**What we must fight for**

Mosharraf Zaidi

Tuesday, Mar 28, 2023

In the midst of this polycrisis for the ages, it is not difficult to enumerate all the things that are going badly and everything that is wrong.

There is a lot to lament and a lot for Pakistanis to be unhappy about. Our leaders, our institutions and even the application of basic values that our society has upheld for decades seem to have collapsed. This is why it is all the more important to remind ourselves of everything we are fighting for, of everything that is good about us and everything that we must try to preserve about these very leaders, within these very institutions, and across our society and polity.

If you have come to this article to read yet another critique of the multi layered polycrisis in Pakistan and the failure of the country’s leaders, you should stop reading now. This week I dedicate this space to a reminder and refresher on all the good that has been done within this very clearly broken system by these same seemingly helpless and endlessly failed leaders and through the very institutions that seem so incapable today.

Pakistan has endured almost two decades of war and withstood at least five decades of middle and great powers trying to take advantage of the country. Every single politician and military leader that has been in power has had to deal with a neighbourhood and global context that has been negatively inclined to Pakistan’s interests. Through these five decades Pakistanis have survived the assassination of two prime ministers, the repeated destruction of our constitution, the manipulation and abuse of the country’s airwaves and internal fissures by external actors and nearly constant conflict in large parts of the country.

Every single major political party has had to endure assassinations, physical assaults, jail terms and the manipulation of the legal system to undermine and eliminate the party leadership. These same party leaderships have somehow found the wherewithal to build the country’s infrastructure and set the standard for federal compromise (PML-N), reform the constitution, heal divisions and renew federalism (PPP), create political awareness and engagement at an unprecedented scale, especially among a voiceless urban middle class (PTI), excite and empower underrepresented ethnic and linguistic groups (ANP, PkMAP, MQM, BNP-M, QWP, NP), sustain religious discourse (JI, JUI-F, JUI-S, TLP) and generate alternative new political narratives (PTM, NDM, AWP).

Most of all, these parties have had to deal with an antagonistic media, a bureaucracy (including the military) that suffers from a compulsive, institutional design-level predilection to undermine the political autonomy of elected leaders, and a judiciary that is often unable or unwilling to uphold the constitution.

The same media that is so easily demonized has bravely faced death threats and abuse – at scale – from both non-state and state actors throughout the country’s history. And despite these threats, no matter the era and no matter the antagonist, the media continues to manufacture heroic truth seekers and storytellers, as brave as any in the world – despite regular assassinations (like that of Arshad Sharif and Saleem Shehzad), assassination attempts (like that of Hamid Mir, Absar Alam and Ahmed Noorani), and constant abuse and harassment (like Matiullah Jan, Umar Cheema, Siddique Jan) and numerous others. No country on the planet has a media with the intestinal fortitude and freedom of spirit that Pakistan has.

The same bureaucracy that is so easily demonized has held the country up on its under-resourced and underappreciated shoulders through some of the world’s worst natural disasters and unending conflict throughout five decades. It did not matter whether it was the 2005 earthquake, the 2010 floods, Covid-19, the 2022 superfloods. There was always an assistant commissioner, a nurse, a government doctor, a sub-inspector, a district commissioner, a government school teacher, a magistrate, a provincial management service officer, a patwari – standing at the edge of disaster, without food, water or shelter, saving lives, at great personal risk and without the kind of support most civil servants get in other places.

Pakistani polio workers, election officials, and lady health workers are regularly assassinated for doing their jobs. How many refuse to show up to work the day after a tragedy? Hardly any. They keep showing up, keep grinding, keep surviving so that their communities and people, and their country can keep chugging. No country on the planet has a civil service that does so much despite being given so little.

The same military that is so easily demonized produces soldiers, spies, seamen and airmen that simply do not quit and have kept fighting through essentially the entire history of the country – one generation, after the other, after the other – fighters, martyrs, heroes. In the dark of night, when Pakistanis sleep in relative peace, it is the Pakistan military that provides the canopy of protection and safety within which we dream of a better future – including one with greater freedoms, and more civilian authority and control of our present and future.

Pakistani soldiers have stared down multiple insurgencies, foreign terrorist campaigns and outright attacks on Pakistan (most recently Salala in 2011 and Balakot in 2019) and an alphabet soup of terrorist groups, from the LeJ and TTP to Daesh and the BLA. The country boasts the highest number of officers to soldiers martyrdom ratio, which is why the coherence and unity of the armed forces endures through one domestic or international crisis after another. No country on the planet has soldiers as brave or courageous as Pakistan’s.

The same judiciary that sometimes fails critical tests of an unbiased and unfettered defence of the constitution has also produced incredible moments of institutional clarity and independence of spirit. A lot of the political consciousness and democratic openness that endures in Pakistan is a direct product of the lawyers’ movement of 2007-2009. It was the slogan of independent judiciary through which almost every political party found renewal in Pakistan in 2007 and through which the military was forced to revisit its explicit rule over the country (which ended in 2008).

It is easy to be critical of a judiciary in which pendency is high and trust is low, but these same judges have stood up to incredible challenges from terrorists and violent extremists. Sometimes judges have had to stand up to the entire system to make judgements and pronouncements that nobody has wanted to hear. Often lacking the safety of numbers that politicians do, and the safety of resources that the armed forces do, Pakistani judges have helped construct a quantum of judicial independence that is, for many other countries, a model to emulate. No country on the planet has tested its judges on numerous fronts as regularly and as brutally as Pakistan has.

All of these qualities and successes are at stake in today’s Pakistan. There is a point of no return for how we conduct the affairs of the country, and it is fast approaching. The most urgent and important task for the country’s leadership group is for it to remind itself that its primary duty is not to their persons, their families, their parties or their specific employer or institution – but to the Pakistan of our dreams and the Pakistan of their recent realities. All that is good in Pakistan has the fingerprints of Nawaz Sharif, Asif Ali Zardari, Imran Khan, Fazlur Rehman, General Asim Munir, Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial, Justice Qazi Isa Faez and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. They are the guardians of all that is worth fighting for in Pakistan.

This is why it is especially important to hear the words of Rana Sanaullah this weekend as he declared a no-holds-barred, binary, fight to the death between the PML-N and the PTI. His horrific statement should make every Pakistani sick to the stomach, but it should also serve as a reminder of the urgency of the challenge the country faces today. This is a country with multiple vulnerabilities, and one that must, like all things in the universe, adhere to the basic rules of physics. Beyond a point of return, nothing can survive.

We are not past the point of no return – but we may be soon. This is a country that has shown glimpses of greatness, courtesy the very individuals and institutions that seem dedicated to total destruction today. They need to be reminded of all that is good about our country – and their inescapable role in the journey to all that is great. Now.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.