**Who will fight for the people?**

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Thursday, Feb 10, 2022

Pakistan is a country locked in a state of siege. We have problems with virtually all our neighbours: ones that affect the security and safety of our own country. On the other hand, we have a government which insists on continuing to focus on corruption, even though it has had little success in recovering the money it had promised to recover, ignoring the plight of these people locked in a state of virtual starvation and mass joblessness.

At the same time, we have a surge in violence across the country. Last week saw terror attacks in the cities of the already troubled Balochistan. It is uncertain whether these attack came from the TTP or Baloch nationalist groups or whether these groups have, in some ways, combined forces to create a new era of terrorism in the province. But we do know that some of these groups do get support from the neighbouring countries, possibly from both sides of our borders. Many suggest that those opposed to the CPEC corridor and Pakistan’s close links with China may have some part to play in the upsurge in violence. It is also true that Balochistan remains the most deprived province in the country, and factors like the issue of missing persons, abductions, arrests and killings still continue.

There are other internal wars as well. There is a danger that Karachi could fall into a new realm of violence and unrest as the PPP and the MQM clash over the local government law and hurl accusations against each other. Local governments are vital to delivering good governance to the people and the act by the government in taking away so many powers from these local governments is simply something which turns the entire local government process into a farce. However, the issue needs to be worked out through dialogue instead of an armed conflict or a return to ethnic violence we have seen in the past.

Something has to be done to ensure this violence does not return and that the Sindh government is able to work out how to handle the existing local government-related issues and how it can share powers with governments set up at a level where people can easily access councillors and take their problems to them. These problems are many, with the city of Karachi having turned into a kind of heap of rubble, where roads are dug up and heaps of garbage cover almost every street. Efforts to lift solid waste or keep drains clean have failed; all of this have led to the collapse of the civic structure of our largest city.

There are other areas of life that are on the brink of collapse as well. Women have won a small war by bringing about a change in the harassment act first passed nearly 20 years ago, by expanding it to cover all workplaces, education institutions and open spaces such as sports arenas, or places where women receive any kind of training. This is a huge success, given the recent reports of harassment in schools and universities, and of the harassment of sports women who are attempting to fight society in the first place to move into the arena of sports. While this is denied officially, there have been numerous cases of harassment, some of them currently under investigation, by the concerned sporting federation or other body.

Most women continue to live under oppression of various kinds, which stems essentially from the patriarchy they face. In former tribal areas, including North and South Waziristan, the literacy rate for women is around seven percent. This is shocking in an age where development is taking place at a fast pace and women are making strides in the world, moving into the top offices of their region and often running them with greater ability than their male counterparts, though of course this is not a universal truth. At the same time, we also have women succeeding in more fields and gaining top marks in exams at various levels and making their way into medical colleges.

What is sad is that their degrees are often a means to earn them a good deal in marriage negotiations which are still carried out between parents rather than individuals themselves and where the degree of a doctor is considered a top honour which brings greater points for the bride to be. The issue of right-wing interventions into school education — particularly in Punjab — remains problematic and a step towards a regressive society. Many argue, including top Islamic scholars, that most religious instruction should be given at home so that any disputes and arguments that usually arise in schools are prevented and parents are able to teach their children the values they parents believe in and hold sacred.

The emigration of people from the country is also disturbing. Two years ago, reports surfaced that the top mathematician in a land which produces few mathematicians or physicists has left the country for the Western world, perhaps because he felt there was no future for him in his home country. It is disturbing that so many people who have remarkable achievements in their field of study or specialisation are choosing to leave Pakistan. More young people with high-quality education are eager to apply for passports of a different colour with the emblem of different countries emblazoned on their pages. The reasons for this are multiple with insecurity and lack of pride in Pakistan being some of them.

At the same time, we have deep ethnic divides, which keep people away from each other; those who live in Punjab have little interest in the affairs of Sindh and Balochistan while the same is true of people who live in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), who focus essentially on their situation. Languages also divide people with Urdu still a minority language in a country where regional languages are either neglected or considered unfit for polite company – as in the case of Punjabi. We need to rethink our country as a whole and settle the private wars being fought within at so many different levels so that we can move towards a place where there is greater calm and harmony.

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