[Dr Ayesha Razzaque](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-ayesha-razzaque)

November 22, 2020

**Pakistan in 2020 - Part II**

Then comes CPEC: The corridor’s projects have begun to come online and are gradually becoming more visible. Pakistan now has power generation capacity well in excess of its current requirements, and several large infrastructure and railway projects are moving closer to completion.

Iran’s Chabahar Port, supported by India and once seen as a rival to emerging Gwadar, has seen its fortunes fall with the massively increased pressure of US sanctions. Central Asian countries have been observing the progress of CPEC and have expressed a desire to link with it. Meanwhile, Afghanistan had to relent on its demand for road access to India in return for giving Pakistan access to Central Asia through Afghanistan. An alternative route via Kashgar would have circumvented Afghanistan entirely, leaving it the blue-ribbon loser of the new Silk Road that is China’s Belt and Road initiative.

Biden2020: On the opposite side of the globe President Trump is out, and President-elect Biden is in. The last few years saw several populists, some with autocratic strongman tendencies, swept into power across the world – Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orban in Hungary, Modi in India, Johnson in the UK, who put priorities like human rights in the backseat. A few years later, people in many countries are realizing that the campaign promises they were elected on were unrealistic and less and unlikely to materialize.

In the US, this collective realization has put Donald Trump into the small club of one-term American presidents, considered a sign of a somewhat failed presidency. For Pakistan, Biden’s win means a return to prioritizing human rights, which may dampen the reckless abandon with which the state frequently and openly picks up and pressurizes its own citizens for, what is now colloquially referred to as ‘software updates’.

Black Vigo: The year also saw significantly more constraints put on freedom of reporting by the media. This is reflected in Pakistan’s rank at 145th place in Reporters Without Borders’ 2020 World Press Freedom Index. This represents a drop of three places from the previous year. Several prominent journalists too critical of the government saw the number of their weekly shows reduced or were pushed out of cable news channels entirely.

The effect has been quite predictable: Several new news channels have sprung up in the online space, primarily on YouTube. If the state continues to stifle the media, it is only a matter of time before low prices of cellphone data, the convenience of watching news on YouTube on demand, and the ubiquitous culture of WhatsApp sharing will push people with dissenting views into the ungovernable online space, where Pemra’s decrees hold no power.

TikTok: The state’s knee-jerk reaction of banning without forethought, without consideration of evidence or application of common sense, was also on display when the PTA banned the popular PUBG shooter game and later TikTok, the latter domiciled in the country that is Pakistan’s CPEC benefactor, China. Being bone-headed moves to begin with, the bans on both apps were ultimately reversed.

However, these episodes are demonstrations of how in Naya Pakistan the government will happily take responsibility for the media and entertainment its citizens consume, but is content maintaining the status quo in all other public services that it should actually concern itself with – health, education, law, order, security, extremism, etc – save for a photo op here and there.

Urban Flooding and the Karachi Floods: This was the year Pakistan saw some of the most severe effects and consequences of climate change. Nineteen inches of rain fell in Karachi in August, drowning the city for a week, sweeping away slums, killing more than 100 people. The damage from the rains even burst the elite’s DHA bubble. Damage to stored goods is estimated around Rs25 billion. Estimates put the loss to GDP of one day’s paralysis in Karachi at $449 million.

The World Bank estimates that recurrent environmental damage due to climate change causes a loss of 15 percent to Sindh’s GDP every year. The federal government responded with the multi-year Karachi Transformation plan. It is still early days, but if it is enacted as envisioned there is hope that Karachi might become livable yet again.

Desert Locust Attack: This year Pakistan saw the most devastating locust infestation in nearly 30 years. The government called a national emergency as entire harvests were destroyed. According to The Guardian, Pakistan suffered a loss of Rs489 billion to Rabbi and a further Rs425 billion to Kharif crops. The locust swarm is expected to last through 2021. In the meantime, it will impact food security and cost us in terms of agricultural productivity, at least for the coming year.

PM IK Reviving Economy: After being in free-fall for much of 2018 and 2019, Pakistan’s economy seems to have finally found a foothold in 2020, albeit an unsteady one. Its real GDP growth rate in fiscal years 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 went from 5.22, to 5.53, to 1.91, to -0.4 percent and is expected to grow to two percent in 2021. Inflation has climbed back into the double digits and has hit a nine-year high of 11.2 percent, which is expected to hover at 7.5 percent in 2021.

The current account deficit has shrunk due to reduction in imports. However, exports remain stagnant with no clear plan to generate growth going forward. While remittance seems to have increased, this should not be seen as a trend but may simply be a consequence of FATF regulation. The bottom-line on the economy is that uncertainty is here to stay for some time and inequity will continue to grow.

This was and continues to be a turbulent year for Pakistan, as it has been for the rest of the world. The uncertainty is there to stay, given that we are buffeted by a second wave of the pandemic. It is said that every crisis is an opportunity for reform, but it remains to be seen whether that holds true for an emerging economy like ours.

This year has been devastating for the many families who lost loved ones or went through the emotional turmoil of fear of losing someone to the pandemic.

By May of this year, Covid-19 had claimed the lives of 20 policemen. By July, it had taken the lives of 42 doctors, 13 paramedics, 20 policemen, and support staff, two nurses and one medical student. Another 240 healthcare workers were hospitalized. Teachers, janitorial staff, servers, and essential frontline workers in other industries that require human contact have died doing their jobs. It is a shame we do not have a single source to look up these numbers, but it is important that we remember the human loss as we walk into the next year.

Until the vaccine becomes available in Pakistan in sufficient quantity, one change that is not too hard to make is remembering that a small act of negligence – not wearing a mask, not social distancing – endangers not only our lives but the lives of those around us. Wear a mask and maintain social distance. This is the single most meaningful way to show respect for the many that needlessly lost their lives.

Concluded

The writer is an independent education researcher and

consultant. She has a PhD in Education from Michigan State University.