**Forced Migration and Hope**

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For the past two decades, our beloved Pakistan has witnessed changes in government through the democratic process. However, the economic condition remains in disarray, and political stability is elusive. The need to secure successive IMF bailout packages, which entail “difficult decisions” for the public, has resulted in widespread hopelessness. Soaring fuel prices, with substantial bi-weekly increases, and the gradual rise in electricity and gas tariffs have made a decent standard of living a distant dream for the middle class, not to mention the lower-middle class and the poor.
Making ends meet becomes increasingly impossible for the people of our beloved country, Pakistan, with each passing day. Unfortunately, skilled and educated individuals are left with a few bitter choices. They can either stay stuck where they are, hoping for better days, or send their children abroad in search of scholarships or better job opportunities. The latter seems to be the more viable option for many, given the numerous challenges they face in their homeland. According to the Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment, in 2022, 832,339 Pakistanis went abroad for employment. In 2023, the number has reached 633,108 as of September and is expected to surpass the previous year’s figure. It’s worth noting that the number of students going abroad for scholarships is also on the rise, not included in this figure. For reference, this year, Pakistan’s share of Erasmus Mundus scholarships, according to the Higher Education Commission, is 198, the highest in seven years, continuing an upward trend that began with 46 students in 2017.
While the increasing number of scholarships is encouraging, the issue of students settling abroad for better opportunities and not returning to the country is worrisome. This poses a significant dilemma for aging parents in Pakistan. Parents with multiple children can afford to send one or more abroad for a brighter future, whether for job opportunities or scholarships. They can keep one child close to them to take care of them. However, for those with only one child, the struggle intensifies. In these economically challenging times with rising inflation and unemployment, seeing their educated yet jobless child is a source of agony for aging parents. This is why it is often termed “forced migration,” as no one wants to leave their homeland, family, and friends. It’s a difficult choice driven by the hope of returning when better days arrive.
Even if one’s child has a job, either in the public or private sector, the salaries do not align with education and experience, nor do they keep up with the ever-increasing inflation. Being the sole breadwinner of a nuclear family has become increasingly stressful. Job competition grows with a surplus of university graduates, and there are not enough jobs offered by the government or the private sector. However, nepotism and alleged corruption in job allocation exacerbate the situation. The emotional toll of feeling left behind, underemployed, distanced from friends, and entangled in bureaucracy increases the sense of being a lesser citizen in a country governed by the elite and privileged class. This anguish is hard to put into words.
To make matters worse, government proposals to freeze pensions and reduce gratuities for retiring employees add to the mental trauma for government employees. These proposals, coupled with economic distress and the country’s unstable political situation, increase people’s uncertainty about their future. They are unsure how they will manage post-retirement expenses, such as their children’s weddings or owning a home. All these worries take a toll on their health, and managing it with medicine shortages, fluctuating prices, and stressed healthcare facilities is a separate story for another day.
In summary, it may seem like our youth are hoping against hope to stay the course and work hard, anticipating better days ahead. The hope for decreased inflation, increased job opportunities, improved healthcare, and the rule of law, while living with their families and progressing simultaneously, appears to be fading. However, every cloud has a silver lining, and despite these discouraging circumstances, there are people in Pakistan who continue to give their best and hold onto hope until better days arrive, and one day, they will be proud of it.