India vs Pakistan BY A A S I M S A J J A D A K H T A R | 2/21/2020

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| EARLIER this week, while wrapping up the high-profile case of peaceful protestors arrested and charged with sedition in the federal capital in late January, Islamabad High Court (IHC) Chief Justice Athar Minallah asserted the inviolability of citizens`constitutional rights and made the pointed remark: `This is Pakistan, not India`.  In truth, the CJ was commenting less on India than on the imperative of constitutional courts in Pakistan defending the social contract and political dissidents in particular from state excess. Our democracy is, at best, f ragile. Superior courts have often sided with the establishment, and military dictators in particular. The proceedings in the said case, then, set an important precedent for whose side constitutional courts should take in times to come.  Yet the reference to India did not go unnoticed. Narendra Modi`s BJP is increasingly turning India into a theatre of the absurd, approximating the most draconian regimes history has known. The political executive and, in some cases, superior courts are constantly running roughshod over citizen`s rights. Police and paramilitaries are making a habit of beating up, arresting and disappearing ordinary people.  Right-wing vigilante mobs appear to have license to attack vulnerable populations and anti-government protestors at will.  In both India and Pakistan, these dark times and the chances are that things could get darker still also represent an unprecedented opportunity for progressive constituencies on both sides of the border to close ranks, not only to arrest the current wave of authoritarianism, but overturn the entire narrative of enmity and distrust that has persisted since soon after the British partitioned the subcontinent.  India and Pakistan are not the only states in our world to have come into being on the back of European colonial rule and cultivated state nationalisms to the detriment of the majority of their people. There are many adjacent states in Af rica, for instance, which have been at loggerheads since formal independence. Think Ethiopia and Eritrea, for instance.  But India and Pakistan are literally home to one-fifth of the world`s population, the subcontinent is more at risk of climate disasters than any other region and, perhaps most significantly, both countries are experiencing massive youth bulges with access to an increasingly digitalised public sphere unprecedented in size and scope.  It is of course true that both countries have different postcolonial histories. Many observers see Pakistan as a praetorian state in which the military establishment has remained the arbiter of the polity virtuallysince its inception. India, on the other hand, is viewed as a more functional bourgeois state with deeper democratic foundations in the trenches of civil society, including educational institutions and media.  Yet these stylised narratives gloss over the shared legacies of colonialism, most notably the thana, katcheri and patwari. Moreover, everyday politics in both countries is heavily structured by entrenched caste, religious, gender and class faultiness that make political parties outlets for patronage rather than carriers of universal programmatic change.  Perhaps most significantly,in both countries, the coercive apparatus of the state has brutalised its peripheries.  It requires deep introspection for ordinary people on both sides to transcend nationalist proclamations of `our` country being better than `their` country. We Pakistanis have always struggled to do so due to the state`s foundations, of ficial historiographies of the unitary Muslim `nation` and the institutionalised power of the reli-gious right. The rise of the RSS to state power in India has made it even easier for hawks on our side of the border to peddle an `us versus them` narrative as Muslims in India become the mostprominent target of the Hindutva project.  Indian progressives also face an uphill battle to stem the tide of hateful nationalist rhetoric. The universities and media entities that housed the dissidents of Indian democracy are being flushed out by mobs.  Meanwhile, social media, as we know in this country as well, gives progressive voices an outlet, but also ample opportunity for rightwing hawks to coalesce around simplistic and hateful slogans.  Yet to reduce the current conjuncture to just doom and gloom is to ignore what is qualitatively different about it. Young people can recognise the `other` and the parallels between our polities in ways that were arguably impossible in the past. New forms of solidarity are emerging in Pakistan and India between central regions and peripheries, and, increasingly, across the borders of both states as well.  It may be a long haul, but there is hope yet that `India vs Pakistan` eventually gives way to a shared future beyond militarism, establishments and hate. The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. |