**[The austerity merry-go-round](https://www.dawn.com/news/1429440/the-austerity-merry-go-round)**

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THE Khan promises to be frugal with the government’s entertainment and transport budget and his critics are up in arms. It’s a sham. It’s not enough. It was promised before in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but never happened.

Austerity plays an odd role in Pakistani politics, different from the West.

In the West, austerity measures generally relate to state spending on welfare measures, such as health. But at home, it’s all about how frugal our rulers can be with the expenses on government houses and the cars they are allowed.

So, while PTI critics are making snarky remarks about Ziaul Haq to draw unflattering parallels between the current government and what the military dictator once promised, the truth is that our governments always harp on austerity — except for the PPP wallahs who rarely bother with such gimmicks.

*There was a sense of déjà vu to the promises of simpler governance.*

The PML-N too had a similar austere beginning in 2013 when it promised not to take any journalists for free on its official tours — this was just one such measure it announced, which followed a Supreme Court action in the PPP days about the discretionary funds of the information ministry. The step was greeted with applause and some perplexity, and in the beginning, there was much discussion about the air tickets and hotel stays being paid for by media organisations.

Then prime minister Nawaz Sharif had also promised to reduce the expenses of the government by keeping the cabinet small (unlike the PPP which had by the end created new ministries to accommodate its allies). There were, also, suggestions of not moving into the prime minister’s house.

Back in the 1997 term as well, there were similar promises of tightening the belt and living frugally. In his earliest speeches, Nawaz Sharif had promised to reduce government expenses drastically. There was even talk of using the governor houses and other such grand state buildings to earn money — a suggestion that set off as much controversy as the Khan’s promises have now, even though there was no social media back then.

No wonder then that when Khan took over, there was a sense of déjà vu to his promises of simpler governance. Though of course, this continuity is rarely acknowledged as the PTI tends to blindly believe that every announcement by its government is a clean break from the past; equally unfortunate is the behaviour of its critics who too are so busy poking holes in the austerity campaign that they have forgotten history.

But politics in Pakistan is inextricably intertwined with notions of austerity. No wonder then that even the PPP has jumped on the bandwagon, with stories of how when they first came into power, they decided to forego first class and travel only in business class (an announcement that has now been made by the new foreign minister)! This is an austerity measure exclusive to our part of the world. But that is another story.

This obsession with austerity is partly because of the gap between the lifestyles of our rulers and those they govern.

The reportedly lavish lifestyles, the palatial residences, the roads that are blocked for ‘VIP movement’ help create the image of a wasteful government whose officials live like monarchs, while the ordinary people struggle with making ends meet. The contrasting images of officials and their retinues in sprawling buildings with the poverty people struggle with are always visible. It adds to the sense of a government which rules, rather than serves.

Social media has multiplied the problems by allowing ready access to images of the down-to-earth European officials, who are pictured riding their bikes to work or mopping up their spilt coffee.

All this adds urgency to the middle-class clamour in the press about rulers being more ‘like us’ — more like the middle class.

This too is far from an accurate portrayal of society because the ‘us’ is far from the entire country; those living in poverty cannot even add a voice to this and point out that ‘us’, which is essentially the middle class, is in itself a social class that excludes many. Nonetheless, the ‘us’ sells as does the notion that the ruling classes need to appear more ‘normal’ and less privileged; this pressure is tangible enough to force the governments to announce austerity measures.

Perhaps the constant sense that governments are unable to deliver all that is now deemed necessary — roads, health, education, security, water — compels the governments to focus on the idea of austerity. It’s a quick way to show that something is being done, even though it may not mean much in the larger, economic scheme of things.

It’s also an easier way to address the complex economic issues linked to our eternal efforts to control expenditures — austerity is easier to sell than explain debt-interest repayments, defence spending and the miserly export earning (which always will now remind us of Dar and his idea of economics). Even Margaret Thatcher couldn’t resist comparing running a country to managing a household budget.

All of this compels society to romanticise the idea of austerity and link it to good governance.

But despite the romanticism, the idea of austerity as our governments practice it is rarely worthwhile. It’s no solution to our economic problems and neither can it turn those who ‘rule’ us into those who ‘serve’ us without major reforms in the system of governance. Which is perhaps why, the austerity measures and the debate over them is forgotten within days and weeks of a new government taking over.

The PTI would do well to remember this. It’s time to govern and reform, rather than waste our time in spelling out its austerity measures and debating the number of cars being used and the kind of biscuits being served at the government’s expense. Let’s get down to the real business.

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