**Enduring fault lines**

BY M A L E E H A L 0 D H I 2021-11-01

HISTORY, it has famously been said, often repeats itself as tragedy. This has also been the case in Pakistan. Many features of the political landscape today reflect the country`s long-standing, overlapping fault lines that keep getting perpetuated. They merit consideration to understand how current government-opposition tensions, parliament`s unedifying performance, the government`s wavering before street pressure from a banned militant group, uneasy civil-military relations and the burden of unresolved structural economic problems are all echoes from Pakistan`s chequered past, that its leaders seem unable to escape.

Five features are noteworthy. One, the ongoing confrontation between the government and opposition has a long pedigree in the country`s history. A culture of compromise and consensus never took root which left democracy fragile and open to interventions by the military, which could always count on support from motley political parties to oust governments. There were rare moments of political consensus as for example when the 1973 Constitution was adopted and in the more recent past, the unanimous passage of the 18th Amendment in 2010. Beyond these and some other exceptions the tradition has been of intolerance with the ethic of war not competition informing political behaviour.

Lack of tolerance has also been evidenced in troubled centre-province relations which repeatedly tested the country`s unity with deleterious consequences. This needs little elaboration but it illustrates how federalism was observed more in its breach than practice. The notion that reciprocal obligations between the centre and provinces are more than a constitutional precept and have to be fulfilled is still not readily accepted. This is apparent from testy relations today between the PTI government and PPP`s government in Sindh.

Two, parliament`s current underperformance is also a throwback to the past as successive governments, despite their declared commitment to parliamentary supremacy, never lived up to this principle. The preferred way of legislating has often been by ordinance. Parliament has been seen, as now, principally as a means to maintain the government in power rather than an instrument of gov-ernance, a forum to initiate and debate laws and policy. Thus, its evolution as a strong and effective political institution has been undermined by these factors.

A third enduring fault line is how governments and state institutions have over the years wavered when faced with agitation by religious zealots or extremists. The latest example has been headline news for days now. The government has sent contradictory signals, initially of appeasement, then vacillation, followed by confused declarations of firmness in dealing with a proscribed group protesting in the streets. This treads a well-worn path of dithering or succumbing to such pressure. This goes back to the country`s early years and subsequently to successive governments that sought to meet challenges by conceding to the demands of such groups. Aimed to bring an end to the crisis of the day it emboldened these forces and fanned sentiments articulated by them only for these groups to rear their head again and challenge the state.

Uneasy civil-military relations recently evidenced in the appointment of the new head of Pakistan`s premier intelligence agency have also been a familiar aspect of the country`s political history and represents a fourth fault line. To some extent unstable relations are inherent where there are two often competing centres of political power. Given Pakistan`s history of military interventions, even under democratic rule the military has had a prominent role and cast a long shadow on the country`s politics and governance. This is also reflected in the frequent ouster of civilian governments by the military. The power imbalance and asymmetry between elected and unelected institutions derived from a historical legacy in which security and order had primacy over democracy.

The fif th fault line has been the most consequential to Pakistan`s fate and fortunes. This is an oligarchical elite`s reliance on borrowing, bailouts and an overvalued exchange rate to address the country`s chronic financial crises and its resistance to mobilise domestic resources including by taxing itself. The enigma of successive governments living beyond their means can only be explained by a power elite averse to measures it perceived as threatening its political interests. This contributed to miring Pakistan in perpetual financial criseswith almost every past government acting in a fiscally irresponsible way and leaving the economy in worse shape for its successor to manage.

The failure to raise enough resources along with low levels of savings and investment, meant that successive governments since the 1980s ran huge deficits in national expenditure and on the external account. These twin deficits budget and balance of payments were financed by printing more currency notes and by inflow of funds from abroad including remittances from overseas workers. It left the country living from one IMF tranche to another. Moreover, bank borrowing at home served as an immensely regressive measure because it translated into forced transfer of savings to the government from people least able to bear the burden of inflation, the most pernicious tax on the poor. Economic management that relied on borrowing permitted the country`s rulers to avoid and postpone much-needed structural reforms, including tax reform, that could place the economy on a viable, self-reliant path. Instead, this led to an exorbitant rise in debt and landed Pakistan in a classic debt trap.

This kind of economic management continues to this day. It means that the structural sources of the country`s chronic financial imbalances remain unaddressed: a narrow and inequitable tax regime, the energy sector`s circular debt, bankrupt publicsector enterprises, a broken public finance management system, heavy regulatory burden and a narrow export base.

No account of major fault lines is complete without reference to the role of the country`s foreign engagements in reinforcing some of these fault lines. The use of foreign alignments to gain access to funds to finance consumption reinforced dependence on external largesse and served to avoid domestic reforms. The Saudi `package` announced last week exemplifies this continuing dependency.

It doesn`t have to be this way. Fault lines don`t have to persist. They can be overcome. And they should as they impede the country`s progress, development and prosperity. But breaking from the past requires a different quality of leadership bold, wise and visionary that remains elusive.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.