**[Unlearnt lessons](https://www.dawn.com/news/1780130/unlearnt-lessons)**

[Maleeha Lodhi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8829/maleeha-lodhi) Published October 9, 2023

PAKISTAN’S checkered political history holds many lessons that need to be learnt if the country is to escape from its troubled past. Some have been learnt but several of the more consequential ones haven’t. These unlearnt lessons have left the country deeply fractured and in a state of chronic political instability and economic weakness, lurching from one crisis to another.

There are at least five unlearnt lessons that have been consequential to the country’s fate and fortu­nes, although this is not an exhaustive list. The first is intensely antagonistic politics that has invo­lved bitter feuds and unremitting confrontations betw­een political leaders and parties. With the war paradigm guiding political conduct, opponents have been seen, not as competitors, but as enemies to be eliminated from the political scene in a terminal conflict. This pattern of behaviour is part of an unedifying tradition, characterised by intolerance and lack of respect for democratic norms.

Those in power rarely accepted the need to eng­age with the opposition, while those in opposition almost always tried to actively destabilise the government of the day. These power struggles became fatal distractions from governance and meeting public needs. What were essentially intra-elite squabbles — over power and patronage, not policy — created the conditions for the military to intervene and return to the political stage.

The repeatedly ignored lesson was that compromise and consensus were essential to achieve civilian supremacy and strengthen democracy. Also overlooked was the risk that endless power tussles would open space for the military to ultimately seize control of the political system. There were always political parties ready to encourage military interventions to remove their opponents. The military for its part easily found political allies to oust civilian governments and aid its takeovers of power.

This brings up unlearnt lesson two, relating to military interventions. Pakistan has spent over 30 years of its existence under direct military rule and since 2018 under hybrid ‘democracy’, in which the military has had an expansive role in governance.

Despite widespread public respect for the military in its professional role, its political interventions have lacked public legitimacy. The lesson from long bouts of military rule is that these constitutional transgressions neither found public acceptance nor delivered what they promised — political stability and economic progress. Instead, they produced deleterious consequences for the country and undermined the military’s reputation. That is why today the military acknowledges that military rule is neither an option nor a ‘solution’.

History has repeated itself in Pakistan as both farce and tragedy.

But a hybrid system is also problematic. The lesson of the hybrid experience, that further skewed the civil-military balance and involved democratic regression, is that it is inherently unable to provide coherent and effective governance.

It fragments the governance system, creates confusion about lines of authority and also distracts the military from its professional role, especially when the security situation needs its undivided attention. The hybrid experiment of 2018-2022 hardly built economic or political stability; quite the opposite in fact. Continuing this ‘model’ will not yield an outcome different from the past.

The third lesson is that unless the country undertakes wide-ranging reforms to address its long-standing structural economic problems it cannot escape from the trap of chronic fiscal deficits, balance-of-payments problems, high inflation and macroeconomic instability, which have necessitated repeated financial bailouts.

The reliance on outsiders — [‘friendly’ countries](https://www.dawn.com/news/1778486) and IMF — for bailouts has been a short-term fix, not a solution. For decades, dysfunctional economic management by both civilian and military governments evaded reform and resisted mobilising adequate domestic resources. Instead, resort to excessive borrowing at home and abroad mired Pakistan in unsustainable debt and perpetual financial crises. The country’s foreign alignments were frequently leveraged to secure financial help — often dubbed geopolitical rent — to overcome the crisis of the day.

So serious is Pakistan’s economic crisis today that the lesson it offers can be ignored only at great peril to the country. The old way of managing public finances is no longer tenable. There is an urgent need to deal with the structural sources of persisting financial imbalances: a narrow and inequitable tax regime, limited export base, energy sector’s circular debt, bankrupt public-sector enterprises, heavy regulatory burden and low savings and investment.

The fourth lesson has to do with the failure to in­­­vest in human capital. This has left the country with deteriorating social indicators and at the bottom of global human development rankings. Unde­rinvestment has meant 40 per cent of Pakistanis are illiterate, 22 million school-age children are out of school, poverty has risen to almost 40pc while health indicators including malnutrition levels remain grim. Pakistan cannot achieve economic growth and progress by failing to invest in its people.

Lesson five concerns how the state has dealt with religious extremism and militancy over the decades. Of course, violent extremism has had both internal and external drivers.

Gen Ziaul Haq’s Isla­misation policies in the 1980s dangerously divided society along religious and sectarian lines. His patronisation of certain extremist groups — along with fallout from the Afghan war — proved consequential, leading to the rise of militancy in the1990s. State tolerance and leniency towards such groups emboldened them and heightened the threat to the country’s security.

Fast forward to 2007 and the [takeover of Islamabad’s Lal Masjid](https://www.dawn.com/news/1345068) by militants. This was a turning point at a time when Pakistan was cooperating in the US-led ‘war on terror’ in Afgha­nistan. Thereafter assorted militant groups declared war on Pakistan including the Tehreek-i-Taliban, which was formed in that period.

Although Pakistan’s security forces have since undertaken effective campaigns to defeat militancy, the need remains for a consistent and holistic strategy that doesn’t just rely on kinetic actions. There is also a wider lesson from Pakistan’s experience with extremism.

Too often governments sought to appease extremists or waver when faced with agitation by religious zealots. Succumbing to pressure to bring an end to the crisis of the day emboldened extremist forces, only for them to repeatedly rear their head to challenge the state.

The lessons from these different aspects of Pakistan’s experience should not be hard to learn and act upon. Doing that offers the best and perhaps only chance for the country to free itself from the dead hand of the past.

*The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.*

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