**[Ruling class normal](https://www.dawn.com/news/1818213/ruling-class-normal)**

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PAKISTAN is on fire, and not in a good way. Interrelated demographic, ecological and economic crises are escalating. The incoming government owes its ‘success’ to the establishment and is considered illegitimate by large segments of the population, especially young people and the ethnic peripheries.

The PML-N and PPP will claim otherwise, but the widespread perception that the ‘new’ dispensation is effectively PDM 2.0 speaks for itself. The ‘new’ ruling coalition only symbolises the depth of our political crisis.

Given our own house is on fire, it is unsurprising that we have largely ignored the heroic political act by a US Air Force officer, Aaron Bushnell, who set himself ablaze in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C. to protest the genocide in Palestine.

Bushnell’s last words before his act of self-immolation were: “This is what our ruling class has decided is normal.” Indeed, gruesome state-sponsored violence against oppressed peoples is routine in our world, from Palestine to Balochistan, Kurdistan to Senegal, and Burma to Yemen. The corporate media obliterates the histories of such peoples; state terror is called ‘self-defence’ while everything is legitimated if it happens in the name of ‘national security’.

All bourgeois parties compete for the establishment’s favour.

It is not just acute cases of systemic oppression that get muted. In Pakistan, even a hopelessly rigged election can metamorphose into a ‘national security threat’.

After Feb 8, the caretaker government (read: establishment) has imposed a blanket ban on the social media site X. The post-poll rigging carried out to bring PDM 2.0 into existence was being exposed with so much irrefutable evidence that our holy guardians decided it was time to do away with the niceties entirely.

This has been followed by dire warnings to journalists who transgress the boundaries of what is considered acceptable reporting, culminating in the arrest of Asad Toor by the FIA. In a nutshell, this is what, to paraphrase Bushnell’s immortal words, Pakistan’s militarised ruling class has decided is normal.

The PPP and PML-N continue to call themselves principled defenders of democratic principles but have remained mum about all of this. We should not be surprised. Long before Imran Khan and the PTI came to power in 2018, it was a PML-N government with Nawaz Sharif in the prime minister’s office that introduced a parliamentary bill which made the notorious Peca into law. That was in 2015.

The very term ‘ruling class’ demands a reckoning with the fact that our predicament is beyond singular regimes, that things will not just get better because one segment of the bourgeoisie has replaced another in government. This is particularly true in our own context where virtually all bourgeois parties compete with one another for the establishment’s favour — look no further than the PPP putting up Sarfaraz Bugti and Jamal Raisani in Balochistan. Speaking of which, has anyone in government bothered to provide relief to Gwadar, which is currently drowning due to torrential rain?

For those who still think that PDM 2.0 is an unqualified improvement upon Imran Khan and the PTI, it is worth noting that Joe Biden — who so many celebrated when he defeated Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential election — is, by current estimates, expected to lose to Trump in the election this year. Simply put, the evidence does not prove that the supposedly more ‘liberal’ (read: centre-right) segments of the ruling class resolve the inherent contradictions of contemporary capitalism and there­by red­u­­ce the appeal of their far-right competitors.

Anyone who actually cares about the mass of peop­le in whose name all ruling clas­ses act would be focusing on creating a po­­pular political narrative that does not leave us to ‘choose’ bet­w­een the centre right and far right. One can and should condemn the way the PTI has politicised young people in the digital age, but armchair criticism leads back only to the status quo of establishment-dominated musical chairs. Refusal to acknowledge even the possibility that those who have experienced state repression since April 2022 may coalesce around a new politics means, in effect, reinforcing the ruling class normal.

Bushnell chose his sensational act of sacrifice because the Israeli war machine and its backers, including Genocide Joe, continue to act unimpeded, even in the face of online dissent at a global scale. For now, Trump is likely to be the major beneficiary of the disjunct between popular sentiment and the established institutional order. Unless there is a wilful commitment to creating a substantive alternative on the left of the political spectrum, however far down the line, those who seek to draw attention to the fires engulfing humanity and nature will have only one option: to literally set themselves on fire.

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*Published in Dawn, March 1st, 2024*