[**Saving Pakistan**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690096/saving-pakistan)

[Dr Niaz Murtaza](https://www.dawn.com/authors/385/dr-niaz-murtaza)

May 17, 2022

The writer is a political economist with a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley.

FOR those irked by our huge present problems, I have more bad news. Our future, leading to 100 years of freedom by 2050, may be much worse than our troubled past 75 years. Six key trends foretell this grim future.

Ecologically, climate change may destroy our fertile soil, swamp coastlines, cause water wars and increase disasters and migration hugely. Demographically, our numbers may hit 300 million-plus given a high fertility rate. Economically, our inability to escape slow GDP and job growth, high twin deficits, a huge debt and poor innovation and competitiveness may cause economic collapse. Socially, fake religiosity and patriotism and extremism may fan huge social unrest — TLP’s quick rise reflects this fact.

Externally, we are in an unstable region that is fast becoming more extremist and autocratic. India-Pakistan enmity is the main global nuclear risk. Afghan instability poses huge risks. Tension between two key allies (US-China) may pull us in and pose unpalatable choices.

And politically, we alone lack civilian sway regionally. Almost every issue above stems from our autocratic eras, especially Gen Zia’s. Almost all our parties owe their existence partially to Pindi. So blame even for their follies deflects partly to the establishment. The landed/business elite-led parties are responsible for patronage, sleaze and top-down politics. But oddly, the politics and outcomes of our main middle class-led political forces — MQM, PTI, TLP — are worse. The popularity of the PTI’s populist megalomania among educated people threatens rationalism.

We must focus on the path that provides the best chance.

Who then will save Pakistan? The recent rise of tiny leftist middle class groups gives hope but can they expand their political outreach and governance capacity fast enough to avert collapse? All are still pressure groups rather than national parties ready to govern with clear policies.

Which other state faces this grim mix of demographic, ecological, external, enmity, economic, extremism, emergencies, education, epidemics, establishment, ethnic and elitism issues? This mix may cause huge ecological disasters, economic collapse, extremist violence, external isolation, nuclear calamity, political turmoil and ethnic insurgency.

Thus, Pakistan is a rumbling volcano. If it erupts, the shockwaves will be felt regionally, even globally. Few other states pose this global risk. Russia and India come closest. But their issues are simpler and regime change may quickly cut them lower. Our deep-seated, multifaceted issues transcend regime change as sins of decades of autocracy coalesce now to confront and torment us.

If this causes gloom, the latter increases in reviewing the steps needed to avert Armageddon. Tax and export revenues, productivity and competitiveness must be upped. Huge increases must be made in creative social spending to reduce poverty and extremism. The establishment must end its political forays and parties must adopt issues-based politics. Extremism and terrorism must be ended. A just solution to Baloch complaints must be found. Peace with India must be struck and ties with the Afghan Taliban cut. Ties with the US and China must be balanced. Gloomily, on most steps, we are currently stagnant or reversing.

Even more gloomily, while our current trajectory takes us straight into the eyes of multiple storms, so badly have the establishment’s regular political forays distorted politics that Pakistani society is unable to produce the mature politics that can help change course. With deep wounds, it is unclear if the political body can heal itself fast enough.

Worryingly, the rise of middle class-led parties has actually made politics worse, even though the middle class globally is seen as giving better politics. Thus, we are paralysed into political inaction despite seeing the threat, as in a bad dream or on the Titanic’s deck.

Globally, one sees cases of huge states like China, India and Indonesia that changed course to gain progress within 25 years, but none faced our massive mix of problems. Thus, neither history nor social science analysis provide much hope and one must conclude that our chances of averting most of these future crises may be few.

Yet when chances of success are so few, one must not focus on them but, like cornered tigers, on the path that provides the best chance. That path is clearly that of democracy, with an end to both establishment politics and the populist megalomaniac politics it has helped spawn. We will also need some lucky external breaks. The US, EU, UK, Gulf states, China and India all have critical roles to play here as Pakistan’s failure will have huge spin-offs for all of them.

Whether all this will be enough to avert doom, only time will tell. Meanwhile, the time bomb’s clock is going tick, tick, tick…

*The writer is a political economist with a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley.*

[**murtazaniaz@yahoo.com**](http://mailto:murtazaniaz@yahoo.com)

**Twitter:** [**@NiazMurtaza2**](https://twitter.com/NiazMurtaza2)

*Published in Dawn, May 17th, 2022*