**The fault is not in our stars**

Dr Murad Ali

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The great and ever-relevant Shakespeare has aptly stated: “When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions” (Hamlet Act IV). What this means is that when a tragedy befalls us or when ill-starred events surround us, they do not happen in isolation, but they come in multiple unfortunate happenings that strike us simultaneously, amplifying the overall impact of human tragedy.

This has happened to hapless Pakistanis ever since this county was created. We have been in perpetual crises of multiple natures and intensities: economic, political, governance, both human-induced and natural. But why blame nature. The major villains are we ourselves. Here I must borrow from Shakespeare again. When Cassius said to Brutus (in Julius Caesar): “Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings”.

It is generally and validly interpreted that we are responsible for our own actions, not fate; we are the masters of our own destiny. The ruling elites of all hues and types - civilian and military, politicians including secular, religious, nationalists and all those who have ruled this nation – have their fair share of responsibility in the current state of dismal affairs. Sadly, today Pakistan stands for poverty, anarchy, killing, injustice, starvation, tyranny and nothing that people should be optimistic about.

Several human-made tragedies afflicted the country in the past few days which came with extremely disturbing news. On Sunday, January 29, a bus carrying at least 43 people plunged into a ravine and was engulfed by ravaging fire in Lasbela, Balochistan. The crash killed 41 people and injured three. The accident is reported to have been caused either by over speeding or sleepiness of the driver. A human fault indeed.

The same day, a boat capsized in Tanda Dam in Kohat, killing 51 passengers, mostly students of a nearby seminary aged between 7 and 14. Again, a human fault, nay, human greed as the boat was reported to have overloaded. The same day, the federal government increased the price of petrol and diesel by Rs35 – literally a bombshell for the misery-stricken people of this hapless land.

Pakistani currency is in freefall as the recent devaluation of the rupee against the dollar following the removal of the unofficial cap has broken all previous records. Where in a civilized world is an absconder catapulted to run the economic affairs of the world’s fifth most populous country? Does our ruling class even have ‘honesty’ or ‘ethics’ in their dictionary? Are Pakistanis destined to be ruled by the likes of these political families? The best revenge is democracy indeed, if what we see in the country is called democracy.

While one thought it was a black Sunday for the country, Monday had more horrific news: January 30 saw a suicide bombing inside a mosque, yes inside a mosque where both the attacker and the victims were all God-fearing Muslims. The horrendous and barbaric act of terrorism in the Police Lines in Peshawar killed nearly 100 people and injured over 170. These are not just statistics. Families have been ruined forever. Mothers and fathers have lost their sons, the inseparable part of their heart, their ‘darlings’, their ‘jigar kay tukray’ blown into pieces. Children have lost their fathers, never to be seen and hugged again. Young women have become widows and will perpetually ask why their loved ones were killed. Why? By whom? What for?

Witnessing the howling screams of relatives who have lost their loved ones reminds one of a scene from Sean O’Casey’s play ‘Juno and the Paycock’, written after the outbreak of the Irish Civil War in the early 1920s. When a neighbour tries to comfort Mrs Tancred after the death of her son by stating: “It’s a sad journey we’re going on, but God’s good and the Republic won’t be always down”, Mrs Tancred, unbearably grieved and shaken like the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters and kids in Peshawar, sighs: “Ah, what good is that to me now? Whether they’re up or down it won’t bring me darling boy from the grave... And I’ll go on living like a pauper. Ah, what’s the pain I suffered bringing him into the world to carry him to his cradle, to the pains I’m suffering now, carrying him out of the world to bring him to his grave”.

We are suffering these human-made tragedies in one form or another. The misery of the poor in this part of the world has no end. If the past is any guide, the future looks visibly bleaker. Yes, it is bleaker indeed as evidenced by data. After the Taliban ascended to the throne in Kabul, many Pakistani policymakers and analysts assumed it was time to heave a sigh of relief. The Taliban takeover was termed as the Afghans breaking the ‘shackles of slavery’, as it was believed – erroneously – that since the proxies of foreign governments would now be reined in, Afghanistan would no longer be a sanctuary for the TTP and others like them.

However, as the recent spike in terrorism indicates, all this was mere daydreaming. According to the 2021 report by the Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, approximately 294 terrorist attacks occurred in 2021 in Pakistan. A 56 per cent increase was observed in the number of terror incidents over the last several years. The highest number of attacks were carried out in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, especially in the newly merged districts.

This suggests that, contrary to Pakistan’s expectations, the return of the Afghan Taliban has significantly emboldened the TTP. Due to this, many in Pakistan believe that both the TTP and Afghan Taliban are different sides of the same coin as both fought against the US-led foreign forces together and now is the time for the Afghan Taliban to return the favour.

Like 2021, the year 2022 also had an ascending pattern of terrorist events – December was one of the deadliest months for Pakistan in recent times. Overall, the country suffered 376 terror attacks in the year that resulted in an increased number of casualties in KP and Balochistan. Particularly, areas in KP and Balochistan bordering Afghanistan witnessed unprecedented spike in terror-related violence as compared with other parts of the country. A majority of fatalities were reported in these two provinces; over two dozen attacks were carried out in December 2022 alone.

Overall, KP experienced about “64 per cent of all the fatalities in the country”, followed by Balochistan which suffered 26 per cent terror-related killings. The report unequivocally mentions that “most of the terrorist violence originated from eastern Afghanistan”, where Pakistani authorities claim that top TTP leadership has cemented their stronghold. But the irony is that following the Peshawar attack the perpetrators were referred to in anonymity as if the attack had been carried out by invisible people.

The writer holds a PhD from Massey University, New Zealand. He teaches at the University of Malakand. He can be reached at: muradali.uom@gmail.com