**PTI`s 20-year term**

BY S H A H Z A D S H A R J E E L 2021-03-14

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan does not like the five-year-term limit and considers it democracy`s tragedy. As the Senatescare is behind him, now is a good time to suggest a serious roadmap to ensure the PTI`s victory in the next three elections for the long-term planning he referred to. The PML-N and the PPP should not begrudge this advice because despite their multiple rides on the-merry-go-round, they could not place their governance models as clearly between the seventh century and presentday as Mr Khan has.

There is a guy called Thomas Piketty; he keeps writing 1,000-page tomes on inequality and what could be done about it.

Concentration of capital, he says, over a period turns into property or wealth and keeps the mills of inequality grinding the poor. We are not at all proposing that our super-busy leadership read Piketty`s volumes; the crux of the solution he suggests is progressive taxation, ie the more income and wealth one has, including income from real estate, and financial instruments like stocks and bonds minus the debt the higher the tax one pays.

For the highest incomes and largest estates, these tax rates can be 60 per cent to 70pc. To ensure distribution of wealth, he proposes progressive inheritance tax.

Progressive wealth tax also does away with the need for permanent agrarian reform and factors in all property, not just farmland. The idea of permanent ownership also needs to give way to temporary ownership. But there is a small catch here, the revenues collected under these progressive tax schemes cannot be spent on testing fireworks or putting up airshows during national day parades. These resources must go towards a national endowment fund that distributes an agreed amount to every citizen below a certain level of income. This, he maintains will reduce inequality over time.

Some of you must be thinking this is a sure recipe for curtailing even the existing term the prime minister has, let alone a guaranteed 20-year stint.

But this is where we leave Mr Piketty for a while and allow another cast of characters in the plot. There was a movie a long time back titled The Most Dangerous Man in the World. It revolved around Mehmet Ali Agca`s assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II. Throughout the movie, the director had you believe that the title referred to the man plotting the assassination. Only in the final few moments you realise that it could be a reference to how the pontiff`s would-be assassin perceived him.

Greg Gutfeld, a commentator on Fox News, declared the present Pope Francis as`the most dangerous man on earth` for his 40,000-word essay Laudato Si in which he warns that climate change is real and actually `man`s dominion over earth` means we ought to be its caretakers not owners and destroyers. According to an article in The New Yorker, the Roman Catholic Church owns 200 million acres of farmland and forests, church properties, and oil wells, yet it has no geographical or spatial mapping of these properties. A young woman, Molly Burhans, is helping the Vatican map every inch of property it owns with the help of GIS for the Church to turn these assets into biodiversity havens and use their proceeds for sustainable povertyreduction.

The governments in Pakistan own millions of acres of land, particularly the provincial augaf departments who administer shrines and mosques, and dole out farmland spread over thousands of acres to favourites at throwaway rates. So, the prime minister can forget the progressive income and wealth tax on the richest fornow, lest they bring his government down midway through its first term, he should just get all the land in possession of government departments mapped and distribute it among the landless.

The commercial banks who have beenmaking a killing by lending to provincial governments for wheat subsidy, must give loans on super easy terms to small farmers to cultivate their patches of land. This is guaranteed to bring him back to power in 2023.In that tenure,he should gofor progressive tax on inheritance and tax all incomes beyond a certain ceiling regardless of how they are earned. Create the national endowment fund and use the BISP and Ehsaas database to supplement the puny cash transfers the poorest are currently receiving; this will get him re-elected in 2028 elections.

In his 2033-38 term, he should tax the richest one per cent at 70-plus percentage and take all the land that the largest landowner in the country possesses and distribute it among the landless and asset-less.

Will the powers that be send him packing? What would he care, by then? A social democracy must be a fiscal state. A security state thinks it runs circles around citizens but only chases its tail.  The writer is a poet and analyst.

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