**What tomorrow should look like**

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As the echoes of an eventful year reverberate through Pakistan’s landscapes, the nation faces an undeniable need for change. The challenges of 2023, from economic precarity to escalating violence, demand an unflinching gaze from our leaders.

While we stand at the threshold of a new year, it’s time for a much-needed introspection and a commitment to resolutions that cut through the complexities of our collective predicament. Let us look at some resolutions that those in governance should make slowly creeping into 2024:

Resolution 1: Economic Reckoning

The close call with economic default in the initial months of 2023 served as a stark reminder that Pakistan’s financial stability is hanging by a thread. With over $100 billion and counting as external debt, overdependence on external financial support, as evidenced by the nth International Monetary Fund bailout, is a vulnerability that needs immediate attention. The leaders must pledge to institute responsible fiscal policies, curb unnecessary expenditures and allocate resources judiciously (read: mortgaging another airport, if any are left, should be the last option).

This involves a meticulous examination of government spending which has only increased (read: unnecessarily) every fiscal year for Pakistan, cutting down on non-essential areas, and redirecting funds towards initiatives that spur economic growth, such as the booming IT and tourism sectors. Economic policies should prioritize sustainability, focusing on long-term growth rather than short-term gains. Initiatives promoting green industries, renewable energy, and technology-driven sectors can not only mitigate environmental concerns but also create job opportunities and attract international investments.

A commitment to economic independence also entails continuing to address the trade deficit. Pakistan’s leaders must focus on policies that boost exports, nurture domestic industries, and create a more balanced trade environment (read: instead of asking the population to consume less tea, the focus should divert to nurturing the local production of the same).

Resolution 2: Tackling Unemployment

The alarming projection from the International Labour Organisation that unemployment may reach 5.6 million in 2023, with an estimated 8.5 per cent unemployment rate, demands urgent attention.

Rectification of this involves investing in sectors that have the potential for rapid growth, such as technology, renewable energy, e-commerce and tourism. While it is appreciable that platforms like Amazon greenlit Pakistani sellers, the lack of understanding and awareness of the same hinders the benefit that Pakistanis should obtain from it

Encouraging entrepreneurship through financial incentives and support programs such as KhudKaar can invigorate the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, a crucial driver of employment. These SMEs and start-ups must be also sustained in this economy (read: the losses of Airlift and Trella are significant to Pakistan even though their sustainability should have been prioritized). Smaller projects such as the Violence Against Women Centers, which has only received notification in Multan, also help in creation of jobs especially for vulnerable demographics such as women and youth.

Given the forecasted spike in female unemployment, Pakistan must enact policies that specifically address gender disparities in the job market. Initiatives promoting equal pay, workplace inclusivity, and targeted programs for female workforce participation can contribute to a more balanced and equitable employment landscape.

Resolution 3: Governance and Democracy

In the tempest of Pakistan’s democratic journey, where the boat of governance often seems tossed by stormy seas, political parties must recognize the enduring value of democracy in ensuring sustainable governance. It is essential to convey that democracy is not a luxury but a pathway to durable good governance, and only through this path can concrete outcomes be achieved in the long run.

The upcoming regime after the next polls holds significant importance for Pakistan’s future. The insistence on fair polls, competent leadership, and governance reforms becomes even more critical. It is a make-or-break moment where business-as-usual approaches are no longer affordable. The collective will of the people, civil society, and the media must converge democratically to shape a regime that can steer Pakistan away from potential doom (read: for example, let a government complete its term).

The lapsing of the elected (read: maybe) government in August 2023 and subsequent delays in holding elections have underscored the need for immediate governance reforms. The frequent changes in Pakistan’s National Accountability Bureau have raised questions about its effectiveness and neutrality. Addressing these issues is crucial to restoring public trust and fostering an environment conducive to economic stability. This includes a transparent and accountable approach to financial management, curbing inflation, and prioritizing job creation.

The shifting of NAB’s leadership by political parties for their benefit calls for a more impartial and stable accountability framework. Strengthening the judiciary to ensure swift and unbiased justice, particularly in cases involving violence and terrorism, is essential for upholding rule of law.

Resolution 4: Counterterrorism

The alarming 60 per cent increase in terrorist incidents since the Afghan Taliban’s takeover of Kabul has thrust Pakistan into a precarious security situation. Concerns are heightened by the permissive environment in Afghanistan, providing space for Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to plan and execute attacks. While the Taliban government may not be directly responsible, the overarching objective of dislodging the Pakistani government from the Pakhtun tribal belt and imposing the Taliban’s interpretation of Shariah demands a nuanced response.

Understanding the domestic factors contributing to the rise of terrorism is equally vital. Vertical inequalities and horizontal inequities, coupled with rising poverty levels, create an environment conducive to the recruitment of potential terrorists. Addressing these socio-economic disparities becomes paramount to reducing the appeal of extremist ideologies and fostering a more inclusive society.

The recent demonstration in Gwadar underscores the urgency of addressing root causes in Balochistan. Given the centrality of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to national development, full ownership by the people of Balochistan is imperative. Establishing effective local governments can not only meet local demands but also counter propaganda by groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). This ensures that the benefits of development programmes are shared equitably, contributing to the region’s stability and security.

To conclude, as we usher in the new year, these resolutions offer a pragmatic roadmap for Pakistan’s rejuvenation in 2024. These resolutions, if implemented collectively, can propel Pakistan towards a year of revitalisation, fostering economic stability, inclusive governance, and heightened security. The script for long has been ‘what could have been’ and never ‘what it is’. The will of the people will become evident in February and then one could only hope for a change in script, if not the narrative.

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