**Palestine exposes a vacuum in Pakistan**

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Tuesday, Oct 17, 2023

The crisis in the Middle East is going to further expose the helpless, rudderless, and purposeless nature of Pakistani leadership. Today’s Pakistani social contract is defined, more than anything else, by the absence of a compact between the country’s elites about how to make sure order is maintained and power is exercised.

A country’s elite must have a raison d’etre that excites and engages a large enough swathe of a country’s populace for that populace to assent to being governed by the same elite. All of these key ingredients of a stable economic, social and political order have been rendered ineffectual and untenable in the past seven years. Since the country is based on aspirations and ideals that are – by every stretch of the imagination – international in character, any kind of contact between global events and Pakistan’s economy, its society or its polity represents both enormous opportunity and huge risk.

Pakistan has been in the throes of a multi-layered polycrisis for nearly two full years. The root cause of this crisis is largely the same as the root cause of all sustained national crises of the past: an informal and unaccountable veto power enjoyed by the military over all civilian decision-making authority.

Any time there is a touchpoint between an international or global event and Pakistan, the country is at grave risk of being rendered even more dysfunctional than usual. This is exactly what happened in February 2022 when then-Prime Minister Imran Khan engaged with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin at a time when the domestic gap between the civilian leadership and the military command had grown to the widest Khan had known. The economic and political crisis today is a product of many micro-errors, poor decisions and institutional obduracy across the spectrum of important national structures. But at the heart of the now two-year-long Pakistani polycrisis is the flammability of the Pakistani system when it comes to large, shape-shifting global events. What this means is simple, but also quite scary.

Whether it was Memogate in 2011, or Dawn Leaks in 2016, or the Cipher case in 2021, the Pakistani elite tends to be at its absolute worst behaviour when the stakes involve Pakistan’s global standing and its relationships, as a sovereign country, with the rest of the world.

The global disquiet around violence in Palestine and Israel since the Hamas invasion of Israeli targets on October 7 this year is a new chapter in a book that is as old as Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari and older than the chief justice and the chief of army staff. No one among the elite is in any way disloyal to the Palestinian people and the long-standing Pakistani position of the need for a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. But because so much of regional and global politics is now going to hinge on reactions and responses of key actors in the region to the systematic genocide that Israel has begun in Gaza, the likelihood of a metastasizing humanitarian crisis for Palestinians becoming a noose for the Pakistani leadership to hang the system on is going to increase.

It is what happens every time there is a moment of reckoning and the Pakistani elite needs to engage the people of Pakistan in a serious conversation. Every time, this country’s elite do the same thing. They choose to deal with international challenges by turning on one another. Every second, every minute, every hour and every day that the country’s elite continue to operate without an ‘elite compact’ the risks of yet another cataclysm continues to lurk.

The cataclysms from the last decade or so have taken a very serious toll and the systemic risks in the Pakistani governance ecosystem have grown dramatically. The Cipher case is a good example of a stage 4 version of the same cancer that has previously perhaps only manifested itself as a stage 2 or 3 progression.

In the Cipher case, three conversations converged into one – the role and tone of US officials in how they speak of elected leaders in Pakistan, the choice of engaging with Vladimir Putin at a time when the benefits of such an engagement were likely overwhelmed by the costs, and the deteriorating trust of Beijing in the consistency and sincerity of Pakistani leaders. Remember also how far and wide the shrapnel has flown because of the divorce between Imran Khan and the military leadership: many PTI supporters may now be permanently disabused of the importance of the Pakistani national security apparatus.

Three developments have made Pakistan even more vulnerable to international events and how those events are reported on, through the tickers and moods on X, CNN, Fox, BBC, Al Jazeera and RT. The first is the 2021 withdrawal of the US military from Afghanistan. Suddenly, with dramatically lower stakes in that country, American attention and understanding for the Pakistani state’s unique challenges shrunk rapidly.

The second is China-US competition and the way it has substantially increased the autonomy and space for countries to assert their own narratives and interests – absent the need for wholesale, all-in commitment to one or the other (China or the US). This is what we might call the middle-power opportunity for countries like Indonesia, Turkey, Bangladesh, and especially Saudi Arabia – but one that is so far only manifest as a middle-power dilemma for Islamabad and Pindi (shorter: Pakistan has conceded strategic autonomy at a time when other more capably governed middle powers are dramatically increasing their strategic autonomy).

Finally, the third is the singular rise of India as a global power. India’s ability to project dominance in the international arena is not uncontested, but it is the most dramatic rise of any country in the past quarter century in terms of the elements of national power that India has at its disposal. No country can simultaneously court the lustfulness of American, European and Japanese Indo Pacific ambitions, whilst dramatically enhancing the quantum of goods and services it imports from China, whilst also becoming the global refinery for otherwise sanctioned Russian oil. India’s strategic power is, by design, a net deflator for Pakistani interests.

These three factors may be unique to Pakistan and its vulnerabilities, but there are also wider, more universal factors that make an already weak governance equation in the country dramatically weaker. Climate change, populism, and most of all, the slow and steady corrosion of state capacity are universal challenges. Combined they have helped choke the ability of countries to navigate their way out of jams.

When we put all this together, the current scenario in Pakistan is hardly surprising. Gagging and jailing someone who is supposed to be the most popular leader in the country can buy some time, but it hasn’t and cannot solve structural problems. Temporary relief caused by the dollar dropping 10 per cent of its value against the rupee is fantastic – but is it sustainable? Every bit of good news may only represent tenuous calm before many storms.

The most potent of these storms is likely to be another Memogate, another Dawn Leaks, or another Cipher case. The stresses from the escalating slaughter of Palestinians are already showing. A week after the hostilities began, Pakistan’s caretaker foreign minister and prime minister both spoke out strongly against Israel’s excesses in Gaza. But the Israelis have barely gotten started. There is a lot more bloodletting to come. The plan is clear and unmistakable: Gaza is to be depopulated and Palestinians are to be settled in camps in the Sinai. None of the key powers in the Middle East are invested in allowing malign actors to ramp up and widen the conflict. A regional war that sucks in Iran would be catastrophic for Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the wider GCC. It will be avoided at all costs.

Sooner or later, the rhetoric of Pakistani officialdom will need to be coordinated with the response of key regional Middle Eastern allies – and ideally not aligned with the unceasing trouble generating regime in Iran. This will likely be at odds with the dominant narratives on Main Street in Pakistan. Every time this disparity appears, Pakistan’s already emaciated governance takes another body blow. The only way to avoid the next cataclysm therefore is for the elite to begin to establish a compact – starting with a coherent and sustainable position on Palestine that balances the demands of the people of Pakistan with the country’s immediate and short-term compulsions.

Threading this needle is the price of not taxing the rich, not educating the young and not empowering Pakistani women. A longer-term freedom for Pakistanis and Pakistani elites thus hinges on tackling those more foundational challenges.

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