahead. And then came 9/11, and the world changed forever.

The two decades of the 21st century have been a time where a new world order has been created, one which is far more cynical and insidious than what it was in the last two decades of the 20th century. The ‘with us or against us’ mantra has led to a decimation of free thinking, dialogue and debate, with compromise and trust losing out against winner takes all. In this taking, a new set of rules was also created. The fashioning of a global elite, consisting of people like us, bought with offers of money, power, glamour and status. We convinced ourselves that Western democracy models and the global neoliberal capitalist framework were the only ways forward.

Will Minouche Shafiq realise the responsibilities of her position to her own community? Could she be playing out a strategy that brings her public revile, but creates fundamental change from within? Is there a possibility that Malala will realise that her true strength lies not in reliance on Western puppet masters but in finding her own truth, different from what has been created for her? It may lead to her being shunned by those in power today, but who can predict where one’s destiny lies? Only time will tell.

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*Published in Dawn, May 13th, 2024*