**Pakistan: Weathering the Storm**

**It is going to be the best budget speech in the history of Pakistan ever.**

[Najm us Saqib](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/najm-us-saqib)

March 11, 2024

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns), [Newspaper](https://www.nation.com.pk/newspaper)

A small group of senior citizens - all retired - had just started a discussion, focusing on the country’s future. Attired in old style suits, they had just ordered tea in an upscale restaurant of Is­lamabad. All was honkey-do­ry. Only one of them had his shoulders slumped. Visibly disturbed, he was continuous­ly shaking his head.

Intellectual: Once again, the country is going through the most critical phase of its history. The general elections have produced a farcical sit­uation that has deepened the roots of polarization in society; raised serious questions about democracy and dem­ocratic norms; created doubts about the economic recovery plans through tainted political leadership; and pro­vided an opportunity to friends, foes, and donors alike to have a laugh at us. No one knows how to navigate through this colossal mess. The direc­tionless society is going around in cir­cles aimlessly. This charade is touch­ing the heights of absurdity. I have not been able to sleep at night and I have been unable to pen down any of my thoughts for months. Perhaps, its my age or maybe I am losing it altogeth­er. However, I am not angry. Neither is there any feeling of dismay. Seems like a nightmare, though.

[Plantation drive started in South Waziristan](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2024/plantation-drive-started-in-south-waziristan)

Politician: It’s not very difficult to un­derstand the reasons. It is déjà vu. The experiment conducted in 2018 had failed. The country had to put back on track. We were asked to hold the fort for sixteen months before the caretak­er set-up could initiate the spadework. We were promised a government after the general elections and that’s what has happened. Moving one head from one seat to another is part of the game. These are small adjustments. A coalition it was and a coalition it is. Those alleging rigging should first explain their victo­ry in 2018 and their over four-year un­checked tenure. Suddenly, people have forgotten the rules of business. Sudden­ly, Pakistan is being compared to Swe­den and Denmark. Come on, Sir. All of us know the system and its requirements. People should be grateful to us. Once again, we have offered our services to save democracy even though we know we cannot deliver. It is not possible.

[New PDMA DG Irfan Ali Kathia assumes charge](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2024/new-pdma-dg-irfan-ali-kathia-assumes-charge)

Bureaucrat: Yes Sir. You are right. Your continuous guidance and patronage will bring about the requisite change. I have worked with the new Finance Minister’s father. He is competent, effi­cient, knowledgeable, and selfless just like his late father. I am sure my son will prove to be a worthy Finance Sec­retary. Just to let you know that my son and his team has already completed the initial work on the country’s budget for the fiscal 2024-25. The FBR reforms ap­proved by the caretaker government will be implemented with a little bit of improvement here and there. We need to devise a plan to increase the tax to GDP ratio from eight to fifteen percent but without disturbing the in-place sys­tem of income tax and customs officials. No worries, Sir. You will see. It is going to be the best budget speech in the his­tory of Pakistan ever.

General: Nonsense. There is absolute­ly no problem. You people don’t know how to manage your affairs. No one is thinking outside the box. Broaden your horizon. Look around and see the real issues. The regional and geostrategic situation is getting alarmingly precar­ious. The tension in the South China Sea is causing constant headaches. The menace of terrorism and extremism is becoming ever more ominous. The US and others must realize the importance of our strategic location. Don’t under­estimate us. We are a nuclear country. No one can dare attacking us. Our bor­ders are secured. We are doing our job alright. Don’t drag us into your political mess. Instead of being grateful that we provided a secured environment to con­duct the elections, we are being accused of manipulating the results. Let me as­sure you once again. We are now apolit­ical. Absolutely apolitical. We have big­ger issues to deal with.

[Awareness walk on violence against women](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2024/awareness-walk-on-violence-against-women)

Professor: After more than four de­cades, we have concluded that proceed­ings against ZAB were unfair and lacked due process, both at trial and appeal stage. Any idea what to do with this ‘his­toric’ verdict? Should we prepare our­selves for witnessing the emergence of more skeletons out of the closet? What is the point here? Rewriting history or setting a precedent? The fact remains that the country lost one of its most re­vered leaders. A timely fair trial might have acquitted him. What is the guar­antee that next time, there won’t be any ‘constitutional lapses.’ Eh? And who will be the guarantor? Justice delayed is jus­tice denied. Justice? Do we know what we are talking about? I taught political science for forty years. I assure you we are going backwards. One more thing. Old tactical moves like diverting public attention from real issues through such moves, don’t work these days. This is the age of Artificial Intelligence.

[38 arrested, 54 cases registered over profiteering](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2024/38-arrested-54-cases-registered-over-profiteering)

Intellectual: Artificial Intelligence? More than ninety percent of our popu­lation does not have potable drinking water. Should we worry about advance­ment in technology or provision of basic amenities to the common man? Shame.

General: For problems of the common man, you should visit some civil society forum. Here, we are discussing issues facing the country. There is a difference. Focus on good governance. Okay?

Politician: The General is right. Let the new leadership take care of things. The new Chief Minister of Punjab with her uncle as PM – the combination is ideal. Just like in the past, no rift between the center and the province. Indeed, such an arrangement facilitates good gover­nance. All matters could be discussed and thrashed out at home.

Bureaucrat: Brilliant. I think it would be ideal to have the remaining mem­bers of the family too adjusted in the Cabinet. I tell you; the country will run ever so smoothly. This is what they call – thinking outside the box.

[Elements selling unhygienic food deserve no leniency, says Bilal Yaseen](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Mar-2024/elements-selling-unhygienic-food-deserve-no-leniency-says-bilal-yaseen)

Professor: Churchill once remarked: ‘The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter’. How many more years would it take us to understand the true meaning of democracy?

Intellectual: Not even in a hundred years if the people remain uneducat­ed and unaware of their rights. In the words of Roosevelt: ‘Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, there­fore, is education’.

General: No wonder our intellectuals and professors are talking absurdly. It’s a good thing that these chaps have gone into hiding. Come on, gentlemen, let’s call it a day. It’s my golf time.

**Najm us Saqib**  
The writer is a former Ambassador of Pakistan and author of eight books in three languages. He can be reached at najmussaqib