[**Global realignment, domestic realities**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1678708/global-realignment-domestic-realities)

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THE prime minister’s predetermined visit to Russia came at an unfortunate time, but it increasingly seems that there’s little that could have been done about it. Justifications for the visit — not the timing — propose that Pakistan needs to chart out a more independent foreign policy that takes into account its own economic and geopolitical interests. This is a position that’s gathering credibility for the past decade, but is now more prominent since this government took over.

The subtext is that Pakistan has remained too reliant on the US, which in turn has proven to be an unreliable ally. There is a litany of complaints from Pakistan’s side and relations have remained characterised by mistrust in recent years. Exploring other geostrategic options sounds like the right thing to do.

Analysing the potential negatives and positives of foreign policy realignment is a task best left to those with domain expertise. There is already a lively debate on the timing and consequences of the Russia visit alone and it makes sense that other aspects will be subjected to heightened scrutiny. What is often ignored in such analysis, though, is the domestic impacts of foreign policy realignment.

Part of the reason for this absence of attention is that domestic politics — as far as elections and vote-choice go — is hardly shaped by foreign policy issues. This is in stark contrast to other countries, including India where Pakistan has featured prominently in the Hindutva right’s election campaigns. Over here, opinion polling of voters usually returns basic socioeconomic issues as key priorities, and other than the occasional accusation, politicians tend to sidestep foreign policy talking points during their campaigns.

How do rights organisations work in a space that is increasingly hostile to their existence?

This does not mean though that foreign policy has no influence on public and political life in Pakistan. If some forms of public opinions are anything to go by, there seems to be broad-based agreement with the current government’s foreign policy choices — the push towards Muslim posturing and scepticism of the West; the repeated publicisation of the Kashmir cause; and now the desire for greater proximity with Russia. These are being viewed as hallmarks of a more assured and independent state.

The foreign policy choices that a state makes can also then amplify and subdue particular domestic groups and their goals. Groups and causes that are seen to be aligned with out-of-favour actors can lose credibility or face coercion. Those who lobby for greater proximity towards a ‘losing’ bloc or actor usually see a loss of favour/access and potentially more serious consequences.

Under this fresh wave of global realignment, this is a key challenge facing civil society actors in Pakistan. For a host of historical reasons, Pakistan’s non-profit sector has been intrinsically tied to global development aid originating from Europe or the US. There are notable exceptions, such as Aurat March, but the lack of local funding for rights-based interventions such as gender inequality, civil and minority rights, and democratic inclusion, and the absence of progressive platforms among political parties necessitates fundraising from abroad.

It is worth stating clearly that none of this somehow makes the causes ‘foreign agendas’ — an accusation that is frequently and incorrectly made. Basic rights are universal and all struggles against inequality of various forms are local. These causes deserve to be recognised as legitimate and necessary for Pakistan’s specific context.

However, the accusation of being ‘stooges’ made by observers, and a complex relationship of aid dependency, makes the non-profit sector vulnerable to the kind of foreign policy realignments that we are now witnessing. In a world where US hegemony is under constant questioning, the West’s political power is waning, right-wing actors are gaining legitimacy everywhere at the cost of basic liberties, and strong-man populism is increasingly entrenched, NGOs and rights movements face a considerable challenge. The closing down of civic space and the further marginalisation of what were already uphill and difficult battles is taking place in a number of countries.

In Pakistan’s case, the issue is more serious not just because political actors and conservatives accuse civil society of being anti-national, but also because suppression on part of a realigning state and physical threats from a host of right-wing Islamist actors are very real.

Here then is the test facing rights organisations and non-profits working in Pakistan: the issues that they work for are still pressing and relevant. Gender inequality still exists, minorities continue to face discrimination, and there is a need to strengthen citizen accountability of the state and the basic constitutional functioning of democracy. These are rights and concerns that the state itself has signed up for through a number of its policies, laws and regulations. They need to be upheld and enforced. But how do organisations do it in a space that is increasingly hostile to their existence?

This is a dilemma that is not only of concern to movement participants, activists, non-profit workers, and other members of civil society, but one that should be of concern to government and opposition parties as well as the general public. After all, it is one that impacts the fate of all those segments in society that are currently being spoken for — however imperfectly — by existing movements and advocacy organisations.

Given the conservative nature of the political mainstream, no party is willing to take on many of the human rights concerns voiced by civil society, beyond paying lip service and the occasional legal reform, and all parties are more than happy to limit the space available to NGOs and movements on account of their foreign funding. And yet because of the importance of the causes they promote, the solution lies only in governments guaranteeing civic space and by parties becoming internally more accommodating to the concerns voiced by rights organisations.

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