**A delusional Pakistan**

**Pakistan’s delusions persist, from financial dependency on the US to enforcing peace through coercion, while digital democracy and youth unrest reshape the nation’s future.**

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Delusion is a mental health condition in which a person cannot differentiate between real and imaginary. To elaborate, a delusional person believes in things that cannot be possible. For instance, stars control one’s life. As a country—a collection of people—Pakistan offers no exception. Delusions driving the country are numerous. Five of them deserve a mention.

First, keeping expenditures high while making efforts to increase taxation can reduce the budget deficit. This formula has failed incessantly. Based on presumptive income to be collected, expenditures cannot be raised in a given fiscal year. The other day, Dr Kaiser Bengali, an economist, unequivocally declared Pakistan’s bankruptcy for its inability to service foreign loans. He disparaged the malpractice of seeking loans to pay loans as well as the insistence on not reducing expenditures. He also said that Pakistan had been borrowing to pay for the interest accruing on the loans. That is, the only way out lies in reducing expenditures, both civil and (non-combatant) military.

Second, the United States (US) is ordained to keep Pakistan afloat financially, as if it were a bounden duty of the US not to let Pakistan experience sovereign default on its foreign loans. If memory serves the purpose, in 1971, Pakistan raised its expectations from the US to send the seventh naval fleet to Bengal (East Pakistan) in an effort not to let the country get bifurcated. In 2024, Pakistan is trying to relive 1971. Instead of managing its internal affairs, a simpleton Pakistan thinks that the US will not let a nuclear-capable country implode financially—to the detriment of South Asia. Here, Pakistan forgets another point. In May 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the US was concerned over the safety of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and that the US had a “contingency plan” to forestall the approach of Islamists (who could be helped from inside) to reach nuclear arsenals. To elaborate on the contingency plan, she said that, in Afghanistan, the US forces had been undertaking mock exercises on how to land in Pakistan to take nuclear weapons into safe custody. Her statements broke Pakistan’s reluctance to do a military expedition in the Swat Valley, thereby heralding the beginning of military operations against the homegrown Taliban. Certainly, the US sees nuclear arsenals detached from Pakistan.

Third, Pakistan cannot experience a Bangladesh-like unrest. Interestingly, Bangladesh’s former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, also believed in the non-replication of any Spring of Awareness in her country. She did not know that, at the end of the Cold War in 1991, the third wave of democracy had swept across East European and Central Asian countries. Similarly, the fourth wave—called the Arab Spring—had ravaged the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East in 2011. The quest for democracy and the desire for human rights were no respecters of any oppressive regime, no matter how potent it could be. Compared to the third wave, the fourth wave predicated its strength on demands for freedom and equitable distribution of a country’s economic resources. Wazed was confident of her oppressive rule in sync with the military and the judiciary to embody the concept of the Bangladesh model of governance. The youth’s pursuit of access to free will and sources of wealth not only upended Wazed’s tyrannical measures but also frustrated the efforts of any country yearning to replicate the Bangladesh model of governance. Earlier, in 2022, Sri Lanka had also witnessed unrest across the island against President Gotabaya Rajapaksa owing to his poor management of the economic crisis. Both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh offer models for studying how people’s disaffection breaches the limits of precedence to create new history. Certainly, there are signs of the sage.

Fourth, Pakistan can enforce peace through coercion. This is not possible. Pakistan still seems to be a dabbler in the arena of independent countries. It has lost the memory of intense negotiations to reach an agreement with political adversaries in the wake of the Lahore Resolution of 1940. Perhaps history books have been consigned to the dustbin for non-retrieval. The province of Balochistan is in revolt. Alienation, exploitation, oppression, and broken promises, all rolled into one, are called the crisis in Balochistan. The hubris of the Centre, expressed through bragging about the potency of a station house officer to quell the crisis in Balochistan, is the best example of why remote areas are getting dissociated from the Centre. In a federation, insulting a federating unit with such haughtiness is a recipe for disaster. Heads must roll. Rigged elections and puppet governments cannot soothe people’s longing for legitimate representation. Unlike Sardars, Dr Mahrang Baloch would be a tough negotiator—a formidable opponent standing for the Baloch cause, disapproving of death squads, enforced disappearances, and disfigured corpses. The Baloch cannot escape the mesmerising effects of her leadership. Even a veteran Baloch legislator, Akhtar Mengal, underestimated the strength of the Baloch uprising, led by the educated youth. He was quite late in tendering his resignation from the National Assembly. This is why he would not retract it. Similarly, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is also seething with anger, though for different reasons. In totality, in two western provinces, the youth want to carve out a future of their choice, and rightly so.

Fifth, digital democracy can be subdued. The way electronic devices have coalesced with the population explosion, Pakistan’s future can be envisaged in digital democracy, expressed through social media. The age of state-controlled media to construct a desired narrative has gone. Owing to the availability of Western education in the English language, Pakistan is more linked to the democratic capitalist countries of the West. The countries where English is not a popular lingua franca for learning and communication find it easier to limit the access of citizens to the outside world. In Pakistan, the same policy is bound to incur revulsion.

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