**Half truths?**

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As popular anxiety subsided this week over the protest by the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government announced its decision to unveil an ‘inflation package’ to usher in an era of relief for up to ten million consumers.

Together, the officially sanctioned news of the two developments marked no more than ‘half truths’ – an all-too-familiar response by the Khan government to Pakistan’s growing list of challenges.

In sharp contrast to the official knack for repeatedly putting across the proverbial glass being half full and rising upwards, the reality points more towards the glass barely half full. Consequently, its far from clear if the gloss put on a half dismal picture will lead to tangible and sustainable gains.

There’s no guarantee yet that the TLP’s latest protest – the sixth in an equal number of years – will not return to haunt Pakistan in future. The movement has demonstrated its muscle power long enough for its leaders to likely remain tempted to repeat a similar show of force.

Besides, the TLP’s challenge to the authority of the Pakistani state has also prompted compelling questions over other non-state actors similarly taking to the streets in support of their demands.

Over time the Pakistani state’s failure to exert its writ has only widened the space for non-state actors, notably well-armed ones seeking to use pressure tactics in support of their agendas. The very fact that successive leaders and regimes have nurtured such armed groups that have gone to become dangerous Frankenstein's monsters has only weakened Pakistan’s outlook.

Meanwhile, sliding conditions across Pakistan hardly inspire confidence in the ability of the ruling structure to take charge of the economy. As signs of impoverishment have grown across Pakistan, notably surrounding low to middle income families, compelling questions must be revisited over the fallout from officially sanctioned belt tightening measures.

The mounting economic pressure must also raise troubling questions over a segment of Pakistan’s population becoming pressed enough to embrace hard-line causes for their salvation. It is a linkage that has played out in many other parts of the world where economic deprivation targeted low to moderate income communities.

Though the coming package is yet to unfold with all of its details, there is already ample reason for outright scepticism. At the macroeconomic level, policy response to challenges has done little to inspire confidence. Areas such as a growing international trade deficit driven in a significant part from growing imports of luxury items will do little to pump up badly needed economic growth.

Going forward in the run up to the 2023 election cycle, key stakeholders among senior bankers are already anxious over policy-related pressures seeking to support populist schemes. Initiatives such as loans for housing of low income consumers and other populist initiatives will only dent the health of Pakistan’s financial sector. If so, this would be a repeat of the past when banks were to back populist causes, disregarding the health of the financial sector.

Beyond policy challenge lies an all too evident sign of an administrative failure that has only fuelled uncomfortable price hikes for consumers in daily life. This has been especially evident across Punjab – a province which is home to more than 120 million Pakistanis. During Khan’s tenure, Punjab has been led by Chief Minister Usman Buzdar, a loyalist of the prime minister.

Across the province with a population size which is more than that of many countries around the world, an all too obvious administrative breakdown has only weakened the grip of the Pakistani state. The most obvious evidence of that slide has been evident nowhere more than around uncontrolled rise of prices of essential food commodities.

Notwithstanding the measures including upcoming ones to subsidise prices of food commodities, the administrative failure has already set the ground for vested interests among traders to oversee uncontrolled price increases. Consequently, it is hard to imagine exactly how prices of food items will be made affordable unless a weak administrative mechanism is replaced with tighter official controls.

Unless the challenges surrounding Pakistan’s politics and the economy are tackled head on, the half truths so eagerly exhibited by the country’s rulers will do little to revive an element of badly needed stability in the foreseeable future.

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