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**Pakistan in 2020 - Part I**

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When I think of the daily circus that is the evening TV political talk show circuit, only a fraction of their airtime is dedicated to issues that have any lasting impact.

Almost none of the issues that received breathless coverage a year ago are of any consequence to the lives of ordinary people in the country today. I see no reason why the 2020 season of political soap opera will be any different.

So, let us look back at the outgoing year and identify key trends and events that are likely to have a lasting impact on Pakistan in the years to come.

Covid-19: This is, hands down, the biggest event to hit Pakistan and the world this year. It induced behavioural changes in a large segment of the population who are now mindful of the spread of viruses by touch and by air and are at least aware of the need to wear a facemask. However, as of September, 46 percent of Gallup survey respondents (most under the age of 30) were of the opinion that the coronavirus is a conspiracy theory or hoax.

So far, the virus has cost us 7,285 deaths (and counting). Unemployment is predicted to surge to 28 percent. Schooling stopped for nearly 50 million students for the bulk of the year. Forty percent of the population is expected to fall under the national poverty line; 45 percent of children are at risk of malnutrition. For the vast majority, dying of hunger due to the lockdown economy has been a bigger worry than dying from Covid. With a resurgence in positivity rate of over six percent, in November, a second lockdown or at least several smart lockdowns are imminent. This is far from over.

Vaccine: According to a recent IPSOS survey, 63 percent of Pakistanis will refuse to get vaccinated when a vaccine becomes available. This attitude is reflective of the reach and damage conspiracy theories have on an undereducated population unable to think critically and distinguish between WhatsApp fiction and reliable fact. While there are now two promising vaccines based on messenger RNA technology (Pfizer and Moderna), the fact that Pakistan has not been an early investor in the development of either of them means that its place in the customer queue is near the end of the line.

It will be quite some time until we can hope to acquire any vaccine in sufficient numbers. Add to that the challenge that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines require extreme refrigeration at -94 and -20 degrees Celsius, respectively. This will mean building a dedicated refrigerated supply chain, something we have not seen even being discussed in government circles yet.

NCOC: Covid-19 did not induce any structural changes to speak of, save one: while the central government often sets up some kind of national command center in times crisis, the National Command Operations Center (NCOC) established for dealing with the pandemic distinguishes itself from prior command centers in that its decisions are heavily data driven. This approach has introduced the concept of targeted interventions supported by data in place of broad decrees that blanket a province or the entire country – a scalpel in place of a broadsword. However, this new approach has not extended much further down into the government machinery for other decision-making yet.

WFH: A sliver of professionals and knowledge workers were able to retreat to the protective bubbles of their homes and continued to work-from-home (WFH). However, many smaller businesses and offices were unable to make the quick transition to digital, least of all government. During the peak of the first wave, staff at government offices was reduced to essential staff only. LinkedIn hype aside, for the vast majority of workers, WFH will not become the new normal in the foreseeable future.

Digital Divide and Schools Reopen: The digital divide in the country was also exposed in the unpreparedness of the majority of schools and universities to adopt online education. Again, the sliver of elite private schools and universities, who were already using learning management systems and had students that owned computers and broadband internet connections at home, were able to switch to online education with limited success.

However, for the vast majority of students the shutdowns of educational institutions translated into an early and extended summer vacation. As schools reopened in the last few months, accounts are emerging of the reality behind the government’s claims of online and distance learning during school closings. The learning loss that has resulted from these extended closings will be felt in the years to come. Schools will likely shut down again for an extended winter break. For most students, this academic year will have to be written off as a loss.

Aurat March: Early in the year, the second Aurat March put a spotlight on women’s rights and sparked heated debates. In the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report for 2020, Pakistan’s rank continues to languish at 151 out of 153 countries, only ahead of Yemen and Iraq.

Hang the Rapist: With this backdrop, the once taboo issue of violence against women is receiving more airtime. Every few weeks a high-profile case of rape or violence makes headlines (Lahore Motorway, Kashmore, etc). Coverage of these cases is causing public outrage and has been increasing the pressure on the government to enact police and legal reforms, but until that happens, with 11 cases of rape and gang-rape reported daily, and many more going unreported, Pakistan remains among the most unsafe countries for women and children.

SNC and Aik Nisab: Historically, changes to the national curriculum have been whisked through without much public scrutiny or questioning. However, in 2020 the Single National Curriculum, or SNC, has ignited public debate like few curriculum changes in the past have, with numerous public intellectuals as well as the general public weighing in.

The increased public interest and input on an issue ordinarily considered insipid and dull has taken aback many in government. This greater-than-expected level of public engagement can be attributed to the rise of online platforms and wider internet penetration that have given voice to the otherwise voiceless.

Tea was Fantastic. The India-China Face-Off: India overplayed its hand in Balakot in 2019. The scrapping of Article 370 changing the status of Indian Occupied Kashmir later that year and the curfew and crackdown transformed it into the world’s biggest open-air prison have further opened India to charges of human right violations that the world is finding difficult to ignore, irrespective of trade interests. In 2020, India overplayed its hand once more when Indian soldiers skirmishes with Chinese forces in the Galwan river valley and several other points at the border.

The Modi government’s aggressive actions and diplomacy, not only against Pakistan, but also China, Nepal and Bangladesh, coupled with human right violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir have set it back on its heels, a rare situation for the Pakistani Foreign Office to find itself in.

Indian Terrorism Exposed: In mid-November, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and DG ISPR Major General Babar Iftikhar held a press conference in which they publicly released evidence of what had long been alleged by Pakistan – Indian financing of anti-Pakistan militants hiding across the border in Afghanistan, using its string of consulates along the border. The evidence included bank transactions and audio clips of Indian handlers and terrorist assets.

This public presentation of facts is a major departure in style and substance for Pakistan. While a single press conference may not change much, sticking to this more open style of argumentation will make it more difficult for world powers to look the other way.

To be continued