**Silence has several languages**

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A quick look at villages and the rural districts of Sindh reveals how deeply unequal Sindhi society is. The lives of common rural men and women, peasants, and casual and daily wage workers remain as it has been for decades: seeped in poverty and deprivation.

A 2014 multidimensional poverty survey shows that almost 43 percent of the population lives under poverty: of this, only 11 percent is urban poverty, while 75 percent is rural poverty. The tight-knit concentration of money, assets and land in a few powerful hands has pushed millions of people to the borders of deprivation. This has also caused the spiral effect on ‘next to none’ social mobility, ensuring that over the generations the cliche remains—those that are born poor, remain so, if not become poorer, and the rich and powerful become richer and more powerful. Almost despotic.

“Feudalism” and the lack of political will to bring about redistributive mechanisms in wealth and assets, be that land reforms, has meant that inequality is tangible and structural. Feudal land owners have made toiling peasants believe that this unjust class structure is here to stay untouched and is integral to their survival and livelihood, in the absence of effective human agency. The little that small farmers may own is fragmented as family members grow in number and separate to form their own households. Unlike in central rural Punjab, rural Sindhis often live in extreme paucity of cash which makes them more vulnerable to the will of powerful feudal land owners.

[England beat Denmark 2-1 to face Italy in Euro 2020 final](https://nation.com.pk/08-Jul-2021/england-beat-denmark-2-1-to-face-italy-in-euro-2020-final)

At least 6 million children between the ages of 5 and 16 are out of school; of this, 80 percent of them have never seen the inside of a classroom. In villages and small towns, herds of school age children dust-laden and loitering during school hours engage in child labour, both meagerly paid work and unpaid work delegated by family members. Those in school receive an education, which at best makes them literate, able to only read and write. This leaves little room for the hope that a younger generation will think critically and question decades of structural inequality.

In comparison, other parts of the country have seen a different trajectory. In the last over a decade, many districts of Punjab, especially central Punjab, and KP’s greater Peshawar valley and Hindko districts have made impressive progress both towards some economic prosperity and school education. This progress is rarely seen in Sindh.

By the time the next general elections are held, Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) will have ruled Sindh for 15 years; consecutively, uninterrupted and with great confidence. 15 years holding the reins of power is a long time—those children who were in class 1 when PPP took over power in Sindh in 2008, are about to now enter college. PPP has a comfortable majority in the provincial assembly, and the chairman of the party has made all the right noises in terms of playing an effective role as a member of the opposition. A younger, more social media savvy Bilawal has also been able to gain favorable spotlight with most forms of media. The province’s chief minister has shown formidable backbone, and with real clarity stood up to the federal government on fundamental issues of provincial autonomy, including the National Finance Commission Award and provincial shares of water division and control. Governance around Covid-19 has also shown a chief minister proactive and serious towards containment, treatment and inoculation implementation plans. Historically, PPP has set an impressive and forward looking precedent at macro policy and legislation making, both in Sindh and nationally. Other imperative gains are in the forms of the 18th constitutional amendment; recognising the rightful identity of Pakhtunkhwa and supporting many progressive causes (e.g Aurat March). The party is also credited with the first peaceful transition of power from one democratically elected government to the next.

[Turkish, American fighter jets to carry out NATO air patrols](https://nation.com.pk/08-Jul-2021/turkish-american-fighter-jets-to-carry-out-nato-air-patrols)

Yet and unfortunately, PPP’s legislative progression nor its stalwart position on civilian, democratic supremacy is visible in rural Sindh. In that sense there are two PPPs—one that defends the constitution and democratic federalism and the other that passively presides over the fate of millions of Sindh’s illiterate, unemployed, cash-strapped poor, who live among heaps of waste in small towns, rural peasants who toil land to get barely anything in return, forced conversions of young Hindu girls, lack of merit in government recruitment and unabashed, unaccounted land grabbing.

Ironically, almost all poor and marginalised people that one speaks to are voters and supporters of the PPP—and most are “content” with the fact that they have not reaped any benefits of their loyalty towards the party. The party has failed to bring about any real substantive change to the lives of poor people in their stronghold, their mother province. If PPP’s claim is contrary to my assertion, one needs a microscope to see this change. It is this dismal performance in rural Sindh that is the main argument of anti-PPP forces.

[Reforms for effective legislation discussed by PM, NA speaker](https://nation.com.pk/08-Jul-2021/reforms-for-effective-legislation-discussed-by-pm-na-speaker)

PPP must not forget that Sindh is its base and real strength as is a ‘prosperous Central Punjab’ for Nawaz Sharif. The 2018 election results and the recent by-elections (the Karachi by-election was won by PPP but only with a few hundred votes) show that PPP has, for now, been restricted to Sindh. Realpolitik dicates that nationally PPP will remain relevant and in some future set up, may be able obtain one or two high offices through political maneuvering but its actual base will not shift.

So the question is, if PPP doesn’t have Sindh, what else does it have? Once its bastion, Punjab has found its own leaders as the province, especially Central Punjab, has graduated from roti, kapra aur makan to prosperity, bigger middle classes, small farmer owners and more disposable cash in smaller households. Punjab is also no longer solely dependent on ‘fauji bharti ground’ as recruitment grounds are shifting to other provinces.

Sindh continues to be PPP’s hunting ground and all signs indicate the party will win again in Sindh. In addition to the nostalgia of the Bhutto legacy and the unfortunate acceptance of poverty as fate, there are other reasons: feudal power has gained more strength due to the lack of effective and on large scale civil and social movements and rural masses do not have real substantive political alternatives. Awami Tahrik leader, Rasul Bux Palijo had the ability and skills to capture the imagination and ignite passion among Sindhi youth, men and women (the very successful progressive Sindhiani Tahrik movement is an offspring of Awami Tahrik) yet was unable to build a viable party. The political arena is, therefore, vacant with no other player of significance in sight as diverse and progressive as PPP. Despite feudal dominance, the party has been able to attract multi-class, multi-professional and ethnic minority community representatives. No other party in Sindh has been able to be as diverse as this. The other existing political parties are either religious groups, drawing room parties, small groups or parties limited to electoral alliances or parties with a very narrow base.

[PM Khan to launch Pakistan's first-ever locally produced E-bike today](https://nation.com.pk/08-Jul-2021/pm-khan-to-launch-pakistan-s-first-ever-locally-produced-e-bike-today)

Although Sindh’s “romance” with PPP continues to-date, the party has exploited this emotionally to make successes in electoral politics and in turn retain power in the only place they seem to be putting in the least effort. PPP is astute to the fact that the people of Sindh have not thought of any other political leader or party as their “own”. Both Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif represent something that does not resonate with Sindhi youth, the people of rural Sindh as well as Sindhi middle classes. Their understanding, policies and approach are too culturally and historically removed from “them” to vote PML or PTI into power in Sindh.

But this should not mean that the voters of Sindh are taken for granted. PPP can learn from a current example of the Hartlepool, UK by-election. The Labour party lost this working class constituency seat (a “red wall” seat, which signifies the party’s historic control over it), for the first time since the creation of the seat in 1974. The result is a blow to a party that should have recognised that loyalty is never abstract. It is not just one-way traffic but based on a continued bond of interests and benefits. Though the disillusioned and disempowered teeming masses of rural Sindh will give PPP more chances and are unlikely to vote another party in any time soon, they do expect that the ruling party put an end to ‘invisiblising’ them. If the party truly wishes for a voter bank that votes for them beyond lack of choice and emotions, then it’s high time for critical introspection. The language of silence should not be translated as complacency or unconditional acceptance.