**Slow dancing with mediocrity**

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Tuesday, Dec 14, 2021

There is a tyranny of mediocrity, low expectations and extremely low standards that is ravaging Pakistan and suffocating the country’s more than 110 million citizens below the age of 23. Older Pakistanis are also suffocating, but they carry the burden of having had a longer period in which to fix that which is badly broken. We have failed. The least we owe to younger Pakistanis is a clear and unvarnished set of foundational truths about what plagues the country and why.

The first step in this journey is acknowledging that the country’s abundant resources and unlimited potential is untapped. If you are not born into privilege, this country offers a meagre set of opportunities for economic and social mobility. Other than a very few exceptions, the country’s elite enjoy relentless success in asphyxiating the space that young people need to identify, explore and master new avenues. Old money beats new money, every day, and twice on Friday – unless new money secures the power of the state.

Since regulation and officialdom exist purposelessly, their core purpose is self perpetuation – and they are available to the highest bidder and the strongest, most fearless thug. The state and especially its self-appointed guardians are completely unaccountable, which makes even the best and brightest among them, susceptible to repeated bad decision making. New jobs are not new jobs; they are recycled jobs from other places that have moved on in the global supply value chain, and thus the global politics food chain. Pakistan – a country with abundant human and natural resources, and unlimited potential – is an economic basket case. About all this, there is largely consensus. Some rich people will quibble at the margins when they feel self-conscious about their role in this mess – but even they won’t argue the core thesis. This place is badly underperforming.

The trouble begins in the diagnosis. Bad data and bad information, undermined by even worse analysis and cancerous diagnoses that repeatedly pin the blame for this mess on the wrong people. This isn’t default stupidity. Something far more pernicious plagues the diagnostics of what ails the country. The elite here isn’t satisfied merely with winning at birth, throughout life and long after death. It wants total and complete control of the way in which the conversation is framed.

Let’s play a non drinking game. Clap twice if you’ve heard these lines in different formats before.

“The population explosion is the most dangerous threat to the country”.

“The domination of religious extremism in society is the most dangerous threat to the country”.

“The current account deficit is the most dangerous threat to the country”.

“The illiteracy and lack of education is the most dangerous threat to the country”.

“The climate challenge is the most dangerous threat to the country”.

One could make a list of dozens of these catch-all, ‘most dangerous’ threat statements that we have heard repeated ad nauseam. Here are the wrong questions: Which one is true? And does one being true make the others false?

The correct question is: Who do these statements problematise?

The answer is: people. Pakistan’s elite have made sport of the people of Pakistan by pinning the responsibility for the disastrous state of affairs in the country on the ordinary Pakistani. The best example of this is the traditional discourse on population. The short version of the argument for better family planning is that there are too many Pakistanis. Nothing could be a more delusional expression of the local and global elite’s contempt for the non-elite. High fertility numbers are principally an economic decision that Pakistanis have been making for four generations. The argument for condoms, IUDs, pre-emption or other means of reproductive wellness has almost always traditionally treated the ordinary family’s economic decision making with derision. Of course, from a purely intellectual standpoint, this derision isn’t wholly unmerited. But the results of a derisive and contemptuous narrative about population are there for all to see. By 2050, some estimates place Pakistan in the neighbourhood of 400 million people.

In the words of DJ Khaled, another one: There are too many extremists in Pakistan. Sure. Absolutely. But there are extremists everywhere, including more populated places. Why isn’t Germany collapsing under the weight of its neo-Nazis? Why isn’t India’s RSS a cause for India to endlessly mope about its terrible fate? Why are American insurrectionists’ children fat and stuck on their iPhones, whilst Pakistani extremists’ children are malnourished, out of school, and with an empty look in their eyes?

More: too many imports are killing Pakistan’s economy. Sure. Consumption is bad (sic). Growth is bad (sic). More for those with less is bad (sic). Only in Pakistan can elites sustain the myth that urban families graduating from global lower middle class to global middle class status is a threat to the economic stability of the nation. As the motorcycle guy graduates to a small car, and the small car lady graduates to a larger car with higher horsepower, the world celebrates. Not in Elitistan. Here the out-of-work genius economist wants to ban cheese imports, ban car imports, ban high quality household goods. Stop the bleeding, they say! Sure. And damn the consequences of a choking of growth. Damn those that choke first. Always. The Americans only threatened to bomb Pakistani back to the Stone Age. Lazy Pakistani elites have been policy-bombing the country’s youth into the Stone Age for decades, with zero consequences.

Too many people. Too religious. Too hungry for nice things.

This, we are told, is why Pakistan is in such dire straits. And so of course, we lament the TLP as some monstrosity that we cannot understand. We conjure up the military’s machinations (true) as the root of social and economic phenomena (false) that we don’t understand. If I stand in my air-conditioned or well-heated corner, with my Tom Fords and Manolo Blahniks lamenting all that I survey as being too many people, who are too religious and too hungry for nice things, then the TLP is only the tip of the iceberg. If we are tired of the TLP with Pakistan at 220 million, imagine the kinds of wellness timeouts we will need when Pakistan grows to 400 million.

It is beyond the imagination of the Pakistani elite to imagine very much at all. The ‘too many’ label fits only the get-out-of-jail-free cards that the elite hoard to the detriment of the people of Pakistan, and ironically to the elite itself.

Swelled by newly arriving elites from the military, real estate, media, professional services and technology sectors, there is no time to engage in a proper reset. Lazy and intellectually bankrupt inanities, like a timeout for democracy, is about par for the course, from the people that brought us “we need a permanent economic advisory council” and “Imran Khan – because come on, at least he’s not corrupt”.

This week marks exactly fifty years since the partition of Pakistan and the fall of Dhaka. The likely direction of the country can be gauged from the degree to which unofficial Pakistani narratives seem to be emerging out of the woodwork seeking to lessen the burden of the mistakes since 1947, the tragedy of 1971 and the farcical absence of accountability since then.

This slow dance with mediocrity will continue because of ‘resilience’. But it isn’t the people of Pakistan that should be tagged with this unfortunate label. It is the elite of Pakistan. Their resilience is what depletes Pakistan’s abundant resources and asphyxiates its unlimited potential. Until there is a social and political compact to tackle the elite’s resilience, Pakistan will continue to treadmill this mediocrity.

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