**A clown show**

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The senseless and completely avoidable tragedy in Murree is the result of simultaneous failures at many levels of government. Not only did the administration fail to place salt and snow clearing equipment in the right places; or manage the flow of traffic; or stop cars from entering Murree, after more cars had entered than the roads or the administration could handle; or order people out of their cars and into nearby homes, hotels and army installations – but predictably, as always, this government and the prime minister blamed the victims in a most callous and narcissistic manner.

This is a pattern with the PTI. Talk big, fail to deliver and then blame others. Murree isn’t the first tragedy but one hopes it is the last.

There was a railway fire accident in October 2019 where 74 people perished. Sheikh Rasheed blamed the passengers who lost their lives for carrying gas cylinders, suggesting those caused the fire. The inquiry report later established that it was a short-circuit that caused it. Sheikh Rasheed’s tenure as railways minister saw the most accidents, including fatal accidents, in Pakistan Railways history. But he continued in the ministry until he was promoted to the interior ministry. This is in complete contrast to the sermons the then opposition leader, and now prime minister, used to give about ministers taking responsibility.

Pakistan was exporting wheat and sugar when the PTI came into power. Today it is importing both. The PTI government is on record for exporting sugar for Rs48 per kg and importing it back a few months later for double that.

Last year the government claimed we produced 27 million tons of wheat, which is more than we need. Yet prices kept increasing and our food security minister said he didn’t know where the wheat went. Of course we know that the Punjab government gave special permission to the poultry industry to consume wheat and it was also smuggled to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Not for nothing is the post of the district food controller in Attock the most expensive in Punjab.

Pakistan produced around 11 million bales of cotton the year the PTI came to power. Last year, it produced about 5.5 billion bales, the least since 1983/84. This year, which the PTI narrative claims will be a bumper year for cotton, we will only get around 7.5 million bales, still about 25 percent less than what the ruling party inherited.

How our agricultural production will fare this season can be ascertained by the long queues for buying, shortage and black marketing of urea. A few months ago the fertiliser industry was seeking permission to export urea. The government however reduced gas supply to them and didn’t bother to stop large-scale smuggling of subsidised urea to Iran and Afghanistan. Now the ECC is forced to import urea at triple the cost at which it was smuggled out. This government is a veritable clown show.

The Punjab higher education department is on its thirteenth and the school education department on its eighth secretary since the Khan-Buzdar duo took over the reins in Punjab. In three years, the Khan-Buzdar administration has awarded 16 licences for limestone mining and cement plants. Speculation about why certain groups were given licences I shall leave for the plush drawing rooms of Lahore. But no expert thinks it was environmentally prudent to issue more than three licenses.

Remember the lady who was raped as she was driving alone on the ring road outside of Lahore. The CCPO said quite typically that perhaps she shouldn’t be driving alone at night, blissfully unaware of his duty to protect people.

In Quetta during the bitter cold of January last year, the oppressed Hazara community refused to bury its dead after a terror attack until the prime minister showed up and reassured them of his commitment to prevent terrorism. Astonishingly, the prime minister called it “blackmail” and refused to go to Quetta until the dead were buried. The PM may have capitulated against the real estate or the sugar mafia but he stood firm against the Hazaras.

There are many statistics to measure the health of our economy. From GDP growth to inflation to unemployment to poverty to budget deficits to debt to tax collection to current account deficit (CAD) – which is trade deficit minus remittance – to interest rates to foreign reserves and exchange rates. In almost all of these areas, the PTI has done much worse than the PML-N. One area it did better was in controlling the trade and the current account deficits. Thus this was the only statistic PTI ministers gave any weight to. Not for them the shrinking GDP or the rising inflation or poverty or unemployment. The only important areas were current account and trade deficits.

Now the trade deficit, in the first six months of this fiscal year, is 44 percent above the trade deficit in the same period in our last year. And when the SBP publishes the CAD for the first six months, that number too will be higher than in the corresponding period in our last year. So now the one achievement PTI the government harped about has also vanished in its sea of incompetence.

Narratives, and only narratives, is what this government believes in. Faced with persistently high inflation, the government decided to build a narrative that there is no inflation in Pakistan. The other alternate – trying to reduce inflation – perhaps wasn’t even an option.

The prime minister set up the Rehmatulil Alameen Authority (RAA). The chairman of that authority considers 9/11 a false flag operation and has called for martial law in Pakistan.

The ruling party has been raising our electricity rates in order to “end circular debt”. Yet, along with a doubling of electricity rates, the circular debt has also doubled. The government now says the rates are increasing because it has to pay fixed costs. However, the PTI has not really paid any fixed costs, simply because it has increased circular debt by more than the amount it has paid for capacity charges. So then why is it raising tariffs? Because it has made management of the power sector (T&D losses and bill collection) worse, violated merit orders, and used expensive furnace oil to produce power.

This government has been promising setting up of LNG terminals in the private sector for three years. Now it has made another U-turn and has asked three energy ministry companies to set up the terminal under the direction of, well, the maritime affairs ministry. This mingling of ministries is of course a marriage of incompetence and corruption. It doesn’t take much insight into the PTI to know that, apart from paying consultant fees etc, nothing will actually happen on the ground.

The government – in its quest for cheaper gas – refused LNG for $4 and bought it for $30. This government promised us gas “three times a day”, failed to meet even that promise and then denied ever making that promise. But then, pray tell, who is responsible for supplying us gas?

From gas to power, from rape to death, from sugar to wheat and from the IMF to CPEC, this government is really a tragedy of errors.

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