**How long to fix Pakistan?**

Mosharraf Zaidi

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Too much has already been said about the current Pakistani polycrisis. Nothing said so far is particularly insightful. Of course, nothing said is particularly wrong or off the mark either – but the incompetence and myopia of the most powerful individuals in the country is impervious and unmoved by good analysis.

Most of the analysis in the last eighteen months has been backward looking, insofar as it seems concerned with what has happened and why it happened and who is responsible for this mess. We all know that the current situation is a convergence of political, constitutional, security, and economic crises. We know that these crises have been exacerbated by the military and judiciary meddling in politics. We know that incompetent politicians make it easy to undermine this democracy. And most of all, we know that the entire Pakistani elite – led by the military – is responsible for this mess. There is surprisingly strong consensus on these things, with only semantics now distinguishing the analysts based on who likes which institution or individual better.

What about a forward look? What about the future? More specifically, how long will it take for Pakistan to become a more successful country? How long will it take to adopt a path of normalcy? How long before the false dawns promised by politicians, bureaucrats, judges, generals, rural elites, industrialists, bankers and media personalities have any chance of actualisation?

The easy answer is ‘InshaAllah’. It is the one I have leaned on more and more frequently over the past eighteen months. I think, deep down, this is as close as I have come to submission. Not the Islamic kind, but the kind that looks at the data, examines the evidence of group and individual interests, assesses the key actors today, and likely in the near- to mid-term, and concludes that one has to submit to reality: Pakistan has no clear or obvious discernible path out of this polycrisis. The Hail Mary of an InshaAllah is comforting (and for the believer, necessary). But it is not a useful analytical framework.

Where do we begin a reasonable analysis of how soon Pakistan can rid itself of the current trajectory? Be more than the sum of its limitations? Replace the operating system of its elites and the social contract? And really, get on the gravy train of the kind of economic growth that is ‘normal’ for China, India, Turkey, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Korea, increasingly Saudi Arabia, and even little old Bangladesh?

The answer to this question (for too many observers, even the most astute ones) is either event or individual based. So, for some, the end of the crisis begins with the IMF’s acceptance of Pakistan’s plan for fiscal and monetary stability. Some think that one chief justice judge is in the way. Others think that the next chief justice will be in the way. Imran Khan keeps naming an individual office. Nawaz Sharif did the same thing in October 2020 at Gujranwala.

For me, from even before the vote of no-confidence in 2022, it has been elections. Pakistan can’t really move forward without a bit of a cleanse, and this country has always found elections – even really compromised ones – to be moments of cleansing and renewal as far as the connection between the idea of this country and its people and their aspirations.

Of course, any of these could be the actual right answer. Or all of them could be parts of the right answer. Or some combination of them could be the right answer. But then what? What happens the moment that special something clicks, and Pakistan is able to look forward with genuine hope of evacuating the dungeon it is currently ensconced in?

This is the very bad news part of the story. The very bad news is that neither a settlement of constitutional grey areas, nor a fully free and fair election, nor a smooth IMF programme, nor even a resolution of the military’s large and ceaseless ingress into civilian affairs will singularly or even collectively be sufficient to turn the tide of economic dysfunction, social disquiet and political unrest that is today’s Pakistan.

Countries are not cars (or businesses) that can be turned around with a capable driver at the steering wheel, or a board and a CEO that take rational and tough decisions. A balanced budget, and efficient public-sector enterprises alone will not save Pakistan. A free and fair election alone that produces a government run by the same rules of business that currently wreak havoc on Pakistan’s potential will not save Pakistan. A military suddenly seized with the righteousness of minding only the borders and its core business of national defense alone will not save Pakistan. Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, Asif Ali Zardari and Maulana Fazlur Rehman working together in parliament alone will not save Pakistan.

All of these may be necessary conditions to save Pakistan, but none alone will be sufficient to save Pakistan. All of these necessary conditions being met together, even met very well, may not be sufficient to ‘save Pakistan’. Why is the negative and critical analysis so easy, and the positive outlook so hard?

Countries are not simple. They are, I repeat, not cars. They are definitely not private businesses that just need that one special turnaround specialist CEO. Countries are also not fairytales or parables from holy books. Countries are complex multi-system systems. A lot has to go right, at the right time, for a long time, for a country to go from a place of failure and hopelessness to a place of success and hope. Every country that is held up as an example for Pakistan has a complex and complicated back story where all the real work happens.

Real work. Rescuing or saving a country is real work. Real work isn’t just sitting in meetings and talking about things. Real work is real work. Want an example? There is probably someone in your immediate environment that is a workhorse – the person that makes it all happen, the person that many depend on, the person that can be trusted when something needs doing, the person that always shows up, the person that stays late, the person that ignores noise and focuses on what matters. In most of our lives this person is as likely, or even more likely to be a woman, than to be a man. But think about how small, simple economic, social and political systems – like a home, or an office – require ‘that person’ and in most cases, several of ‘that person’ to make things work well.

Now imagine how many a country requires. Think of it this way: Pakistan has somewhere between 32 million and 38 million households, depending on what data we use. Countries are complex multi-system systems. Imagine how many of ‘that person’ Pakistan will need. The good news is that countries are not impossible.

In 2005, King Abdullah started a scholarship fund to pay for the university education of any Saudi national – man or woman – that could secure admission abroad. Today, the world raves about the speed of Saudi reform under Prime Minister Mohammad bin Salman, quite rightly. But Vision 2030 and MBS have relied on the rocket fuel of over 150,000 high quality young Saudis with degrees from all around the world. The human capital fuelling today’s Saudi Arabia came about because of a programme launched 18 years ago.

In July 2001, PM Hasina Wajid of Bangladesh inaugurated a 6.15 km bridge over the Padma River. Every international financial institution considered the bridge to be unrealistic – and many issues in the first few years of the bridge planning process forced Bangladesh to try to finance the construction of the bridge itself. No one raised any slogans about the evil of foreign donors. No one whined or moaned about how Bangladesh has been left in the lurch. PM Hasina Wajid and hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis rolled up their sleeves and built Padma Bridge themselves. From 2014 to July 2022 the bridge was built at a cost of over $3.5 billion – all of which was provided by the Bangladeshi taxpayer. The bridge is expected to add billions to the Bangladesh GDP. The PM that announced the bridge project, inaugurated it 22 years later.

Indonesia and Turkey went through terrible political and economic crises in 1997. Both places, full of devoted Muslims and run by dominant, capable armies, were basket cases. Today, both are G20 economies. Both command geopolitical relevance and the respect of all powers, large and small. The processes that helped their militaries withdraw back to the barracks and unleash the potential of their people began in 1997: the removal of Necmeddin Erbakan in Ankara and the collapse of the Suharto regime in Jakarta. That was 25 years ago.

Countries are not impossible. But they are complex, multi-system systems. It will take Pakistan at least two decades to become a successful country. But that two-decade process has not begun yet. Not even close.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.