**Same old script**

BY A A S I M S A J J A D A K H T A R 2020-11-27

I AM generally wary of inferring a great deal from the conduct of individuals, however important, they may be, but Prime MinisterImranKhanundertooktwoengagements this week that illustrate both the fortunes of the present regime, as well as deeper continuities in Pakistan`s structure of power.  
  
The more prominent of his two appearances was the televised address made to a special gathering of the high-powered World Economic Forum (WEF) in which he asserted that contemporary Pakistan is `all about creating wealth`, and that the bad old days of the 1970s when `profit-making almost became a crime` are now well and truly behind us.  
  
To much less overt fanfare, but no less important, was the prime minister`s visit to meet the Chaudhrys of Gujrat in Lahore.  
  
Such a rare personal visit suggests that Khan`s political coalition is increasingly unstable.  
  
The Chaudhrys are of course one of central Punjab`s major political families, and have more or less enjoyed the fruits of governmental power throughout Pakistan`s history. While this particular family`s particular political lineage does not extend to the days of the Raj, the `Big Men` brand of politics that the Chaudhrys espouse has its roots in the colonial regime.  
  
`Big Men` may have interests in land, trade or industry, but are generally hand-in-glove with state institutions. The British swore by such kingmakers, and Pakistani governments have tended to do the same, even as their sources of wealth and power have changed.  
  
That Khan, with all of his claims to be breaking with political clientelism, is reliant on an entrenched king-making family like the Chaudhrys of Gujrat, indicates exactly how little things have changed in `naya Pakistan`.Evenworseforhim,theChaudhrys are reportedly unhappy with what they are getting under the hybrid regime. Given the proximity of politicos like the Chaudhrys to the military establishment, it is no wonder that Khan is breaking with standard practice to visit them in person.  
  
Which brings me back to the WEF and Khan`s advertisement of Pakistan as a money-making haven. If on the one hand the Pakistani political mainstream has always featuredentrenched`Big Men`withinterests in trade, industry, agriculture, and, increasingly, real estate, then on the other hand it has always welcomed both foreign patronage and money, whether from Big Powers, IFIs, MNCs or private investors.  
  
He rightly noted in his WEF address that it was only for a brief period in the 1970s that Pakistan`s political economy took on a dif fer-ent tack. Perhaps one should not be surprised at how the prime minister derided the brief experiment with Fabian socialism.  
  
After all, he was simply voicing what every major Pakistani leader since the 1980s has shared: a deep aversion to any economic model that does not revolve primarily around the profit motive, and a commitment to subjecting all natural resources, publicly owned enterprises and services like education and heath to the so-called `free market`.  
  
On the whole, this otherwise unquestioned orthodoxy has led to a spectacular rise in inequality around the world. Pakistan has seen growth in the ranks of a nebulously defined `middle class` since the turn of the century, but there has also been an alarming increase in the number of working people f alling through the cracks. The prime minister and his economic team have played up the regime`s commitment to `daily wagers` but a recent Unicef report confirmed that 23 million Pakistani children between five and 16 years are currently out of school.  
  
Meanwhile, the pandemic has thrust mil-lions into poverty overnight, a fact that cannot be offset by what is still a limited rollout of the Ehsaas cash transfer scheme.  
  
In case anyone has forgotten, Pervez Musharraf`s regime relied on `Big Men` like the Chaudhrys whilst also cultivat-ing foreign investors and big business within Pakistan. It did not last, because domestic opponents frozen out of the power equation and foreign patrons alike changed tack.  
  
There is little to suggest that the current regime has a plan beyond appealing to foreign legions and offering the usual suspects within the polity a share of the spoils. It is currently obsessing about and trying to stave of f the PDM. What it isn`t even paying attention to is the Pakistani youth, including those from relatively affluent backgrounds, coming out in protest.  
  
In recent days, medical students have joined droves of private university fee-payers up in arms about the conduct of tests in enclosed examination halls while Covid-19 cases skyrockets. Many will be on the streets of cities across Pakistan today to demand rights, representation and a government that can commit to securing their futures. They too, like so many others, are discovering that this regime is old wine in new bottles.  The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.