[Ghazi Salahuddin](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/ghazi-salahuddin)

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**A patchwork of ideals**

An unexamined life, as Socrates is supposed to have said at his trial, is not worth living. This philosophical lesson synchronises with the message of most religions. Indeed, we are all accountable for how we live our lives. But the point here is that we should consciously develop a capacity to examine and question our deeds and our values.

And the same principle should be applied to collective entities, such as organised groups, institutions and nations. In fact, it is imperative for institutions to define the purpose of their existence and consistently examine the quality of their prescribed conduct.

As for nations, there is this fundamental concept of a vision or a set of ideals. Pakistan is almost unique in this respect because it was born of an idea. Conventional wisdom states that the dream was dreamt by poet Iqbal who, by the way, compellingly asserted that a nation that does not constantly reckon with every action that it takes is doomed. Then, the dream was brought into reality by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. That is how we invoke his vision all the time, without being able to define – and, thus, examine – its contours.

Enough of a preamble. We can look before and after (and pine for what is not) but the intention is to cast a glance at the state of the nation in the light of how it is governed. A recurring assignment is to figure out the status of the ‘Naya Pakistan’ project and try to decipher the direction in which it is going.

Making a distinction between the superficial shine and the intrinsic worth of events that make media headlines is a problem. For instance, there was the judgment on Monday of Justice Faez Isa’s case. Everyone noted its dramatic twist. Accepting the review petitions, the ten-member bench overturned, by six to four, its own June 2020 majority judgment.

One has to be aware of the background of proceedings that began with a presidential reference. Take a look at how this process stumbled through some awkward and emotional exchanges in the courtroom to arrive at this judgment. Essentially, Justice Isa’s vindication amounted to the rulers’ loss of face.

Let me quote just one sentence from a published editorial: “The verdict also serves as an object lesson for those who tried to pervert the law and the concept of accountability to malign and excise from the bench a judge unafraid to call them out for their excesses”. Justice Isa had himself argued his case. However, one gets the feeling that Monday’s verdict, announced as a short order, would not be the end of this matter. Still, what does it mean in the context of the superior judiciary’s role and reach in the disputes that are now taking shape?

In any case, the reverberations made by Justice Isa's case were almost immediately drowned in the thunder of incendiary revelations of the former head of the Federal Investigation Agency, Bashir A Memon. Among other things, he alleged that Prime Minister Imran Khan himself had wanted him to initiate proceedings against Justice Isa. One expression that circulated in the media was that Bashir Memon had opened Pandora's box.

Suddenly, he became the star of prime time talk shows, appearing on one channel after another and confidently repeating his account of how the government was playing foul to initiate cases against its political opponents. This charge was so serious that Imran Khan had to respond. He rejected the allegations in a meeting with a group of TV anchorpersons at the PM House on Thursday.

Considering the potential of Jehangir Tareen’s powerful group to undermine the PTI’s political legitimacy and the dismal performance of the PTI candidate in Karachi’s by-election for NA -249, a constituency previously held by the PTI, would it be fair to say that Imran Khan is more vulnerable now than before? If Pandora has opened her box, many miseries are likely to come out, in addition to the deathly shadows cast by the pandemic.

But Imran Khan has seldom been as dynamic as he is at this time. He is following a hectic schedule, making multiple appearances to cut ribbons, lay foundation stones and make visits to other cities. He is live on TV channels almost every day and at times more than once in a day, dispensing his wisdom on how he is making a ‘naya’ Pakistan. He flaunts his credentials in a rather passionate manner.

One refrain is that he knows the West like no other person. But the Imran who went to Oxford and played cricket for a number of years and eventually married Jemima was someone else. The West he came into contact with was one segment of what we know as a civilisation that has its good and bad features. It is interesting that the post-West Imran may agree with some popular clerics’ views of the West.

This does not mean that he should not be taken seriously when he finds inspiration in different and often contradictory systems of governance. Beyond any doubt, he admires authoritarian leaders and regimes. Bashir Memon’s revelations included a reference to how some Middle East regimes had dealt with corruption in high places.

A desire to emulate China for lifting people out of poverty makes a lot of sense. But does he know China as well as he does the West? Would he support a socialist revolution in Pakistan, one feature of which would be to reject organised religion?

Finally, one would totally agree with his formulation on elite capture. I like to quote a former country head of UNDP who, when he was leaving Pakistan, said that the elite have to decide if they want a country. But there is little thought devoted to how the elite can be defeated. Some of those who are persecuted in Imran’s Pakistan may have some views on how to do it.

And when it comes to cutting the moneyed elite to size, would Imran like this to happen to so many of his friends and associates?

The writer is a senior journalist.

Email: ghazi\_salahuddin@hotmail.com