[**Comeback states**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1721051/comeback-states)

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WE face now one of our worst crises due to a mix of domestic and external economic, political and natural threats. Our economic, political, social, demographic, ecological and external trends say we may see huge ecological crises, displacement, pandemics, economic turmoil, terrorism, external tiffs, political turmoil and ethnic conflict in the future too. These together make us perhaps the most riskily perched and unstable large state globally and may cause doom in 25 years. Can we avoid it? I look for tips at six big ‘comeback’ states that saw big crises but rose from the ashes to make progress.

Japan saw US nuclear attacks and occupation after 1945 but rose soon as its economic rival. Its crisis was military conquest, caused by its own military forays. Ethnic oneness, a long state history, US aid and a sole focus on economics led its progress. Mao left China a poor state in 1978 but China is now a superpower. Its crisis was mainly economic due to misrule and a choked economy. Ethnic oneness, a long state history, past success, a focus on economics and diaspora ties led its progress. Russia emerged from the ruins of ex-USSR in 1991, which fell due to economic malaise and military overreach. Russia saw but overcame economic and ethnic turmoil. It hasn’t seen Japan’s or China’s success, yet its natural resources give it some progress. But Putin’s misrule and military overreach again risk its own and global stability.

India faced a big economic crisis in 1991. It has also seen much ethnic, religious and Maoist strife, but without them posing existential threats. Its economic problems were due to over-regulation. Progress came via deregulation, strong diaspora ties and an able bureaucracy. Indonesia too faced huge economic turmoil in 1998, terrorism and ethnic strife that led to East Timor breaking away. Long army rule, ethnic divides and a short state history were the main causes. Democracy, devolution and location in a dynamic region aided progress. Bangladesh was left an economic basket case by 25 years of our colonial-style rule. Army rule upped its strife. Yet it now has fast economic growth due to civilian rule (even if corrupt and dynastic), ethnic oneness and export-led growth.

This review gives key lessons. None of the six had the multiple crises, some of them existential, we face in all realms. Indonesia came the closest. But we combine all their crisis-causing factors — military overreach, ethnic divides, a short history, a badly run economy and extremism. Many of their remedial factors are absent for us: long history, ethnic oneness, past success and strong diaspora. Even ties with the big powers have given us more doom than boom. So we face more crises, suffer more complex root causes and have fewer remedies.

We have examples of states that emerged from crises.

The political novelties that some crave — revolution, technocracy, electoral changes, theocracy or a populist, anti-sleaze messiah — played no role in their cases. In fact, progress usually came by shunning them. There was always a move towards democracy or less autocracy (Russia/China). In each case, able reformists could gain power just in time and without indulging in political novelty to shepherd change. This is the Gordian knot we can’t untie — how to get able reformers in power — despite many failed Pindi novelties (like the anti-sleaze messiah). A look at the three states most like us — India, Indonesia and Bangladesh — shockingly shows they gained power via the ‘bad egg’ we reject for failed novelties: corrupt, dynastic politics! Oddly, daughters (or daughters-in-law) played varying roles in each. This may be music to alert Noonie ears. So can Maryam be the Pakistani Hasina politically? The Congress model may be better for us, with the Gandhi family choosing able prime ministers.

Setting wild dre­ams aside, quickly needed change can only come via the present bad system. In the 2023 polls, we have a last chance to avert doom if the new regime does serious restructuring in five years. After that, it may be too late. We had that chance in 2018, but Pindi blew it by acting too wise and imposing a failed experiment. The chances are very low as the tried and failed PDM and PTI are the two choices. The PTI will give incompetent and chaotic populism, external isolation, social extremism and endless political drama and conflict. The PDM ‘A Team’ will only give incompetent, patronage politics. The best hope is if, like the Gandhis, the Sharifs and Zardaris appoint able people already in their ranks, like Shahid Khaqan Abbasi or Hina Khar, as prime minister, and able PPP persons in the foreign, law and social ministries and able PML-N persons in economic and security ministries. Will Pindi, Pakistan and PDM make wise choices? On their choices rests the country’s progress, perhaps even survival.

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