**Drowning to live**

Mosharraf Zaidi

Tuesday, Jun 20, 2023

The capsizing of a fishing trawler off the coast of Greece has shocked many around the world. At least 78 have died and several hundred remain missing.

Pakistan was reportedly the most well represented nation on the boat. The Foreign Office has reported that 12 Pakistanis have been identified among those whose bodies have been found – many more, perhaps hundreds, remain unaccounted for. CNN has reported a Pakistani official source claiming that 300 Pakistanis may have died. Already the dissembling and performative aches and pains of a helpless and hapless state and societal elite has begun.

As I write these words on the ‘day of mourning’ for the middle-class men and women that died fleeing this place, the outcome of the inquiries, the outrage and the flagellation in the discourse is the only thing about Pakistan that is guaranteed. The third-tier criminals that are the last mile of the supply chain that ends with Pakistanis jumping off HMS Sohni Dharti will face some jail time, maybe even serious jail time. But the first-tier criminals that are the plantation owners, the executive producers, the lead conductors and chief engineers of this tragic Rock Bottom Enterprise? They will continue to spray Zippo lighter fluid across the length and breadth of the land, burning down whatever semblance of order remains.

For evidence, one need not look further than the budget document foisted upon the country last week. Ishaq Dar is seized by the interests of the PML-N, we are told. Of course, he will do what he is doing. But what is it exactly that he is doing? He is essentially trying to find enough oxygen for the state to survive past the expiry date of the current government. What happens to Pakistan the day after? Ishaq Dar, we are told, doesn’t care – he is the one that keeps telling us, in his charming Shahzeb Khanzada side manner. This is a strange flex for the Pakistani elite to keep trotting out. “I was wronged” and now “I don’t care”. Or the more powerful, “It isn’t right, but the country must be saved”.

The newest means of saving Pakistan is to convert the most passionate consumers of the fictions that the military itself manufactured into the most toxic critics of the same military. Why would a country hound the honourable lawyers that it is lucky to have? How does this keep happening? What are the short-, medium- and long-term effects of the constant throwing of the constitution into the shredder? It is exit.

I was first given the gift of Albert Hirschman’s ‘Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States’ by a professor that instituted the essay as part of my masters in 1999. By that time, Exit, Voice and Loyalty was almost thirty years old – older than me then, and much older than the Pakistani median age of 23.

Hirschman’s framework helps us understand what motivates the dynamic between individuals and systems in terms of sticking to a system versus choosing to leave it. Voice and loyalty are, therefore, really important elements in determining the ultimate outcome. If you have a voice in a system, and this voice matters, and you use it, and this use ends up making a difference, this is likely to limit the chances of your exit. Concurrent to this, in Hirschman’s own words, “The importance of loyalty from our point of view is that it can neutralize within certain limits the tendency of the most quality-conscious customers or members to be the first to exit.”

Put more simply, if you have loyalty to a system, you are likely to be able to endure failures or weaknesses in the system. Both these elements – the element of voice and the element of loyalty – are however bounded and limited. No real-life situation is ever analogous to the frameworks constructed on desks, or laptops, or in laboratories, or in boardrooms.

But Exit, Voice and Loyalty offers a powerful means of assessing, dispassionately what happened prior to the capsizing of that fishing trawler off the coast of Greece, the choices made by consumers of ‘dunkie’, the market failures that enable illegal and extremely risky migration, and the quantum of effort that states like Pakistan are now being forced to invest in keeping some people outside its borders and other people within.

Despite being given enormous leeway by my editors, this column cannot fully explore the entire spectrum of these questions – but we can make three quick observations that have a relatively rich evidence base. The first is the kind of median age Pakistani that ends up ‘dunkie lagana’ on those fishing trawlers and boats that transport people from North Africa (especially Libya) across the Mediterranean to the land of honey and milk – aka Giorgia Meloni’s Italy or Kyriakos Mitsotkis’s Greece.

It is really quite simple: bottom quintile Pakistanis cannot afford to get themselves on these economic opportunity cruise lines. Without paying illegal human smugglers several hundred thousand, and often several million rupees, you simply cannot get to the border, what to say of getting on and off the trucks, planes, trains and automobiles that end with embarking upon the boats and ships of death that are plying the Mediterranean. That kind of money is available only to those that have assets that can be converted into the hard cash that then gets converted into the illusion of a better life in Europe or beyond.

The primary question this should prompt for Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, Asif Ali Zardari and the spectrum of officers and offices of the state – deep and shallow – is why those intergenerational assets (usually land) is so readily being sold for such a high stakes gamble in which losing means drowning at sea, or being shot during a daring border crossing, or suffocating whilst in the air or in a box somewhere hiding one’s way from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, to the inflation, racism and demographic deficit of 21st century Europe.

The second is what is happening in Europe. In a different multiverse, Europe would feel deeply anguished for enabling such tragedy, and Pakistan would make sure such anguish was expressed robustly. Sadly, such audacity is outside the pay grade of Pakistanis; the country’s economic dysfunction is so profound that instead of lambasting European Union officials for having the temerity to insist on limiting illegal migration whilst Pakistan either drowns in superfloods or burns in extreme heat, Pakistan has to enable and work with the EU to support its efforts to limit illegal migration.

Greece, the country off whose coast the most recent illegal migration tragedy has occurred, just re-elected its own version of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to office, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Among Prime Minister Mitsotakis’s primary appeals – both to his voters and to the EU that helps lean on the IMF to fund fiscal Greek pensions – has been that he will limit illegal migration. In short, the capsized boat and the dead illegal migrants – human beings, if you will – are actually indicators of a successful compact between Greece and the European Union on restricting illegal migration.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen waxes eloquent about how great PM Mitsotakis is, and calls Greece Europe’s “shield”. The Greek PM basks in this glory, boasting that he doesn’t care what you call him, “right-wing or centre, I don’t know what it is, but I have to protect my borders.” This kind of dehumanized public policy is organic to Pakistan and Pakistanis – and that is partly why Pakistanis outrage – despite the collapse of humaneness in Europe’s public discourse, should be focused here at home rather than at Athens or Brussels.

The third is Pakistan’s border dilemma. One of the national security responses to permanent war in Afghanistan has been the building of a fence on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Yet the flow of Afghans in and out of Pakistan remains, essentially of a quantum that is and will remain unmanageable. Concurrently, Pakistanis with the means, the desperation and the daring to seek a better life via illegal migration keep ‘leaking’ out. Semi-permeable membranes are only very rarely one way.

Pakistan – a country that has failed its young for decades – keeps adding to its stock of young people. At 250 million people, every single problem Pakistan has will magnify in size. And every single one of those problems will affect the country’s relationship with places like Europe. The illegal migration problem is a criminal enterprise problem only for bureaucrats and the braindead. For Pakistan and its youth, it is an existential problem that says more about the present and future of 250 million people than Ishaq Dar’s budget ever would or could.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.