[**Revolution now?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1753269/revolution-now)

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WHEN this spin of the political merry-go-round pauses, one image will linger: a young man, veiled by his blue surgical mask, clinging to a bewildered peacock.

The peacock had been looted from the Lahore corps commander’s house in the wake of Imran Khan’s arrest, an ill-thought-out gesture to reclaim what rightfully belonged to the people. One wonders what became of that peacock, and one fears for its welfare. Its fate is an apt metaphor for the prospect of a mass political mobilisation in Pakistan.

The unprecedented events of recent days have again stirred the question: is a revolution coming? Social media is flooded with videos of angry young men pillaging the [corps commander’s house](https://www.dawn.com/news/1753254/mass-arrests-continue-as-340-suspects-in-jinnah-house-attack-held), smashing candelabras and burning furniture, disgusted to find frozen strawberries in an elite kitchen in the same country where food inflation is running well over 40 per cent and most people are struggling to eat two square meals a day.

That unthinkable moment when people pushed through the gates of GHQ has raised tantalising prospects that the status quo might yet be challenged.

Indeed, there are several revolutionary ingredients in the mix: soaring inflation, polarised politics, a weaponised society with nothing to lose, and a new ability to smash the sacred cows of previously untouchable elite institutions. But despite the unrest and white smoke plumes of tear gas, a mass reckoning remains unlikely.

This is because public agitation continues to be reactionary and aimed at destroying, rather than visionary and aimed at creating (a new paradigm, a new society, a new status quo). If there is a mass movement brewing, it’s all ‘anti’ and not enough ‘pro’. And history has taught us that you can’t build anything from hate.

The lack of issue-based mobilisation — even at this critical time — is a reflection of Pakistan’s paucity of issue-based politics. In an authoritarian state that has been under military rule for much of its history, politics has always been a game of survival, rather than a public service. The resulting distortions in our political discourse are all aimed at weakening opponents and appeasing puppet masters.

These distortions are now reflected in our mass mobilisations: there is rage and rejection but little in the way of grassroots activism. We know what we don’t want, but we have never dared to ask for what we could have.

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Many of the key ingredients of a successful revolution remain missing: credible leadership (beyond a cult personality), a free media that can support and disseminate a movement’s messaging, and a population that understands the need for structural change and is ready to participate based on perceived benefits.

Our young, urban population should fulfil this last criteria, but the prevalence of misinformation, conspiracy theories and the shambles that is our public education sector has limited the critical requirement for understanding.

Ironically, the closest we have come to mass reform movements in recent years is in the form of the TTP or other similar religio-political movements. These comprised a rejection of the status quo and offered an alternative vision as articulated in concrete demands (for example, regarding the imposition of Shariah law).

It is not surprising that the TTP — despite killing tens of thousands of Pakistanis — enjoyed some traction (albeit ambivalent) with the public for over a decade. That itself is a testament to Pakistanis’ hunger for issue-based politics.

There have, of course, also been recent attempts at mass movements without a violent extremist bent. Think of the PTM or the Haq Do Tehreek in Gwadar which offered progressive politics and a specific people-oriented agen­­da.

Unfortuna­tely, status quo beneficiaries in Pakistan know a meaningful mass mo­­vement threat when they see one; they ma­­naged to nullify these groups’ leadership through extended jail terms and contain them with media bla­c­kouts.

The comparison between the imprisonment tenures of Imran Khan and Ali Wazir offers a clue as to which movement has more potential to actually effect change.

In the West, there is a growing recognition that mass mobilisations that challenge the status quo will only occur — and succeed — if they can offer a political alternative that is rooted in specific pro-people demands. Climate change activists, for example, are increasingly seeking to align with labour movements or minority rights’ movements in order to embed abstract net-zero demands into a progressive vision that privileges equality, human rights and security.

The number of issues around which Pakistanis should be coalescing is staggering: food security, safety, dignity of work, free speech, minority rights, welfare protections, healthcare provisions, climate resilience. Until we can craft a politics that champions for the people rather than against their overlords, our future will be riot, not reform.

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