**Missing link**

BY H U M A Y U S U F | 1/13/2020

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| HAPPY New Year. Particularly if you are young, as the prime minister has commenced the decade with the launch of Hunarmand Pakistan, an ambitious programme aimed at boosting youth skills. The initiative seemingly checks many boxes, helping young people prepare for the future of work with a heavy emphasis on AI and robotics, while also tackling the scourge of extremism, by focusing on madressah students. Sadly, it also exists in a vacuum.  In the same week the prime minister launched Hunarmand Pakistan, we were flooded with reminders that the space for critical thinking and free expression in the country is closing at an unprecedented pace.  Urdu translations of Mohammed Hanif`s novel, A Case of Exploding Mangoes, were seized from his publisher and scared off bookshelves across the country. With actions that amount to an unofficial ban (a defamation suit, a raid, threats), the security establishment is signalling that the wider dissemination of content that could in any way tarnish its image is unacceptable.  Soon after, Special Committee 6 of the Punjab Assembly (boasting nomenclature of which George Orwell would be proud) banned the publication and distribution of two books by Lesley Hazleton, another historical religious text by Mazharul Haq, and a newspaper, Al-Fazl, on the basis that the publications contain blasphemous material.  The committee also initiated legal action against 127 social media users for posting allegedly blasphemous material.  On Twitter, meanwhile, Pakistani users reported attempts by the telecoms regulator to block the website of Napa Daur, a leftwing online media initiative that hoped a digital platform would enable it to circumvent the harsh censorship imposed on mainstream news outlets. Access to the site was restored quickly enough, but few will be surprised if it is blocked again.  And this is just the past week or so. More broadly, self-censorship has been established as the norm, journalists are reconciled to publishing partial truths, and bans on importing books published in India (including by Pakistani authors) remain in place.  In the context of higher education, the Hunarmand programme announcement follows a government crackdown, including arrests, on the student solidarity marches at the end of last year, during which students demanded to be allowed to form unions and complained about harassment and surveillance.  What is the connection? Simply put: a country cannot meaningfully develop the skills of its youthif it has no tolerance for critical thinking. Critical thinking entails careful consideration directed towards a goal, and necessarilyrequires questioning and challenge. It is a key educational skill inculcated through wide reading, engagement with dissenting and sometimes controversial views, and the ability to respond to, negotiate, or reconcile those.  In Pakistan, critical thinking is used as a synonym for political dissent, but you need the same skills to be a good sof tware designer or robotics engineer. To innovate, you have to test and challenge, and constantly ask whether something can be different or better. A stifling environment in which all forms of debate and critique are demonised cannot facilitate skills development or workplace innovation. The Hunarmand programme`s complementary initiatives, such as the Startup Pakistan Programme and the Green Youth Movement, which aims to support environmental innovation, are laudable, yet bound to f ail if we cannot unlock our nation`s capacity for critical thought.  This contradictory approach spurring innovation while stifling thought echoes the divisions in our `hybrid` political culture. On the one hand, we have a civilian governmentdesperate to hop on the modernity wagon that other emerging economies are riding to posterity. This approach values dynamism andopenness;hence Hunarmand Pakistan`s focus on tech,virtual skills and partnerships with international organisations. On the other side, there is the security establishment, with a more authoritarian vision of centralised project management and elite control of economic and security policymaking. In the latter conception, the public, and particularly the youth, is a morass that must learn to fall in line. Until this fundamental disconnect in the country`s institutional setup is not addressed, we will continue to see the state launch initiatives, only to undermine themitself.  If the PTI is truly committed to youth promotion and skills development, it must view the problem holistically. One logical step would be to lif t the ban across the country on student unions at universities. Another would be to facilitate international partnerships of the sort envisioned by the Hunarmand programme across the spectrum, including in the fields of social science and humanities.  Ultimately, it is up to the government to forge the missing link between its aspirations for the country`s youth and economy, and the currentintellectual environment. The writer is a freelance journalist.  huma.yusuf@gmail.com Twitter: @humayusuf |