**[Four unavoidable agendas](https://www.dawn.com/news/1816180/four-unavoidable-agendas)**

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PAKISTAN’S state institutions, especially the Election Commission, have fallen miserably short of ensuring electoral transparency or fairness.

The result, if not the very legitimacy of elections, is being questioned not only by the ‘defeated’ contestants but also by independent observers and key Western governments.

Even though the major political parties, including the PTI, seem willing to keep the system running despite their individual reservations, muddling through the system in the old Machiavellian way won’t be helpful or prove lasting. The country desperately needs stability on the back of an unadulterated democratic order, which requires a bipartisan commitment to overhaul the broken system.

The political landscape seems flooded with conflicting currents. But a deeper look shows several confluences that may help political actors coalesce around a reconstructive agenda. First, given the split mandate, none of the political parties, or for that matter the establishment, enjoys a position to dictate the terms — even if they are joining hands to rule at the centre.

Second, the [looming economic implosion](https://www.dawn.com/news/1802817) requires a broader political consensus on a sustainable polity that could endure tough and indispensable decision-making for reviving the economy.

Third, the hybrid system’s historical addiction to finding a military-style or authoritarian solution to every problem — be it political or fiscal, or related to foreign or security policy — has come a cropper. The state stands grounded, politically, economically, institutionally, even in terms of security.

Defiance is writ large on the landscape — tribal, rural, urban, and metropolitan.

Finally, even the judiciary is no longer able to leverage its status as an honest arbiter due to a toxic, polarised environment and because some of its recent decisions are being perceived as ‘unfair’ and ‘partisan’. Thus, the political classes have a rare opportunity to close ranks and remould the political order, focusing, inter alia, on the following four unavoidable agendas.

**End the hybrid regime, effectively and irreversibly.** The security establishment plays an important role in national security, but is not supposed to assume or determine the elected government’s core functions. Our Constitution restricts it to the domain of security. But the boundaries have rarely been respected. What we have lived under is either raw military rule or a ‘hybrid’ order that, de facto, accords the military establishment a larger-than-life role in policy and execution.

Ironically, unlike the ‘illiberal’ East Asian model that prides itself on the troika of efficiency, development, and stability, our hybrid system has offered little in terms of economic, security or political boons. It has thrived largely on its twin tools of coercive power and judicial manipulation. But now, perhaps for the first time, those tools are becoming ineffectual.

As the state stands beset with multiple crises, the old ways of running the political system have come under formidable attack by a new youthful political culture that is on the rise. It is not a revolution yet. But defiance is writ large on the landscape — tribal, rural, urban and metropolitan. The spectacular comeback of a much-battered PTI, embarrassing pro-establishment contestants, is sounding the death knell for the ancien régime.

**Enforce citizens’ fundamental rights:** The enforcement of fundamental rights is the measure of a successful democracy. But our record has been dismal. Human rights are unremittingly trampled upon — in many ways. The loosely framed [anti-blasphemy laws](https://www.dawn.com/news/1773628) have become regular instruments of persecution of the hapless and marginalised members of religious minorities.

The wider definition of ‘terrorism’ covering even minor damage to public property has given the authorities carte blanche to implicate any ‘offender’, even conscientious objectors, condemning them to years of incarceration and other injustices.

Eliminating people as terrorists or ‘enemies’ of the state is another convenient alibi used by security agencies to get away with their high-handedness. Hundreds have gone ‘missing’ (allegedly abducted by state agencies), leaving families to strive for justice for years on end. But to no avail. Disgruntled, many a young man has taken up arms.

Besides draconian laws and repression, skewed social policies, poor governance, and institutionalised corruption also have a direct bearing on rights and liberties. Half the populace is illiterate, and millions have no access to even basic services. Let’s not forget that an apathetic, elitist or Orwellian state was never contemplated by the founding fathers. The country was promised as a benevolent and law-abiding republic. It is time, therefore, to redeem this pledge made to the people.

**Give the people their dues:** Our economic policies have been guided by an iniquitous neoliberal theory that is premised on an elusive ‘trickle-down’ effect. Our economic wizards have long postulated with religious zeal that supply-side economics would spur growth and bring in more wealth and jobs. But that theory has fallen flat.

Instead, we have a lopsided economy dominated by an extractive elite that represents powerful industrial, financial, commercial, and propertied interests. Many a generation has been lost to a low-income, debt-trapped economy, compounded by the exploitative business, political and state elite.

Even after seven decades, the people continue to yearn for education, health, water, food, etc. Dearth, neglect, and repression have intensified public anger if not outright alienation against the state. The country is facing insurgencies and terrorism. The failed economic policy must be drastically reformed. The focus should be not on growth alone. An equitable redistribution of wealth and resources must also be ensured. Let the common folk receive their historical dues.

**Stop the wars:** Dangling India as an ‘existential’ threat to Pakistan, a siege mentality has been nurtured from early on to justify a security state.

Ignoring our limited resources and pitiable social conditions, the state has been pushed into all kinds of wars — international, internal, regional, proxy, hot and cold. But still the search is on for the holy grail of national security, though the state has gone nuclear.

But the ‘war economy’ has now reached breaking point. It can’t sustain the mammoth defence structures anymore. It needs peace and stability to develop soft powers that propel the world — democracy, science, technology, and human resources. India and China have grown into global powers treading on this twin-track, avoiding major conflicts, and developing human and economic resources. Why can’t we?

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