**The year of living anxiously**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2020-12-28

2020 was a devastating year for Pakistan as for the rest of the world. The year of the pandemic disrupted lives everywhere and tested people`s endurance and resilience. As elsewhere, Pakistan too plunged into unmapped territory.

The government faced the biggest test of its tenure as its handling of Covid-19 was consequential to the evolving crisis. Initial management laid bare a vacillating approach as the government struggled to choose between prioritising lives or livelihoods.

Of course, leaders across the world sought to find a balance between the two. But as many agreed, this was a false choice, because saving lives was necessary to save livelihoods In Pakistan the government`s early messaging and actions left its policy approach unclear and incoherent. Mixed signals from the leadership did not initially convey the urgency or severity of the unfolding threat. Procrastination over social distancing measures and getting mired in a prolonged public debate about lockdown vs no lockdown, also conveyed indecisiveness.

The prime minister`s tone changed when the number of cases rose. Yet weeks into the crisis centre-province coordination was found wanting. The prime minister`s reluctance to reach out to provincial leaderships, especially of Sindh, prevented a unified policy from emerging. This continued until a National Command and Operation Centre was established.ItwasonlyaftertheNCOCtookcharge, with the army`s help, that crisis management became more coherent. Even then premature selfcongratulation by the government encouraged complacency when the virus was to wreak more havoc in its second wave which continues. The opposition, for its part, showed little responsibility during the second surge, persisting with mass rallies despite the danger of contagion.

The government`s stimulus packages and the enhanced Ehsaas programme were important steps to mitigate the pandemic`s economic fallout.

Protecting the vulnerable by Ehsaas emergency cash handouts of Rs159 billion, which benefited 15 million families, was widely appreciated. Overall economic management sought to soften the blows delivered by the pandemic. Official estimates put economic losses at Rs3 trillion. The macroeconomic situation improved in the second half of 2020 butmajor challenges remained unaddressed especially with debt and liabilities building up, revenue shrinking and inflation soaring. Losses of stateowned enterprises and the power sector`s circular debt continued to mount pressure on the budget.

Negotiations stalled with the IMP. With growth projected at below one per cent by the World Bank in the current fiscal year this will gravely undermine efforts at job creation and poverty alleviation.

The other big issue dominating 2020 was the raging confrontation between the government and opposition and deepening polarisation. The PTI government made no effort to engage the opposition in a dialogue on pressing national issues, insisting that the opposition only wanted to talk about an NRO. The opposition vehemently denied this but questioned the one-sidedness of the accountability process.

When 11 opposition parties coalesced into an alliance PDM confrontation entered a new phase.

Both sides adopted uncompromising positions.

Af ter a series of public rallies, the PDM unveiled its strategy for the year ahead. It called on the prime minister to either step down by Jan 31 or face a march on the capital. It threatened mass resignations from the assemblies but stopped short of setting a deadline except to ask MPs to submit resignations to their parties.

If the government responded in a schizophrenic way rattled by the opposition`s aggressiveness yet complacent about the impact of mass resignations the opposition confronted its own challenge of maintaining unity among differences over the value and timing of resignations. Inevitably the stand-off between the two deflected focus from internal and external challenges especially at a time when India intensified its belligerent posture against Pakistan. National cohesion in the face of external challenges remained conspicuous by its absence in 2020.

Governance too remained patchy at best. PTI leaders no longer had the excuse of being new to the job, as acknowledged recently by the prime minister himself. The government continued to overpromise and under-deliver on most fronts. Nowhere was the government`s weak governance more evident than in Punjab with a team there that lacked competence and gravitas to the discomfort of seniorparty figures who urged privately -in vain for a change of guard.

The government demonstrated a mixed record on foreign policy. Its two principal preoccupations during 2020 remained tensions with India following its illegal and brutal actions in occupied Kashmir and escalation on the Line of Control as well as the f astevolving situation in Afghanistan. The former presented a grim prospect while the latter marked a moment of hope and opportunity. Relations with India sunk to a new low with all meaningful diplomatic engagement suspended. The government`s Kashmir campaign lacked consistency and imagination especially seen against its aim of raising the diplomatic costs for India of its Kashmir actions.

This made ef forts to mobilise international support f ar more imposing in the coming year.

Developments in Afghanistan offered the promise of peace. Pakistan played an active and important role in the events leading up to the February Doha accord between the US and Taliban and the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. But the path to a negotiated settlement remained strewn with obstacles, which left Islamabad with having to prepare for less hopeful scenarios. It was unclear whether the government started work on this.

Relations with China continued on a robust, positive trajectory. With the US, the main commonality remained Afghanistan. The advent of the Biden administration however opened up the opportunity to rebuild ties and impart content to the bilateral relationship, which has been elusive in recent years.

Significant was the downturn in ties with Saudi Arabia despite of ficial protestations to the contrary.

That Islamabad was asked to repay a substantial part of a loan was testimony to this as also the apparent freezing of an oil credit facility. The absence of high-level engagement between the two key allies also confirmed this.

The lack of any foreign policy direction in the outgoing year reflected the dearth of imagination that generally afflicts the government. However, it will be the government`s performance on the domestic front that will matter more and determine its fortunes in 2021.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.