**The road not taken**

Siddique Humayun

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In the year 1899, Theodore Roosevelt, at the time the governor of New York, delivered an inspiring speech titled, ‘The Strenuous Life’.

The speech romanticized the principles of commitment, hard work and bitter toil as ideals to be embraced by not only individuals but nations. Roosevelt said, “We do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort; the man who never wrongs his neighbor, who is prompt to help a friend, but who has those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life.” America was 123 years old at the time.

Fast forward to the year 2023, and oceans apart, Pakistan, at 75 years old, could perhaps take a leaf out of Roosevelt’s book. Whether one believes in the progressive conservatism of the former US president’s Republican presidency of the 20th century or not, it is pertinent to understand that the ideals of active life are not only admirable, but in our case have become a necessity to deal with the multitude of crises we now face.

Pakistan is currently experiencing its worst financial situation in recent memory: foreign reserves are nearly empty; circular debt is a complicated concern that has eluded experts and practitioners; and the unrelenting tragedy of climate change has caused destruction that amounts to billions of dollars, that we simply do not have. And if this wasn’t enough, the TTP has resurfaced like the unwanted cancer that suddenly reappears after a few years of relative calm achieved through an unforgiving therapy. All of this could have solutions in politics, but even that seems out of reach.

While we may very well avoid default after we receive financial support from multilateral lenders, will this solve the structural issues that plague our economy in the longer run? And what of it when we decide to let go of our promises once again to appease the electorate? How many times will debts be rolled over? Or a lending hand be given by friendly nations? Donor fatigue has already set in even among our closest allies. So then what do we do? We embrace the strenuous life.

We reform our economy by creating an environment that attracts foreign direct investment, we reduce red-tape, and we increase the share of manufacturing goods – export finished products and not just raw materials on an industrial scale. Wealth generation cannot and should not only be achieved through taxation. Pakistani citizens have traded billions in crypto currencies – yet there is no mechanism to streamline this activity – nor has much been done to promote the development of applications, softwares and digital markets.

With the economy in shambles, the question staring in our face, if we take it out of the sand, is: why? Why hasn’t anything being done in so many avenues of economic activity? It takes us hours to put a blanket ban on knowledge-sharing websites, but it has been nearly two years, and we have not given regulatory approval to Starlink – something which is available for the world to see online.

We see examples of countries like the UAE opening up and becoming the centre of world activity and travel. Tourism is a God-sent treasure trove for this country. Pakistan has more than 7,000 glaciers – more than anywhere else on the planet outside of the Arctic, it has vast expanses of deserts, and a shoreline begging to be developed – and yet the world travels next door to Dubai to enjoy the emptiness of a desert. Can tourism then not contribute to the economic life of this country? Why is it easier for a foreign tourist to get a visa of a Middle Eastern country but not Pakistan?

Arguably the greatest tragedy humanity has witnessed in its recorded history culminated in the year 1945. Germany and Japan felt the shattering of civilization on a scale perhaps never witnessed before: physical infrastructure destroyed; near total economic collapse; and a soul-crushing demoralization and despair at the conclusion of the Second World War. Only a few decades later, these two countries, embracing the principles of commitment and hard work, rose from the ashes of chaos to become world leaders in development and national character. Led by women and “stern men with empires in their brains,” these nations regrouped and rebuilt to become some of the largest economies of the world. Maybe there is a lesson to be learnt? Of development delinked from politics.

The sooner we detach our economic course with that of our political life, the sooner we will set our path straight. The governance of a country ridden with strife and economic disparity is no easy task, and so while we may argue and criticize those at the helm, it is perhaps not always an easy choice in the choices that may be forced upon us. As long as those choices are the right choices, we as a nation are capable of leading a life of toil for the betterment of the coming generations.

So then, as Roosevelt would remind us, “Let us therefore boldly face the life of strife, resolute to do our duty well and manfully; resolute to uphold righteousness by deed and by word; resolute to be both honest and brave, to serve high ideals, yet to use practical methods – that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness.”

The writer is a Pulitzer-Moore Scholar and Director Advocacy & Communications at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute.