[Mosharraf Zaidi](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mosharraf-zaidi)

December 29, 2020

**Five challenges for the PM in 2021**

Prime Minister Imran Khan recently expressed surprise at how difficult governing has been. He knows better than to pretend that he was surprised. The single most important characteristic he has sought in his political proxies and partners is the capacity to shout down, harass, abuse and tar and feather those that dare warn Pakistanis about the dangers of a lack of preparation. He can keep the trolls. But Pakistan needs a PM better prepared for 2021 than he was for 2018, 2019 or 2020.

In 2021, Pakistan will face five grave dangers that ultimately (no matter what civil-military divide whining we eventually see the PTI adopt), are PM Khan and the PTI’s responsibility to be prepared for and tackle.

Risk 1: A weak and imbalanced economic recovery. Pakistanis require two things from the government on the economic front. The first is growth, a pure and simple increase in the size of the Pakistani pie. The second is cash transfers – a large, sustained and frequent boost to the capacity of the ordinary Pakistani to buy things. If there is GDP growth, even a dysfunctional fiscal regime, led by a bureaucracy-dominated FBR will collect more and more tax. If not, revenue dries up and Pakistan has to borrow even more than it ordinarily would, thus jacking up external debt.

Meanwhile, the celebratory mood around an impressive turnaround of the current account deficit (CAD) needs to be tempered by a little realism: as the economy recovers and Pakistan begins to import more machinery and heavy equipment to meet its industrial needs for growth, CAD will once again rise. To his credit, PM Khan’s instincts on economic policy during the pandemic were spot on. He chose wisely in May, June and July: delivering the two things Pakistanis need the most: growth and cash transfers.

A major increase in the payments being made through BISP, ideally through a reframing of the Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme as a regular cash grant for nearly 16 million families, must be at the heart of economic policy in 2021. How to pay for this? By ensuring that the industrialist seths are making so much more than they have in recent years that a higher tax rate doesn’t hurt them very much at all. Finally, a strong recovery must feature a major stimulus-driven budget for FY 2021-2022 – in which provinces dedicate a greater share to not just basic service delivery, but especially to infrastructure. Infrastructure (contrary to the brain trust around PM Khan), is how governments stimulate not just overarching long term mobility and economic capacity but also shorter-term jobs and consumption. To get to that stage, the remaining six months of the current year must be dedicated to much more effective utilization of the limited development budgets that were allocated.

Risk 2: System-wide division and disruption. Pakistan cannot afford another 2014 dharna. Even without the kind of behind the scenes support that Tahirul Qadri and the PTI enjoyed in 2014, the Pakistan Democratic Movement has repeatedly demonstrated its appeal, both for the common citizen and for those that help shape the public discourse. Pakistan can certainly ill afford mass resignations from the assemblies. The only response the government seems to have to the PDM is information operations to try to diminish the opposition’s claims. But there are a number of reasons why trolling should replace reconciliation in 2021. The most important is that almost every major issue that will face PM Khan in 2021 requires a baseline of acceptability across party lines.

Legislation on the economic front, on public health sector reform, and especially on historically challenging arenas for political accommodation (like the National Finance Commission) require some means for the PM to put the animus on hold and find ways to get along. Jalsas and rallies where Maryam Nawaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari are incentivized to respond to the PTI’s attacks in kind make such reconciliation unlikely. We should not expect a grand national dialogue to be a means of making life easier for PM Khan. But we should expect the PM himself to try to dial down the temperature enough to do his job better – no matter whether a larger grand national dialogue takes place or not.

Risk 3: Escalation of violence in Afghanistan. The last time a major power left Afghanistan to its own devices, the vacuum was filled by the 1990s version of the Taliban. The promises made in Doha seek to assure the world that the 2020s version of the Taliban will be different. It is likely to be a mixed bag, but it would be foolish for Pakistani strategists to assume that the coming year in Afghanistan will not impact Pakistan immediately as well as for the foreseeable future. Hostile groups in Afghanistan, supported by India will take every opportunity to strike Pakistan as they have for two decades now. Disenchanted groups within Pakistan have no reason to cater to sensitivities in Rawalpindi or Lahore when they are being seduced by such hostiles.

Violent extremism in the name of Islam has reduced, but many of the kernels of truth that fueled it remain as unchallenged as before. In short, Pakistan’s vulnerabilities to an Afghan civil war mean that PM Khan needs to invest in a serious effort to engage Pakistani political leaders in a conversation about what Pakistan needs to do to support reconciliation and peace within Afghanistan, and mitigate against the risk of failure to do so inside Pakistan. Pakhtun leaders of the PTM, ANP and PkMAP, and religious parties’ leaders of the JUI-F and Jamaat-e-Islami are all essential to such an effort. The Pak Afghan Parliamentary Friendship Group offers a good starting point to try to engage these leaders. It must be upgraded, expanded, and given a full spectrum view of the national security and trade dimensions of the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship.

Risk 4: Further alienation and disengagement of the ‘periphery’. Pakistan’s ‘periphery’ is growing. No longer defined by geography alone, the idea of the ‘mainstream’ in the digital age is increasingly about whether the issues that people care about are reflected in the public discourse or not. Today, we need not travel to the newly merged districts, or to Awaran, or to Umerkot, to find the ‘periphery’. Those that feel wronged by the ‘mainstream’ exist everywhere, in Pakistan’s cities as well as capitals around the world. They have voice and platforms. They are also vulnerable to India’s insatiable appetite for discord in Pakistan.

Contaminating legitimate Pakistani grievances should not be so easy for India. Separatists in Balochistan are only further down the spectrum of discontents in Pakhtunkhwa or Sindh. Instead of declaring the entire spectrum off limits, it is well past time to reconsider. Why is ever-increasing control of the airwaves and social media websites the only path to national harmony? What drives people to be seduced by narratives of subnational identity, be it ethnicity or sect or language? The answers aren’t simple, but they aren’t so complex that we should not try. Pakistan has to try harder.

The mainstream’s allergy to periphery drives people away. The solution is not killing more separatists, or firing more television anchors, or blocking more websites. The solution is an embrace of those on the outside and their inclusion in the mainstream. They are not they. They are us. A compassionate PM like Imran Khan knows all this. If he does not act to fix it, he cannot claim a lack of awareness or preparation. The fact is that 2021 is the fourth calendar year in which he will be PM. It is well past time.

Risk 5: Mainstream citizen distrust and disengagement. The troubles in Balochistan, or other narratives that worry Rawalpindi, aren’t the only citizen disengagement and disenchantment that exist. The funeral of Khadim Hussain Rizvi and the lightning-fast uptake of Mumtaz Qadri as a hero among millions of Pakistanis is a sign of national failure. Hizbut Tahrir flyers in ATM vestibules in Islamabad and hashtags that trend separatist tropes are only security issues because Pakistan consistently fails to treat them as economic, political and social issues. The only way to deal with these challenges effectively is engagement. In the long run, effective local governance. In the short run, a much wider spectrum of acceptable free speech. Let people talk. Do not suffocate speech. It will only asphyxiate society.

Long live Pakistan. Happy New Year!

The writer is an analyst and commentator.