**Bizarre & brutal**

BY A A S I M S A J J A D A K H T A R 2021-02-19

WHAT we now call suicide bombing arguably started with Japanese fighter pilots who hurled themselves and their aircraft towards seaborne enemy vessels at the end of World War II. These attacks became known as kamikaze manoeuvres, but I suspect young people today are largely unaware of where the term originated.

One of the less advertised details about Nazi Germany`s reign of terror was the institutionalisation of what today the world knows as the practice of enforced disappearances. At the height of World War II, Hitler issued the infamous `Night and Fog` decree, following which thousands of opponents of his regime were forcibly disappeared and sent to concentration camps.

I start with mention of mid-20th-century fascist regimes because I imagine many germane readers of this publication would concur that they represent abhorrent blots on our collective conscience. Some argue that humanity on the whole has completely transcended that era and its abominations.

Sadly, this is simply not true. Fast forward a couple of decades from World War I to the faraway lands of Latin America. From the mid-1960s for about two decades, countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile, among others, were ruled by military dictators who disappeared thousands of dissidents. Many never came back, and most who did were never the same.

Numerous other regimes in recent history have effectively made enforced disappearances state policy. Saddam Hussein`s tenure in Iraq, the ongoing persecution of Uighurs in China`s Xinjiang province, and the Guantanamo Bay internment centre set up by the US at the outset of the `war on terror` are some examples of many.

Pakistan`s tryst with enforced disappearances is relatively old news. The practice came to prominence under the Musharraf regime, both in Balochistan and amongst some hitherto patronised mujahideen elements who became bad guys under the post2001 dispensation. Since then, it has spread across the length and breadth of the social formation as the state apparatus has become increasingly militarised.

Relatives of Baloch missing persons have of course of fered the most vocal and brave resistance to this practice over the past 15 years.

Yet another protest camp set up by them in Islamabad over the past week garnered scant attention from the ruling PTI until opposition politicians started to visit the protesters at D-Chowk.

What followed was perhaps to be expected; some statements that the issue would be taken up at the highest level, and promises that a bill would be tabled in parliament to criminalise enforced disappearances.Legislation has certainly had some effect in curtailing abuse of power in countries as diverse as the Philippines, Mexico and Thailand. The hope is that the same would be the case in Pakistan too, but the government`s otherwise vociferous claims to support such legislation betray thatit helped defeat exactly such a bill that was drafted by MNAs Akhtar Mengal and Mohsin Dawar recently.

This government is of course following in the footsteps of those that have preceded it.

Even if the PTI seems like the worst of the lot, others have done little better in reining in an authoritarian state apparatus of colonial origins. We have had three elected governments since the end of the Musharraf dictatorship but none has had the courage to hold the deep state to account for enforced disappearances.

Notwithstanding the uniqueness of Pakistani praetorianism, we should not labour under the illusion that European fascism or the dictatorships that prevailed in so many post-colonial countries in the 20th century have been left behind in some global wave of democratisation. We know what ishappening in the West, even if Trump is history.

Meanwhile, the fact that formal democracy is now largely institutionalised in countries like Turkey, Nigeriaand Indonesia where the military ruled the roost for decades not to mention the Latin American dictatorships referred to earlier does not mean that these countries are free of civil conflict, authoritarian state logic, and demagogues like Erdogan. Myanmar speaks for itself, a country beset both by a praetorian curse, and ethnic majoritarianism. In that sense, it is as similar to Pakistan as any other country on this list.

As we head into another inevitably compromised Senate election, with rumours that Balochistan`s seats are the ones in which money and establishment machinations play the biggest role, it is worth recalling that the Baloch women who have set up the most recentmissing persons campinIslamabadare the closest embodiments of democracy, freedom and dignity of our times. Like those who brought down the dictators that institutionalised disappearances in Latin America, these women speak for themselves, their disappeared loved ones, and, indeed, for the oppressed everywhere. They give us some hope that this bizarre and brutal system of domination will one day be defeated. The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.