[**The Pied Piper**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1709035/the-pied-piper)

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TO understand contemporary Pakistani politics, one needs to revert to kindergarten. There, life ran to the rhythm of nursery rhymes and fables.

Which one of us has forgotten Humpty Dumpty falling off the wall? Or Jack and Jill climbing up the hill? Or Baa Baa Black Sheep? Rumpelstiltskin or the vengeful Pied Piper of Hamelin?

Real life, however, does not end in the nursery. Maturity brings with it a gamut of different characters. Yet echoes of those rhymes permeate into our present.

Take the egg-head Humpty in Stanhope Place, London, whom all the king’s horses and all the king’s men have not been able to restore to the throne in Islamabad.

He wants to lead those who follow his new music into a land of no-return.

Take the two cousins — Hamza and Maryam — who went up the hill in search of a pail of power, and tumbled down without it.

Take the former head of NAB who sought to shear a flock of black sheep, and then lost them and blackened his own reputation.

Take the rotund banker Rumpelstiltskin who promised to spin straw into gold and then advised finance ministers of two PTI-controlled provinces — Punjab and KP — to sabotage the bitterly needed IMF package. In the green days of the PTI government, its commerce adviser threatened to re-examine CPEC. It took numerous visits by high-ranking officials to mollify the Chinese government. Didn’t anyone tell the former finance minister that we need the IMF more than it needs us? Or does he propose Citibank to be the new lender of last resort?

And now take our modern Pied Piper who entered Islamabad to rid it of its rats. Having failed, he changed his tune and wants to lead those who follow his new music into a land of no-return.

There cannot be a rational Pakistani anywhere who does not recognise the chasm that has appeared in our political landscape. It is worse than any caused by a natural earthquake in Muzaffarabad in 2005, or the floods in 2010, and now again in 2022. This one is man-made. It has been created wilfully, knowingly, and deliberately by those we elected to power in 2018.

The electoral promises they made then have been washed away, like the belongings of their voters. ‘Naya Pakistan’ is unrecognisable, smeared by mudslinging. The slogan of ‘tabdeeli’ does not stand for change of government. It means moving out of your submerged homes to higher, drier ground.

While relief packages are being distributed to the homeless camping in inadequate shelters on the roads of flood-affected areas of the country, they might like to remember in their plight the declaration of assets made by their leaders in 2018.

The details of assets held here and abroad are now in the public domain. To the diligent researcher, they make depressing reading. To the flood victims, they are of little use. They are beyond retrieval, beyond reach and beyond conscience. They are no more than a high watermark of unpunished corruption.

Perhaps the most insidious turn in our political misfortunes is the new role of Pied Piper assumed by the PTI leader Imran Khan. His detractors prefer to call him Imran Niazi, as if a change in name will diminish his growing popularity.

Like the late Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s, Mr Khan has decided to go directly to the masses. He promises them not ‘roti, kapra aur makaan’, but a cloth-less, foodless and roofless ‘true democracy’.

He has embarked on a whirlwind tour of the country, rousing his audiences with fiery rhetoric. Each speech out-burns the other in intensity. Each voracious jalsa searches for a new target, a fresh victim. Each volley of ammunition uses a higher calibre when the earlier broadside fails.

The latest attack by Mr Khan during his address at Faisalabad was ill-advised (if indeed he was advised at all) and certainly ill-timed. He seems to have forgotten that it was within the first few months of his first government that an amendment was approved to the Army Act of 1952, enabling an incumbent COAS to receive extension of service until the age of 64 years.

Today, he is apprehensive that the new COAS may be chosen for his loyalty to the crown rather than to the state.

Had Mr Khan been better advised, he might have waited until the nation had commemorated its martyrs on Sept 6 with appropriate dignity, rather than hurling at them a wreath woven from calumny.

How long will this state of affairs continue? Indefinitely, one suspects.

The IMF is unlikely to release any further tranches to us until we can demonstrate that we can exercise self-control at every level — fiscally, socially, politically, and above all morally.

Until then, prudence tempered with humility might not be a bad medicine to swallow.

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