**[Fiscal pollution](https://www.dawn.com/news/1726444/fiscal-pollution)**

[F.S. Aijazuddin](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1314/f-s-aijazuddin) Published December 15, 2022

The writer is an author.

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IN some ways, modern Islamabad is akin to 15th-century Ferghana in Central Asia. The novelist Lytton Strachey wrote of the first Mughal emperor Babar, who was born there in an area congested with ambitious descendants of Tamerlane and Genghis Khan: “There were too many kings about, and not enough kingdoms[.] One could scarcely travel two miles without being held up by an emperor.”

In Islamabad, one cannot move half a kilometre without encountering a self-important think tank. It is populated thick with them, each eking a living by examining a gamut of issues of national importance, such as gender imbalance or health concerns or national security. There are at least 20 of them — an institute each for South Asian strategic stability, policy research, security studies, regi­o­nal studies, policy studies, international affairs, alternative solutions, army history, and Pak-China studies, etc. The most venerable of them is the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) — designed to be a feeder for our Foreign Office.

What they have in common is that they are in perpetual motion, like a Tibetan prayer wheel. Extending this analogy farther, to any traveller coming from the rest of the country to the rarefied heights of Islamabad, the city seems like ancient Lhasa, where monks rotate prayer wheels, chant mantras in a dialect only they can understand, and read scriptures only they can decipher.

Over the years, Islamabad has not changed; it has simply sprawled. It has swallowed neighbouring villages. Skyscrapers continue to soar, facing in the wrong direction with their backs to the Margalla hills. Hills have been levelled to create housing societies. Fertile fields have been converted into clubs and plush polo grounds. Luxury homes crown hillocks. The urban rich from other cities own landscaped farm houses to which they can escape when they want to breathe fresher air.

Islamabad has not outgrown its siege insularity.

The atmosphere above Islamabad is still pristine compared to other cities in Pakistan. Residents talk condescendingly about the pollution in Rawalpindi, as if it exists below the horizon. They will soon realise, though, that the number of cars plying in Islamabad is increasing by the day. It is only a matter of weeks before Islamabad’s name will be included in the air pollution index.

Islamabad has not outgrown its siege insularity. One recalls speaking to a senior bureaucrat in the Secretariat in 1977, when the agitation against prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was at its height. It was reported that the main road connecting Rawalpindi and Islamabad had been blocked by armed demonstrators. When asked whether the meeting scheduled that morning would still be held, the bureaucrat answered: “Of course. The rioters have not reached Islamabad. Everything is normal here.”

Another occasion brought this home to me. At a conference convened in Karachi in 1997 on the prospects of the IT industry, president Farooq Ahmed Leghari spoke with verbose optimism of the need to produce not hundreds but thousands of IT specialists each year, of aiming at IT exports of not millions but billions of dollars each year, and of Pakistan outstripping India in outsourcing to Western companies.

Hearing the president dilate so expansively, I whispered to my neighbour: “Which world does the president live in?” The reply was: “He lives in Islamabad.”

Twenty-five years later, at a Conclave on National Security arranged last week by ISSI in Islamabad, one heard Leghari’s successor president Dr Arif Alvi parrot his predecessor’s exhortations. He urged his audience — a smattering of mid-career women researchers and retired ambassadors with time on their hands — to focus on IT development and exports. His message — timely and apposite, but in another forum — was wasted on them. The president persisted regardless. He was not speaking to the room. He addressed the ages.

Dr Alvi referred to the time he was ‘made’ president. He quickly corrected himself by saying when he was ‘elected’ president. It was a revealing slip of the truth.

He had arrived at the conclave late, without a prepared speech. He took notes while others spoke at the podium, and then began by talking about Pakistan’s prime challenge — population control. Gradually, he moved away from this topic to healthcare and then, unexpectedly, he spoke candidly about cancer. He advised his audience that timely detection of cancer was vital.

The president left as noiselessly as he came. The conclave concluded. Outside the ISSI building, at the foot of the hill topped by president Ayub Khan’s house, the problems confronting our beleaguered country remained unresolved: a population that by 2047 will be 330 million, Rs1,420 bn. owed to IPPs, and an existing burden of $130bn in external debt.

The pollution in Islamabad is not atmospheric but fiscal.

*The writer is an author.*
[www.fsaijazuddin.pk](http://www.fsaijazuddin.pk)

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