**Visible regression**

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The PTI government assumed power in 2018 with unbounded optimism and fierce ambition. Ultimately it is proving to be the most regressive government since the times of General Ziaul Haq. In the last three years, lower-income groups in Pakistan almost lost the knack of catching up with lower-middle income groups.

In the last quarter of 2021, any remaining signs of hope are turning into despair. Take for example Pakistan’s retention on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list. Although there was some acknowledgment of Pakistan’s progress, it appeared just a consolation rather than a reward. The main point of contention is that -- according to the FATF -- the government has failed to prosecute top cadres of UN-designated terror groups. That means Pakistan remains on the FATF’s increased monitoring list -- or the ‘grey list’. The government has been unable to exhibit its terror financing investigations and prosecution against some top cadre of these terror groups.

Pakistan’s continued presence in the grey list is not the only challenge the country is facing at international forums. Our overall impression in the world has been tarnished at multiple levels. Whatever our decision makers did in the 20th century could have been corrected in the first two decades of the 21st. But unfortunately those who have remained at the helm of affairs have been consistently ignoring the changing realities of the world. In the past 21 years, we have not only paid a huge human cost, we have also incurred an inflated economic bill that the people of Pakistan have been struggling to pay.

Pakistan has not been a stranger to incompetence and turmoil, but the recent disappointment has hit citizens of this country especially hard. At the turn of the century, Pakistan was among the rarest examples where a serving army general ruled the roost following an unconstitutional coup. The dawn of the new century buzzed with talks of democracy around the world, but not in Pakistan. Some thought that Pakistan would eventually catch up with the rest of the world.

There were doomsayers who insisted that Pakistan would keep lagging behind economically, politically, and socially. This writer defied many doomsayers and insisted that there have been economic success stories such as Vietnam’s where the country endured decades of destruction and fought relentless wars, but still managed to come out of the morass. There have been both economic and political success stories too such as that of Bangladesh which -- despite its authoritarian PM Haseena Wajid -- managed to keep democracy alive and restored good relations with neighbours and beyond. There are stories of social transformation too such as in the UAE and lately even in Saudi Arabia.

Some countries progress economically and lag behind in political and social developments; others move forward in two or three directions simultaneously. Look at the Pakistan of today and one will find that in all three directions, regression is strikingly visible. Take a glance at the way we have been advocating the Afghan Taliban, as if the world will recognise them as legitimate on Pakistan’s say-so. Our leaders have bent over backwards to form good relations with the Taliban. The people of Pakistan are facing acute economic hardships, and we are committing billions in aid to the Afghan Taliban.

It is true that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan needs help from neighbours and other countries, but the question remains: who essentially is responsible for the current crisis? Just blaming Western powers is not enough; if the US and its allies did all wrong in the past 20 or 40 years, we have been their allies all along. We say that there was no military solution to the Afghan problem; at the end of the day, the question is: are the Afghan Taliban ruling with the consent of the Afghans or by force?

In terms of local governments (LGs), Pakistan is again at the lowest level of public administration. Most of the countries have devolved public administration at the local level to elected local bodies -- Pakistan hasn’t. None of the provinces in Pakistan has an effective and functioning local government system. If the PML-N and the PPP were bad in this domain, the PTI has proven to be worse. Despite repeated rulings by the courts, the provincial governments -- three of which are controlled by the PTI -- have been reluctant to hold LG elections in a timely manner.

There is consistent use of various tactics to punish the opposition. There are growing concerns that institutions like NAB or FIA, or even ANF, are more focused on cases against opposition members. Politically speaking, presidential ordinances galore in the PTI rule. Dozens of ordinances have been promulgated without any due process of parliamentary democracy that calls for debate and discussion before legislation is passed. The government has brazenly targeted the opposition which has faced cases after cases under various guises. All this appears to be an attempt by the PTI government to divert attention from its own inept administration.

The civil society in Pakistan, the media, and some judges have rebuked the rulers time and again. There are a few public intellectuals who have been highlighting the fact that democracy is fragile in the country -- or has been deliberately kept fragile -- and claim that democracy has failed. For democracy to thrive, all stakeholders must act in line with the law. Flouting the law and then professing to be democratic makes such claims ring hollow. Economic regression and political instability mostly go hand in hand anywhere in the world -- more so in Pakistan.

The Pakistani rupee keeps depreciating, and our principal banker claims that such depreciation benefits expats’ families. Can there be a more irresponsible comment from one of the top economic managers in the country? The State Bank’s reserves decline by $1.64 billion in a week and the governor of the SBP sounds upbeat. Recently, the country’s finance manager -- or is it adviser? -- left the US without concluding negotiation talks with the IMF, and the government appears to be unable to reduce the gap between revenues and expenditure. Amid all this economic and political regression, there is social backsliding too.

The government decides to produce a TV series on Salahuddin Ayubi, with Turkey. The PM wants the young generation to be familiar with Muslim history and spiritualism of his own liking. Beginning with TV plays of the 1980s based on the pseudo-history of Naseem Hijazi to the near-fiction of Ertugral, the retrograde use of the media has taken a serious toll on our young people.

Finally, the extension of two ordinances for another 120 days by the National Assembly and attempts to use parliament’s joint sessions for the approval of at least 15 bills is tantamount to making a mockery of legislation. The Senate has its own prestige and deserves utmost respect. Bypassing the Senate’s mandate through the use of majority in joint sessions will further undermine democracy. The government must draw on ideas of reason and democratic order and derive its strength from some basic truths of the modern age. The present setup is literally -- and not subtly -- tweaking with the very foundation of society: economically, politically, and socially.

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