**[Broken politics, broken budget](https://www.dawn.com/news/1843272/broken-politics-broken-budget)**

[Arifa Noor](https://www.dawn.com/authors/57/arifa-noor) Published July 2, 2024

THE [budget](https://www.dawn.com/news/1842689) has come and gone, as far as parliament is concerned. The PPP showed much concern and made much noise but then quietly voted for it, while the PTI couldn’t even put up much of a noisy show in parliament. They were far too busy fighting each other.

And so the PML-N has successfully passed a budget, which has been more widely criticised than any in the recent past; when confronted with criticism, the party continues to blandly remind us all that everyone knew this was going to be a ‘difficult’ budget. Of course, what they conveniently ignore is that the state, the politicians, the bureaucracy, and the military have managed to avoid any burden or difficulty while the salaried class and the more vulnerable people are left to carry the burden, through direct and indirect taxes.

Expenses in government departments have gone up; salaries and pensions have gone up; bonuses are being given generously. But for those outside the ‘state’, good news is downloading at the speed of their internet. Hope is a tiny bird, which is sitting where only a few in government can see it.

Consider the finance minister’s latest press conference on Sunday. Pension reform is in the works, he says, as is tax on traders. Reducing expenses and shutting down departments is also in the pipeline. Passing responsibilities (read: expenses) on to the provinces is also being discussed.

Its Camelot in the making but for those stuck in the purgatory called the tax net, hell couldn’t really be any worse.

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This is the second press conference by the finance minister since the budget was presented and it seems as if he doesn’t realise he is not just dealing with a distrustful IMF but also a citizenry which is equally suspicious of the Pakistan government. Muhammad Aurangzeb may have given up his passport and private sector comforts to come help the motherland but he is not the first such sincere finance minister who has promised good times to the people in the vague future.

What he doesn’t realise is that he carries the burden of the past few years; half a dozen finance ministers have sat in the very same chair and made similar promises. Indeed, since 2018, the people have been promised temporary pain, as the government — any government — gets around to fixing problems. But while the pain is never-ending, the ‘fixing’ and the relief never come.

And this is part of the reason why the anger this time around has been immediate, to which the government seems oblivious. What else would one call it? The government doesn’t even realise the need for optics. Confront it on its rising expenses and increased salaries, and the government holds forth on how this will not make much of a difference to the numbers. In others words, it appears oblivious to the need for even making token efforts at belt-tightening. Why else would the finance minister announce a three-month bonus for the National Assembly staff during his speech, after having already given the entire bureaucracy a hefty raise?

But then, the problem is bigger than him or even the PML-N. This budget and the interests it has protected at the expense of squeezing the already weak shows, at one level, the impact of manipulated election results — in 2018 and 2024. Beleaguered and weak governments are simply incapable of protecting the rights of those who can vote for them; the protection is, instead, secured for those who have shaped governments. And this makes many wonder if this is why governments are being shaped. To protect the privileges, which may be less secure if the people are able to choose who comes to power? Institutional and individual likes and dislikes, which drive narratives and analyses, are perhaps secondary.

And this is directly linked to the second point of the breathless commentary on how the heavy taxation and high energy bills will lead to chances of rioting or street protests.

In fact, those who point this out also tend to frequently bemoan the Pakistani people’s inability to protest and push back against an increasingly extractive state. However, this analysis — both in terms of those who expect rioting and those who think the people are far too submissive — is too Punjab-focused. It seems as if they are unaware of events in Balochistan, where the discord with the state has led to two interconnected but distinct movements. If one is a violent struggle, the second is a peaceful street protest led by women to highlight enforced disappearances.

Similarly, in parts of KP, the emergence of the PTM is also a form of protest politics.

Perhaps one can go so far as to say that at least half of Pakistan is already home to movements or political expressions, which no longer think parliament is the forum where negotiations can be carried out for the benefit of the people, be it economic or political. It is important to note that these movements may have political issues at heart but economic ones are not far behind. The Baloch have long complained about their resources being monopolised by the centre, instead of being used for the welfare of the people living in the province. The PTM’s initial demands included the issue of compensation for the damage caused to property and livelihood.

The point here is that those who think that the decisions of the state will not change unless there is rioting and street protests, are essentially accepting that the election cycle, the formal structure of political parties, and parliament are no longer sufficient for providing a voice or space to ordinary people. In other words, for the voice of the people to be heard, politics now has to be carried out on the street, in the shape of protests.

Indeed, our politics has been broken for a long time. The budget is simply another proof of this.

*The writer a journalist.*

*Published in Dawn, July 2nd, 2024*

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