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Fit Shave... ever!



  
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# Bracing for tougher days ahead

Shahid Hussain

The revival of the \$6b International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme is being seen as a great achievement by the government for its commitment to key governance and economic reforms to support sustainable growth for job creation and poverty alleviation. For it, the government had to make tough adjustments and their effects will come to the fore in a few months.

The government says it has taken some “difficult” decisions to revive the economy but the common people have been crushed by rising prices of essentials, electricity, gas and medicines. If the first half term of the PTI government was the worst for their household budgets, the coming weeks and months too do not promise any relief to them. Pakistan’s economy slowed down drastically when it had entered the IMF programme in 2019. Millions of people had lost jobs even before the onset of the pandemic and inflation reached an unprecedented level in the country as a consequence of the decisions. The government has again taken tough decisions to stabilise the economy ahead of the revival of the package, which was put on hold last year because of the pandemic. The new measures include a steep hike in electricity tariffs, imposition of Rs140b taxes and agreeing to grant unprecedented autonomy to the State Bank of Pakistan and their fallout would not be different from what people have already suffered.

While approving \$500 million to support the budget and revive its programme for Pakistan, the IMF appreciated the authorities for making continued satisfactory progress under its programme, which it called an important policy anchor during an unprecedented period following the pandemic. “Fiscal performance in the first half of FY 2021 was prudent, providing targeted support and maintaining stability. Going forward, further sustained efforts, including broadening the revenue base, carefully managing spending and securing provincial contributions, will help achieve a lasting improvement in public finances and place debt on a downward path,” the IMF observed.

In return for the revival of the IMF package, the government has committed to generating more than Rs700 billion in additional revenues through general sales tax and income tax in the coming budget, increase power tariff by over 34pc (about Rs900b) and withdraw Rs140b worth of corporate income taxes through promulgation of two ordinances. It means people will start paying a heavy price for the new measures in the next few months. Life after the next budget will be even tougher.

Inflation is expected to increase in the weeks to come. According to the State Bank of Pakistan, recent hikes in electricity tariffs and sugar and wheat prices account for about 1.5 percentage points of the 3 percentage point increase in inflation between January and February out-turns. The recent increase in electricity prices will continue to manifest in headline numbers in coming months, keeping average inflation in FY21 close to the upper end of the previously announced range of 7-9 percent, it observed. Noting uncertainty around inflation and the growth outlook, the central bank warned that despite recent momentum, risks remain due to the emergence of a third, more virulent wave of COVID-19 in Pakistan. In terms of the inflation outlook, this summer’s wage negotiations and any new tax measures in the next year’s budget could add further supply-side shocks. Optimism about a stronger US-led world recovery this year is translating



into higher international commodity prices, including both food and oil, which could continue to feed into domestic inflation, the SBP warned.

According to the Sensitive Price Indicator (SPI), inflation for the week ending on March 4, 2021, increased by over 0.6pc as compared to the last week of February. It is despite tall claims by the government that inflation is under control. The SPI for the week recorded nearly 148 points against 147 points registered in the last week of February. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), prices of just five items decreased whereas 22 items showed a consistent uptick in rates. Moreover, prices of 24 items persistently remained at the same high levels with no respite for the common consumer. Generally, prices of essentials skyrocket ahead of Ramazan, which will start after a few weeks.

Experts fear Pakistan’s economic challenges have been compounded by several factors. One is its failing state-owned enterprises. The domestic debt of the companies — which include Pakistan’s national airline and railway — increased by nearly 250pc between 2013 and 2018, and they continue to borrow heavily. To add to public woes, the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority has asked the government to increase prices for gas consumers. If electricity and gas prices are increased further, it will become unbearable for the common man, who already finds it hard to make both ends meet. The opposition will also attempt to exploit the situation. Doubts had been raised about the ability of the PTI government to fix the economy. It has proved them true.

Risks to the economy still persist even after making harsh adjustments. Lack of political consensus, instability in prices, rallies by the opposition, rising inflation, low collection of revenue and trade deficit are still major challenges to the economy. The recent reports indicate that the next few years could be even harsher for the people of Pakistan. The government may have put the economy on the right path, but it has not benefited the people. The government has added to their problems by not taking action against people who create artificial price hikes. It will have to act now to address rising unrest among the people.

# The collapse of PDM

Nasim Ahmed

The opposition's Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) alliance is in deep trouble. The PPP's refusal to submit en bloc resignations is a big setback to the PDM, which had to call off the March 26 long march against the government.

Resigning from the assemblies is not an easy option for the PPP. The party always had the most to lose among its allies in the PDM. After all, it has a stake in the current set-up, including the Sindh government. Now that push has come to shove, the PPP has made its stand crystal clear.

It is now clear that the PDM decided to postpone its anti-government long march owing to serious differences over submitting resignations. Certainly, the rift in the alliance does

not make for good optics, and government ministers are having a field day proclaiming the "demise" of the PDM, once again.

Their delight, however, may be short-lived. Alliances, like the PDM, composed of parties with interests broadly falling along the same arc but varying in their particulars, often suffer some discord along the way. Nor are such divergent political unions uncommon in our country. Even the anti-PPP Pakistan National Alliance, aside from several right-wing parties, also included the progressive National Democratic Party. When cracks appear, strategies must be revised to keep an alliance intact.

The PML-N, fighting with its back to the wall, seems to be caught between two extremes and seems to have been greatly demoralised by the latest development. On the one hand is Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who has nothing to lose in the current set-up and, therefore, linked the resignations to the long march in an attempt to pressure the other component parties. On the other hand is Asif Ali Zardari, a shrewd politician, who will only do what serves him or his party's interests.

Indeed, it is worth asking whether a "go slow" in the PDM campaign promises some advantage to the PPP. In the Senate election in March, Yusuf Raza Gilani won the coveted Islamabad seat, a victory ascribed by the PDM to the establishment's "neutrality". However, the elections to the top Senate offices have jolted the PDM out of its complacency. The PPP leadership is also not sure which way the wind will blow if early elections are held.

While the opposition alliance is well within its rights to call for early elections, to do so halfway through the PTI's tenure can be considered unreasonable, even a non-starter, given that poll rigging allegations are a staple in our country. Compounding the challenge, the establishment for its own reasons is evidently still backing the same horse. Without its support, a change in the political set-up is unlikely. While the PDM may want to reflect on whether it created unrealistic expectations among the public regarding its capacity to bring down the government, the PTI for



now has reasons to celebrate.

PML-N leaders appear confident that Shahbaz Sharif will soon get bail. Hamza Shahbaz is already back in the political saddle after spending two years in jail and is busy surveying the current political situation. Maryam Nawaz, without doubt, has galvanized the PML-N base during the last six months and holds the reins of the party firmly. However, the implosion of the PDM — at the expense of the PML-N — may force the party leadership to pursue a different line of action, perhaps even within the larger umbrella of the Nawaz Sharif narrative.

JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman finds himself in a tight spot. While the parliamentary game in the past few weeks was the PPP's forte, the long march was supposed to be the Maulana's time in the sun. Through the parliamentary game, the PPP got Yusuf Raza Gilani elected as a senator. It got some of what it wanted (the Senate chairman election remains open-ended till it has run its full legal course). The Maulana did not even get crumbs as his candidate for the deputy chairman was pummeled in numbers by the government candidate.

Now that the Maulana's long march and resignations have been taken away from him, he will require a new trick or two to hang on to a semblance of relevance for the near future. He may have some options if the PML-N surges ahead with its hardline narrative, but if Nawaz Sharif also has second thoughts on his current strategy, the Maulana may find himself the biggest casualty of the PDM implosion.

The ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) is happy with all these developments. However, it has merely survived. With the PDM fading into the background for now, the PTI's internal weaknesses will come into sharp focus. The PDM chapter may be closing, but the political battle is still not over. The PDM may fine-tune its strategies to calm down the PPP and thus enhance its impact. The PDM will appease the PPP by not resigning in Sindh but may increase pressure steadily by resigning stepwise from the PTI-majority assemblies to deprive them of their legitimacy.

# India's hegemonic designs

Nasim Ahmed

It is no secret that the Narendra Modi-led BJP's government is pursuing an expansionist and hegemonic policy designed to ensure India's dominance in South Asia and eclipsing the sovereignty of all neighbouring countries.

In order to achieve its nefarious designs of pushing its neighbouring states to the wall, Delhi is brazenly following the fascist, supremacist, and the racist doctrine of RSS that strongly believes in intimidating and bullying not only its own marginalised communities but also its neighbouring states.

Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal are on the top of the list of the countries for which India seems to be putting in all its efforts to hit them inside their territories. In fact, the doctrine of RSS is deeply rooted in the philosophy of Hitler and Chanakya, who is known as "Indian Machiavelli". Before his death, Chanakya had written the Sanskrit exposition "Arthashastra", a merciless empire-controlling guidebook.

Written around 18,00 years before Machiavelli was even born, Chanakya's Arthashastra propagates the "Raj Mandala", a model which suggests the adoption of deceptive ways and means, by the dint of which a king could rule his state and deal with neighbouring states tactfully. The model was based on collusion, acquisition, alliance or destruction through misinformation, spies, poisoning and assassinations in coping with individuals as well as nations. Chanakya had advised the king in Arthashastra that never let the neighbours live in peace. "Keep pestering them all the time. If the neighbouring state is a weak one, employ all deceiving methods to devour the state as soon as possible".

It's now a proven fact that Delhi, under the BJP government, is a friend to none, not even to its own people. India's skirmishes with Bangladesh, China, Nepal and hot borders with Pakistan are ample proof of the fact that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is badly suffering from the hallucination of "Akhand Bharat"--- a greater India encompassing India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and islands in the Indian Ocean.

Being an atomic power, Pakistan has always been a major impediment to the fulfillment of Delhi's hegemonic and fascist designs in the region. Islamabad has always sought to strengthen its relations with its neighbours on the basis of mutual respect and equality. It has never bowed before India and bravely fought three major wars with it. That's why Delhi has made Pakistan a major target of its conspiracies.

In a bid to sideline Pakistan, not only has India made the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) impotent, but also formed the Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation platform that keeps Pakistan away from it. However, in spite of all of its efforts, Delhi has not yet been able to keep Pakistan at bay. Pakistan has constantly been playing its effective role in maintaining regional peace and security.

Meanwhile, Amit Shah, the Minister of Home Affairs of India and the national leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the rightwing fascist and extremist group responsible for shaping the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, has lately divulged that having successfully established and stretched the RSS network throughout India, its leadership is all set to expand its footprint in Nepal and Sri Lanka too. Thus, RSS' plans to infuse its ideology of Hindutava in the minds of the Hindu population living in both countries stand badly exposed.

The recent comments of the chief minister of India's Tripura state, Bi-



plab Deb, that Union Home Minister Amit Shah has plans to establish the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governments in Nepal and Sri Lanka have elicited severe criticism in both countries. The Nepalese media says the RSS plan to expand its influence in the Himalayan nation is not acceptable to the Nepalese people. Nepal has expressed anger and shock over Amit Shah's statement and lodged a formal complaint with New Delhi.

In reality, the BJP not only wants to instill the doctrine of fascist, extremist, ethnic prejudice and hate crime of Hindutava in the Hindu population of the two countries to expand its influence in the region, but is also bent upon toppling the governments in the states.

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, the Indian border forces are involved in a spree of killings along the border with Bangladesh for a long time. Scores of Bangladeshi people have lost their lives at the hands of the Indian forces. Even though Delhi always portrays Pakistan as a destabilizing factor behind cross-border terrorism, the reality is otherwise. As a matter of fact, India's increasingly strained relationship with its neighbouring countries, especially China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, establishes the hard fact that it is actually India that is a destabilizing factor for the peace and tranquility of South Asia.

In the meantime, India has unleashed a reign of terror in Illegally Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Since the illegal annexation of the valley, the Indian army has stepped up its inhuman and barbaric operations in the region, killing a large number of people and injuring many others. Numerous incidents of rape of women of all ages are a big slur on the face of Delhi claiming to be the biggest champion of democracy.

India's nefarious designs against Pakistan are not a secret. Just to win the election, receiving orders from Modi, the Indian air force attacked the Balakot region of Pakistan in 2019, with its fighter jets dropping Israeli-made Spice-2000 missiles. However, Pakistan gave a befitting response by shooting down its Mig-21 and arresting its pilot Abhinandan.

On the one hand, Modi lied to his nation that China had not made advancement in Ladakh and, on the other, taking advantage of the standoff with China, India has increased its defence budget by 7 percent. It has allocated \$67 billion for military buildup. It is time the world took notice of the expansionist designs of India which has put the peace of South Asia as well as the world at stake.

# Third wave deepens uncertainties

Muhammad Hassan

New fears about a loss of lives and livelihoods are growing after restrictions have been reimposed in the wake of a third wave of the coronavirus. It is feared the resurgence in the pandemic could be more devastating than the first two waves as people continue to defy SOPs, while positivity rates have increased to over 14pc in some cities of Pakistan.

Campuses, which were closed earlier due to high positivity rates, will remain shut until April 11. It means thousands of teachers and staff of private schools will have to live without salaries for another month as there is no mechanism to support them, either from their own institutions or the government. According to the new guidelines, education institutes, which were earlier closed on March 15 for two weeks, will remain closed in COVID-19 hotspots until April 11. Ninth, matriculation and intermediate exams will be held as per the schedule announced by education boards. However, students of O/A-level remain uncertain about their future.

According to the latest data, the number of COVID-19 active cases has almost doubled in Pakistan in a few weeks, while the national positivity ratio has remained above 8pc, which is unprecedented in the country. Prime Minister Imran Khan also tested positive for COVID-19, two days after he was vaccinated. He set a bad example for not following SOPs, while he appealed to the common people to observe precautions. It also raised questions about the efficacy of the vaccine. It will discourage people from getting vaccinated, though experts offer many explanations for it.

It is a fact that most people do not want to be vaccinated for different reasons. President Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Imran Khan's pictures getting the vaccination appeared in the media to encourage elderly people to get a jab, as the country has begun vaccinating citizens over the age of 60. Only 300,000 people aged over 60 have registered to receive the vaccine. The senior citizens have been instructed to register themselves using their National Identity Card numbers via SMS. After their details are verified against a government database, they are issued instructions on when and where to receive the vaccine. Vaccine recipients are asked to remain on-site at the vaccination centres for roughly 30 minutes after receiving the vaccine to monitor for any side-effects.

Another reason for most people not interested in the vaccination and observing SOPs is that the pandemic has not been as harmful in Pakistan as it was in other countries of the world. According to government data, the rate of severe disease and death in Pakistan has been far lower as compared with many European and other countries, including its neighbours. However, the infection rate has been rising over a few weeks, which may harm people seriously.

The government has reimposed broader lockdowns, with no mobility except for emergencies, in 10 cities where the positivity ratio is over 8pc. They are Islamabad, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, Peshawar, Swat and Muzaffarabad. The positivity rate in Peshawar exceeded 14pc a few weeks ago. The government earlier implemented a policy of smart lockdowns in which people had liberty to move. However, according to the new policy, residents of the areas concerned will be informed about the duration of lockdowns and suggested to store edibles. People will not be able to move freely, except for emergencies. Edibles will be provided at their doorsteps, through online services. The government has also decided to close commercial activities by 8pm and



ban all types of indoor gatherings — cultural, musical and religious. Two safe days a week will also be observed. Inter-city public transport will operate at 50pc and rail service at 70pc capacity. Complete closure of amusement parks will be ensured and reduced presence would be observed in all courts. Stringent protocols for tourism will also be followed in Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Azad Kashmir and other tourist places.

Pakistan suffered huge economic losses despite tackling the health challenge most successfully as compared to regional and other countries of the world. The deaths in Pakistan are negligible as compared to other countries. However, Pakistan's economy and poor people are set to suffer in the third wave of pandemic. According to data released by the government, the pandemic caused a loss of over Rs3 trillion to the national income last year and the situation is not certain this year either. The provision of smooth food supplies and a check on their prices will be a big challenge for the government if the situation worsens.

People are worried about the possible shortage of essentials and their rising prices after they had to face the ordeal in the wake of the pandemic last year. Inflation has already risen and the central bank has warned that it could rise beyond the target set for the current fiscal year. The International Monetary Fund has estimated that Pakistan's inflation may jump up to 13pc, but the government's estimate is between 11pc and 13pc for the current fiscal year.

The pandemic is also feared to hit Pakistan's ranking on the Global Hunger Index, which is constantly on the decline. The latest poverty estimates show that 24pc of Pakistan's population lives below the poverty line. If the rot is not stopped, Pakistan will face serious challenges to feed its growing population in future. In a report, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) said Pakistan was among three Asian countries where the rate of undernourishment due to poverty was the highest. The highest rates of undernourishment in 2017 were observed in Afghanistan (29.8pc), Timor-Leste (24.9pc), and Pakistan (20.3pc), the ADB reported in the 50th edition of its annual statistical report.

Experts say a high population growth rate and unfavourable water and climatic conditions in the country mean that concerns about food security may increase manifold over the next two to three decades. The coronavirus epidemic poses challenges which require short-term solutions.

# Towards a green Pakistan

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan's efforts for a green future are being recognised by international organisations. However, it is the beginning of a long journey to save marginalised groups, which are facing serious food insecurity and loss of livelihoods from climate change.

Pakistan is ranked among top 10 countries of the world, which were most affected by climate change in the past 20 years. It has lost 0.53pc per unit GDP, suffered economic losses worth \$3.8 billion and witnessed 152 extreme weather events from 1999 to 2018. According to international estimates, it needs between \$7 billion and \$14 billion per year for climate adaptation. International studies point out that losses from climate change are compounding with the passage of time. Pakistan is likely to become the most adversely affected country in the South Asian region, a study by the World Climate Research Programme and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology says. In the next 60 to 80 years, the temperature in the northern areas of Pakistan is expected to increase by six degrees. The high temperatures will have an immediate impact on glaciers. The ice will melt rapidly causing floods not only in villages but also in big cities. This may also lead to extreme climatic conditions, such as heavy rainfalls and massive droughts.

It is feared that the aggregate impact of climatic parameters, such as changes in the temperature and rainfall, exerted an overall negative impact on cereal crop yields, given that the management practices and use of technology remain unchanged. Modeling of climate change scenarios for Pakistan shows that if agriculture and water management in the Indus River Basin continue in a business as usual mode, increasing temperatures and changes in precipitation will pose serious threats to the future livelihoods of farmers and to the Pakistani agricultural sector, the Economic Survey of Pakistan noted. In the Karakoram region, which contains the major proportion of Pakistani glaciers, there is evidence that most of the glaciers are advancing. The Khurdopin glacier and Shisper glacier surged down the hill at extremely fast rates, causing a blockade to a flowing stream, forming a temporary lake with an outburst risk. On the other hand, some areas, especially in the Hindukush mountain range (Chitral and western Gilgit), the Chitaboo glacier in Chitral retreated rapidly in recent years due to global warming. With more than 7,000, Pakistan has more glaciers than anywhere except the polar regions. But climate change is "eating away Himalayan glaciers at a dramatic rate," a study published in the Science Advances journal noted. As glacier ice melts, it can collect in large glacial lakes, which are at risk of bursting their banks and creating deadly flash floods downstream in places like Hassanabad. More than 3,000 of those lakes had formed by 2018, with 33 of them considered hazardous and more than 7 million people at risk downstream, according to the UNDP.

Past governments in Pakistan ignored the issue but Prime Minister Imran Khan has launched initiatives to offset the effects of climate change. He plans to establish 15 national parks in different parts of the country under his "Green Stimulus" project aimed at covering an area of over 7,300 sq km, stretching from the mountainous region in the north to the scrub forests in the plains and a marine protected area in the south. He has also launched a five-year campaign to plant 10 billion trees. The World Eco-



omic Forum (WEF) has also appreciated Pakistan's environmental policies, climate action plan, and response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic in a video. It highlights the three ways in which Pakistan is moving ahead towards a greener future. "Pakistan has pledged to source 60pc of its energy from renewable sources by 2030," it says. It also acknowledged Pakistan's efforts for the creation of 15 new national parks. "As the pandemic devastates the globe, and climate change threatens our way of life, our relationship with nature demands us to rethink," the video concludes.

In its February 2021 report, the WEF appreciated the Pakistan government's green agenda. Over the past few months, while many countries grappled to come to terms with the pandemic, Pakistan was willing to think ahead and act out of the box – sensing a silver lining emerge around this black cloud of confusion and uncertainty. The government's green agenda, built upon the successful implementation of the Billion Tree Tsunami (2014-18), had already accepted the premise that nature-based solutions not only protect and preserve nature but also have the potential to spur an alternate green economy. More importantly, it had effectively created the launch pad for a directional shift of the economy towards sustainable growth. Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity and Pakistan seized it to break out of the depression and reboot a stressed economy with a "Green Stimulus" focused on two objectives: protecting nature and creating green jobs. The focal areas for intervention included planting more trees, expanding and reviving protected areas and improving urban sanitation – all of which could generate quick employment while also allowing the country to come out of the crisis on a nature-positive pathway, it noted.

According to the WEF, Pakistan has carved out an opportunity amidst the crisis, through rebooting the economy with a green stimulus and putting its faith in four diverse nature based financial instruments – all premised on the belief that the economic framework of the 20th century will not get us through the 21st century. Nature is demanding a rethink and Pakistan has heeded the call. However, long and persistent efforts are needed to tackle the environment issue and all future governments will have to focus on it for desired results.

# PDM's crash

Muhammad Zain

The so-called Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) of the opposition has fallen apart after threatening the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan for months. The collapse was not unexpected because rifts existed in the 11-party alliance over resignations from assemblies and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) could have been the biggest loser if it had accepted the demand of other allies, which have no stake in the system. However, the government still faces huge challenges to reduce inflation, unemployment and improve governance to provide meaningful relief to people.

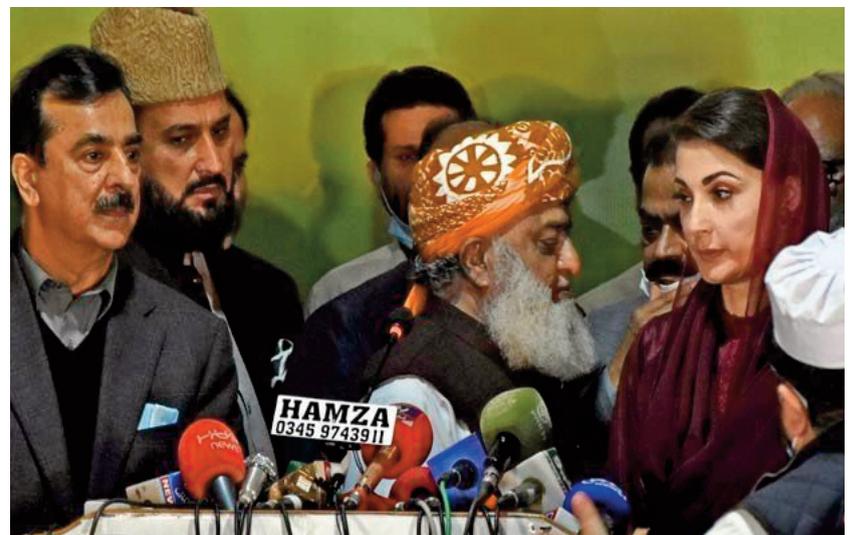
All allies wanted the PPP to leave the Sindh government before launching a “long march” on Islamabad against the federal government. It is obvious that PDM head Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) supremo Nawaz Sharif and other opposition parties and their leaders have no stake in the system and they want to disrupt it at any cost. They fear their interests will be badly hurt and they would have to face corruption cases if the system remains intact. They are even targeting the establishment and courts for personal gains. Like Nawaz Sharif, Fazlur Rehman’s open agenda is to force Prime Minister Imran Khan to resign and announce fresh elections through efforts to malign national institutions and put pressure on them.

Ousting Prime Minister Imran Khan is Fazlur Rehman’s personal agenda, because he believes his politics cannot flourish in his presence. He had also alleged massive rigging in the 2008 and 2013 elections but accepted their results happily because he was offered a role in the government by the PPP and the PML-N. He also contested the presidential election after the 2013 election but resorted to agitation when he failed to claw back into the power corridors.

The opposition alliance, under Fazl, started an anti-government movement with impressive public gatherings. It also won almost all by-polls and embarrassed the government with the victory of its candidate in the Senate for an Islamabad general seat, which forced Prime Minister Imran Khan to take a fresh vote of confidence from the National Assembly. However, the government turned the table on the opposition in the election for the Senate chairman and deputy chairman. The election sharpened rifts among the major component parties in the opposition.

The PDM had planned to launch an anti-government “long march” on March 26, but it was postponed because the PPP was not willing to resign from assemblies and other allies believed the protest would be ineffective without en bloc resignations. The PML-N also thinks the PPP has benefited from the PDM struggle, while it could not make substantial gains from it, except winning a few by-elections. On the other hand, the PPP leadership believes the PML-N wants to use its resignations for the personal benefits of its leaders. Veteran politician Aitzaz Ahsan said Nawaz Sharif wanted the PPP legislators to resign and its leaders to go to jail while his own party was not willing to step down and he himself was staying abroad. Fazlur Rehman left a press conference hurriedly after announcing the postponement of the “long march”, expressing his anger and frustration at the PPP, which he believed had betrayed the opposition. On the other hand, the PPP had never promised to resign from assemblies, even though it said the resignations would be “nuclear weapons”.

The opposition alliance appears to have lost steam, but it still can



mount pressure on the government by holding a “long march,” which can even last for a few days. However, the PPP may avoid it because it has never been in its favour for many reasons. Some analysts believe Fazlur Rehman is acting on an offensive policy against national institutions to extract some space for himself and other opposition parties. The PML-N and the PPP chose Fazlur Rehman as their leader for his ability to use religion in politics. He is the true representative of the ideology of Nawaz Sharif. Like Nawaz Sharif, he has no stake in the system and no fear to lose. He wants to use all options for his political gains. He will not even hesitate from dividing the nation on sectarian lines. He will continue to target national institutions to achieve his political ambitions because he thinks it is the only option left for him. According to government ministers, two Muslim countries and India are funding the movement to pave the way for Nawaz Sharif’s return to Pakistan and quash cases against him.

It appears the opposition’s protest movement will not be able to force the government to step down and hold fresh elections. On the other hand, Senate elections have taken place and the PTI has become the largest party in the House, displacing the PML-N. It has also solved the ruling party’s problem to pass laws in the Upper House, which was earlier controlled by the opposition. The government may not have won a majority in the Senate, but it is in a position now to call sessions of both Houses together to pass laws, which it has not been able to do since its installation. In this way, Prime Minister Imran Khan can reform the system and improve governance.

At the time, the biggest challenge to the government comes from its inability to solve public issues. High prices and unemployment are the biggest issues facing the common people. The government has miserably failed to address them. In fact, it has compounded them with its inaptness and bad governance. It has completed over a half of its term and it is still groping in the dark. It is disheartening to listen to the prime minister, who says he needed many months to understand the issues of the country and people. He should have prepared himself for it when he was in the opposition. However, he still has time to improve his performance and serve people.

# Pakistan-India thaw

Shahid Hussain

Efforts for peace between Pakistan and India have come to the fore after remaining behind the scenes for months. Though both sides have expressed their resolve to de-escalate tension, yet results will start appearing after concerted efforts for years and decades.

The statements of leaderships of both countries show the process to normalise relations between the two nuclear-armed neighbours had started when tension between them was too high to even think of it. When Pakistan's military and political leaders offered a hand of friendship to all neighbours, nobody thought India would respond to it positively. However, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Pakistan Day message to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan came as a pleasant surprise to many people on both sides of the border and it could pave the way for improved relations between the two countries. It is a great achievement that the two sides have started taking careful steps after years of tense relationship. Earlier, the two sides had hinted at improving relations when they announced a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) last month. They have also started talks to discuss the sharing of Indus waters, the most serious issue between them after Kashmir.

Many rumours are doing the rounds about the efforts to normalise relations between the two countries. Some say the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had brokered the ceasefire while others believe the US, under the Biden administration, is playing a role in de-escalating tension in the region for peace in Afghanistan. According to some analysts, China also wanted improved relations between the two countries for the success of its regional and international economic plans. Despite the theories, it is a fact that peace would most benefit Pakistan and India and their people. According to a US media report, the UAE had brokered the February 25 Pakistan-India ceasefire. "The Pakistan-India ceasefire marked a milestone in secret talks brokered by the UAE that began months earlier, according to officials aware of the situation who asked not to be identified. The ceasefire, one said, is only the beginning of a larger roadmap to forge a lasting peace between the neighbours," it claimed. The next step in the process involves both sides reinstating envoys in Islamabad and New Delhi, who were pulled out 2019 after Pakistan protested India's move to revoke seven decades of autonomy for Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K). Then comes the hard part: Talks on resuming trade and a lasting resolution on Kashmir, the subject of three wars since Pakistan and India became independent from Britain in 1947, according to Bloomberg.

However, expectations are still low that the current detente would achieve much beyond the return of envoys and a resumption of trade through the Punjab land border. But the process appears to be the most concerted effort in years, and comes as the Biden administration is seeking wider peace talks on Afghanistan. The UAE, which has historic trade and diplomatic links with Pakistan and India, has taken a more assertive international role under Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. It has also "look towards Asia" policy as it strengthens political alliances beyond its role as a global trade and logistics hub. Several clues over the past few months pointed at the UAE's role. In November, Jaishankar met bin Zayed, the crown prince on a two-day visit to Abu Dhabi, followed by Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi the following month. Roughly two weeks before the February 25 announcement, the UAE foreign minister held a phone call with Prime Minister Imran Khan "wherein they discussed regional and international issues of interest." And just days before,



India allowed Imran Khan's aircraft to fly over Indian airspace as he headed to Sri Lanka for a state visit — a practice suspended since the 2019 hostilities, according to the report.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent a tweet wishing Imran Khan well after he was diagnosed with COVID-19 -- another sign that relations between the countries are getting warmer. After the ceasefire, the UAE was one of a handful of countries to issue a statement welcoming the ceasefire announcement, highlighting the "close historical ties" it has with both Pakistan and India and hailing "the efforts made by both countries to come to the agreement."

Foreign media reports also said that India would be participating in joint anti-terror drills to be held in Pakistan under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The drills will be held in Pabbi, home of Pakistan's counter-terror school, and the decision to hold the exercises was announced during the 36th meeting of the Council of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on March 18. Besides India, China, Russia and other SCO states will also send their contingents to take part in the drills.

People in Pakistan got a hint when Prime Minister Imran Khan asked India to take the first step toward peace and resolve the Kashmir dispute in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions. Speaking at the opening session of the first Islamabad Security Dialogue conference, he said his government tried from the first day to resolve all outstanding issues with India, including Kashmir through dialogue, but "New Delhi went in the opposite direction. We want peace with India, but it must take the first step toward peace because we cannot move forward without it." The signal became clearer after Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa called on India and Pakistan to "bury the past" and move towards cooperation. He stressed that the burden was on India to create a "conducive environment" and said the United States had a role to play in ending regional conflicts. Then the Indian prime minister confirmed peace efforts continued between the two countries. In a tweet on Pakistan Day, he said, "As a neighbouring country, India desires cordial relations with the people of Pakistan. For this, an environment of trust, devoid of terror and hostility, is imperative." He also wished Pakistan well in dealing with the challenges of the pandemic. Earlier, he had sent good wishes to Prime Minister Khan when he tested positive for the coronavirus.

It is obvious that the messages of the leaders of the two countries point to lessening of tension. However, they have to really work hard to normalise ties as hawks on both sides could derail the peace process.

# Political impact of Senate elections and PDM putting off long march

Raza Khan

The recently held election for the Senate and the opposition parties' decision to postpone their much-touted "long march" are extremely important political developments, which would have far-reaching consequences for the corridors of power in the country.

The decision of the opposition parties' umbrella anti-government alliance, Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), to put on hold the long march, which it had announced for March 26, was quite expected and it was a direct consequence of the recently-held Senate election. In the election, the coalition government of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of Prime Minister Imran Khan not only got a near majority in the Upper House but was also able to elect its men as chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate of Pakistan. It was partly possible because some of the opposition members of provincial assemblies and afterwards Senators voted for the government candidates. It triggered a blame game among the opposition parties. In particular, the resignation from national and provincial assemblies had become a litmus test for the commitment of leaders of the PDM. Clearly, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) refused to comply with the demands of other parties, including the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), on the issue of resignations. The logic behind the PPP refusal was that the party has its government in Sindh province, the second largest among the federating units, and a good number of Senators. Whereas, the PML-N may have a large number of MPAs in the Punjab but it does not have a government there while the JUI-F has a miniscule representation in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies.

The argument of PDM head Fazl that there was no need for a long march without resignations is quite potent as it was the only way to put some irresistible pressure on the PTI government. However, it was like a political gamble that if the government had been able to resist the pressure, then the opposition parties would have lost their presence in the provincial and national legislative assemblies. Thus, with the postponement of the PDM would-be long march, the PTI government has gained a lot of strength and now it seems that it would be relatively easy for PM Imran Khan to complete his five-year tenure. Imran Khan has also started sensing that he now has an easy field to work on and, therefore, he said recently that it was the time for the government to deliver.

It is important to note that as the Senate election has improved the PTI's position politically, therefore, chances that the ruling party MPs would quit the party have become negligible. In fact, quitting the party or a change of political loyalties is proscribed under the relevant laws, like the Political Parties Act. One way of escaping the laws while changing political loyalties is the creation of a "forward bloc" by a sizable number of party MPs. There were apprehensions that scores of PTI MPs would vote against the party, especially when the ballot to elect Senators was constitutionally secret.

The win in the Senate and the vote of confidence by PM Imran Khan would have a strong impact on his coalition partners. The foremost reason is that the ruling alliance's MPs would now feel confident that their gov-

ernment is not going down and they don't need to change political loyalties. Similarly, the PTI's allied parties, like the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) and above all Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), would now realise that continued support to the PTI is more beneficial politically than to join the opposition ranks. The vote of confidence does have a very strong impact on political stability. When the March 12 elections for the Senate chairman and deputy chairman were held, Prime Minister Imran Khan's nominees, Senator Sadiq Sanjrani (from allied party BAP) and Mirza Afiridi (Independent), won despite the fact that the ruling alliance was short of a majority.

Noticeably, there have been rumours and proposals from the opposition and certain elements within the security establishment about replacing PM Khan with someone else from within the PTI as prime minister. In this connection, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, who is also the second-in-command in the PTI, has been mentioned. The opposition wanted to drive a wedge in the PTI as Qureshi has strong opposition within the party and arguably not that obstinate as has been Imran Khan on the issue of corruption by past governments, led by key figures of the PDM. Now analysts as well as the PTI MPs are of the view that there is no chance that PM Khan could be replaced by someone else from his party.

Arguably, the most important consequence of the Senate elections, the PM's fresh vote of confidence and the postponement of the PDM's long march would be curtailed chances of early elections. The probability of early elections in Pakistan is still there but it would depend upon different reasons. First, if the PDM succeeds in mounting irresistible pressure on the government through street protests. The opposition had already announced a long march from March 26 to bring down the PTI government, which has been put off. But the opposition can still go for it. In the situation, the security establishment would also decide whether to ask PM Khan to step down or not. There was also a possibility that PM Khan would resign. However, it could have been a political suicide at a time when the performance of his government leaves a lot to be desired.

The PDM has put off the long march, thus putting irresistible pressure on PM Khan now does not arise. In the situation, the security establishment cannot ask PM Khan to resign and call early elections.

Now the prospect of any patch-up between the PTI government and the PDM leadership has almost vanished. There is no possibility at all that PM Khan would give NRO-like relief to the opposition. He has himself time and again and unequivocally said that he would never give an NRO to the opposition. Although he is known for taking "U-turns" on his stated positions, yet one thinks that he would not compromise on the issue because he does not have a majority in the parliament and he cannot expect to win in the next elections by giving up the stand. Whatever support the PTI and Imran Khan have among Pakistanis is not due to his governance or performance but the belief that he is the most honest politician. The support base of Imran Khan is still quite intact in the public.

# Power struggle and future of Afghanistan

Raza Khan

As the future of Afghanistan as a nation state is now really at stake, another conference is being organised to address the seemingly unending conflict in the country. The outcome of the conference is unknown but if a great breakthrough is not achieved, violence in Afghanistan would exacerbate, making the United States to revoke its agreement with the insurgent Taliban to pull out all of its troops from the war-ravaged country after almost nearly 20 years.

The dialogue on the Afghanistan conflict is being held at Moscow in Russia, where representatives of the Afghan government, the Taliban, Pakistan, China and the United States are taking part. Russians obviously are also actively participating in the negotiations. It is important to mention that at the end of February 2020, an agreement between Washington and the Taliban was signed. According to the deal, the Taliban would cease violent activities and take part in an intra-Afghan dialogue with the Afghan government. In return, the US would pull out all of its troops from Afghanistan by May 2021. The deal was made by former US President Donald Trump. Since the change of guards in the US in January this year and the assumption of the office of President of the United States by Joe Biden, the Afghan peace deal's future has become uncertain.

The new US President Biden has announced that it would be very "tough" to pull out all of American troops from Afghanistan by the May deadline. Although he has not refused to withdraw all of its military personnel from Afghanistan, yet it appears that he would announce an extension in the deadline if some major development does not take place regarding peace in the country between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

In the situation, the holding of a conference to address the Afghan issue has become extremely important. In case no agreement for a future political set-up in Afghanistan is arrived at, then there would be a huge spike of violence in the country. Already, violence has exacerbated in Afghanistan with attacks on women, journalists, academics and other professionals.

On their part, the Taliban have asked Washington to honour its commitment and withdraw all of its troops from Afghanistan by May, otherwise they would be compelled to renew attacks on the American troops and installations. The Afghan government has been asking the US not to pull out its troops from Afghanistan unless there is a settlement with the insurgents. Thus, the main bone of contention between Kabul and the Taliban is the future political setup and the manner in which a new dispensation should come into existence. In other words, it is the distribution of power in Afghanistan to which the two sides disagree.

At the moment, there is also a proposal to establish an interim regime in Afghanistan with representation from all sides, including the government and the Taliban as well as minority ethnic groups, like Tajiks, Hazaras, Turkmen and Balochs. It is important to note that both President Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban top leadership are Pakhtoons, which is the largest and historically dominant ethnic group of Afghanistan. It is indeed an important proposal because unless there is an interim government in Afghanistan no future political set-up could be agreed upon.

The Taliban have been insisting on the pullout of the US troops from Afghanistan because they know that in terms of force and militant power they could defeat Afghan government troops, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). It is interesting that 300,000-strong ANSF personnel could not resist

the Taliban, who according to conservative estimates, number not more than 30,000. It is because there are profound disciplinary issues and lack of commitment on part of the ANSF personnel. Many ANSF generals have not been professional soldiers but are political or ethnic employees. The Afghan government has appointed the "generals" as a political bribe to anti-Taliban warlords and commanders. The Taliban expect that once the US troops and their airpower are not available to the ANSF, they would easily defeat the latter. Although this may not happen, yet according to the Taliban calculations many ANSF personnel would switch sides and join them.

The Taliban in Afghanistan really have a very strong support within the Afghan people and it has been the mainstay of the insurgents. Additionally, many people think that the Taliban have been fighting a war of national liberation against foreign troops. The Afghan government and ANSF personnel are considered by a large number of Afghans as US stooges. Therefore, they don't get the support of the Afghan public. It was profoundly realised by the Afghan establishment and it has been making negative propaganda against the Taliban. The Taliban, on their part, are also power seekers. Now it depends how they use power this time round if they get it. The problem of the Taliban is that they want power and don't want to share it with any other stakeholder. It is so because the Taliban are fundamentally a militant group instead of a political outfit. The leadership of the Taliban could not transform it into a political group.

The Taliban's insistence on the pullout of the US troops is matched by the partially representative Afghan government and particularly its civil servants to keep the Taliban out of the power corridors. A large number of civil servants comprise former communist-era officials, who became marginalised by coming to power of the Taliban (1996-2001). Since the ouster of the Taliban regime by the US-led International Security & Assistance Force (ISAF) in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the American mainland on September 9, 2001, the communist-era Afghan officials have come to dominate the Afghan establishment, particularly its security component. Thus, the officials are against the Taliban and their return to power, as they think, they would be singled out and even eliminated physically and there are strong fears of losing their jobs, at least. Thus the officials blame all the unrest on the Taliban, which is not true at all. Observably, the Taliban have not owned attacks in the last several months, including some really deadly strikes. The attacks on civilians have taken a heavy human toll. However, the Afghan officials put the blame of all the attacks on the Taliban despite many of them being owned by Daesh or the Islamic State.

The IS and the Taliban have been at daggers drawn in Afghanistan and there have been many deadly clashes between the two militant groups. There have been strong indications that many Afghan officials have links with the IS as they want to use the latter as a militant counterweight to the Taliban.

Against the backdrop, when the Taliban insist on the withdrawal of the US troops so that to militantly capture power to the exclusion of all other power stakeholders, possibly to have a new beginning by mending their old violent ways of ruling, and the Afghan establishment wants to keep the Taliban out of power, it is very difficult to find a peaceful settlement of the imbroglio. In the situation Afghan intellectuals and civil society groups should come forward to find a solution to the conflict.

# Between hopes and risks

Husnain Shahid

Pakistan's growth and employment continue to recover and business sentiment has improved after suffering an unprecedented contraction last year. However, the economy still faces serious risks from the pandemic and high international food and oil prices which may add to domestic inflation and woes of the common people.

Pakistan's Large-scale manufacturing (LSM) grew further by 10.8pc year-on-year in December 2020, and 9.1pc (year-on-year) in January 2021. Through the first seven months of FY21, LSM has grown by 7.9pc, compared to a contraction of 3.2pc during the same period last year. In agriculture, all major kharif crops, except cotton, surpassed production levels in FY20 and targets for FY21, and indicators of input conditions—such as tractor sales, fertiliser use, water availability, and weather—suggest strong prospects, especially for wheat, according to the State Bank of Pakistan.

Pakistan's current account deficit for February declined by 75pc year-on-year (YoY) and 76pc month-on-month to \$50 million, compared to a deficit of \$197m in Feb 2020, and \$210m last month. Total exports during the month jumped by 3pc to \$2.65b compared to \$2.58b in the previous month. Similarly, on a yearly basis, total exports increased by 8pc in Feb 2021, against \$2.46b in Feb 2020.

The flow of workers' remittances into Pakistan remained strong at above \$2 billion for the ninth successive month in February 2021, which helped the government maintain the country's foreign currency reserves at stable levels and strengthened its capacity to make international payments smoothly. The country received remittances worth \$2.26 billion in February, which was 24pc higher than \$1.82 billion in the same month of the previous year.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also completed the second, third, fourth and fifth reviews of the Extended Arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) for Pakistan and approved an immediate disbursement of \$500 million for Pakistan's budget support. IMF Deputy Managing Director Antoinette Sayeh said the Pakistani government had made satisfactory progress under the programme, which she termed an important policy anchor during an unprecedented period. "While the pandemic continues to pose challenges, government policies have been critical in supporting the economy and saving lives and livelihoods. The government also continued to advance its reform agenda in key areas, including consolidating central bank autonomy, reforming corporate taxation, bolstering management of state-owned enterprises, and improving cost recovery and regulation in the power sector," she noted.

According to the IMF, fiscal performance in the first half of the fiscal year 2020-21 was prudent, providing targeted support and maintaining stability. Sustained efforts by the government which included broadening the revenue base, managing its spending and securing contributions from provinces would help achieve a lasting improvement in public finances and place debt on a downward path. The current monetary stance is appropriate and supports the nascent recovery. Entrenching stable and low inflation requires a data-driven approach for future policy rate actions, further supported by strengthening of the State Bank of Pakistan's (SBP) autonomy and governance, it observed.

While acknowledging recent improvements, the IMF said further efforts were needed to remove structural impediments and strengthen economic



productivity and private investment. The efforts needed to include "measures to bolster the governance, transparency, and efficiency of the vast SOE sector; boost the business environment and job creation; and foster governance and strengthen the effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions. Also, completing the much-advanced action plan on Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) is essential, it noted.

The State Bank of Pakistan has also revised the country's economic growth rate upward to 3pc for the current fiscal year from its November 2020 target of 1.5–2.5pc in FY21 against 2.1pc set by the government. It noted that growth and employment continued to recover and business sentiment had further improved since January. "While still modest, at around 3pc, growth in FY21 is now projected to be higher than previously anticipated due to improved prospects for manufacturing and reflecting in part the monetary and fiscal stimulus provided during the pandemic," said the Monetary Policy Statement. According to SBP estimates, the recent increase in electricity tariffs and sugar and wheat prices accounts for about 1.5 percentage points of the 3 percentage point increase in inflation between January and February out-turns. A recent increase in electricity prices will continue to manifest in headline numbers in coming months, keeping average inflation in FY21 close to the upper end of the previously announced range of 7-9pc.

However, the SBP noted that despite recent momentum, risks remain due to the emergence of a third, more virulent wave of COVID-19 in Pakistan. In terms of the inflation outlook, the summer's wage negotiations and any new tax measures in the next year's budget could add further supply-side shocks. Optimism about a stronger US-led world recovery this year is translating into higher international commodity prices, including both food and oil, which could continue to feed into domestic inflation, it feared. Looking ahead, as the temporary increase in inflation from administered prices (wheat, sugar prices) wanes, inflation should fall to the 5-7pc target range, it hopes.

Undoubtedly, Pakistan's economic indicators are improving and even the IMF has been impressed with its performance. However, people continue to suffer from high prices, unemployment and mismanagement. The government has taken harsh measures to first qualify for and then revive IMF's \$6 billion programme after it remained suspended for over a year. The government has hiked electricity prices, imposed Rs140b new taxes and agreed to grant unprecedented autonomy to the central bank to revive the programme. The measures would add to the suffering of the people.

# The debate over trade liberalisation

Muhammad Jahangir

According to an international survey, Pakistan remains the least open country for trade in Asia and the second-last performer in the Morgan Stanley Capital International (MSCI) emerging markets group ahead of Brazil. The average in the MSCI emerging markets category is 72.7pc, while the Asian average hovers above 100pc. The survey report portrays a murky picture of Pakistan's trade status over the last two decades compared to China, India, and Bangladesh.

Pakistan's trade as a percentage of GDP is meagre. Growth has suffered as imports have surged uncontrollably while the exports remain stagnant. Hence, the overall trade ranges from 30pc to 40pc of GDP. The import-export FX corridor (trade balance) shrunk recently due to a curb on imports and may be short-lived until a long-term upturn in exports.

But the import restriction is not without its cost. It has made Pakistan compromise on growth. Its worst fallout is its trickle-down adverse implications on the employment level. It is because Pakistan imports machinery, minerals (petroleum), electrical and electronic equipment, and chemicals that aid industrial production. Besides, protectionist policies can have repercussions, like retaliatory measures by other countries. This is what led to the US-China trade war.

There is a strong argument in favour of limiting imports. It is said that Pakistan has adopted import substitution in order to support the local industries. This policy was adopted during the Ayub Khan-era and continued until it was replaced by export-led industrialisation in the early 1980s. Pakistan is still suffering from the effects resulting from the policy as it led to rent-seeking by local players and the citizens had to get along with inferior yet high-priced products. An example of it is the abysmal state of Pakistan's Japanese auto industry, whose products are bad in quality but high in prices.

The crux of pro-protectionists' argument is the increase in market share for the local industries, especially the SMEs. However, their contention remains erroneous. International exposure does expose businesses to foreign competitors, but it provides an opportunity for them to integrate into global value chains. This prompts innovation and accords them with a substantial market (within and beyond the borders) to tap.

International trade works on certain well-recognized principles. It is premised not on the ability to produce an output with lower inputs than other nations but on the appetite to forgo the least quantum of the other commodity for the sake of making another. Hence, countries use resources to produce goods they have a comparative advantage in and import ones in which others incur a lower opportunity cost. The net result is a supplementary quantity of all the outputs to consume, leaving the partaking parties better-off.

Needless to say, countries have a comparative advantage in certain commodities on the basis of variations in weather and resources. Some are richly endowed with a distinct natural resource while others possess inexpensive labour. This elucidates why the US exports aircraft, Saudi Arabia crude oil, and Brazil coffee.



There are many competing trade theories. Free trade proponents assert that trade openness promotes economic growth. On the other side, protectionists consider trade counterproductive to growth. Some also deduce a causal relationship, arguing that trade openness is a mere by-product of growth in the economy's real side, that is growth-led trade.

For relatively smaller economies, trade is more beneficial because the gains from comparative advantage are proportional to relative price differentials in the world market and relative prices in the home country without trade. The larger the difference, the greater the benefit for a country, and vice versa. For instance, Japan has an opportunity cost of \$5,000 for producing a vehicle while Pakistan has to forego \$15,000 for the same vehicle. The relative price for Japan to produce the car would range from \$5000 to \$15,000. On the contrary, the relative price in Pakistan's case has to be more than \$15,000. So, Pakistan would be worse-off if it continues to produce the car instead of importing it from Japan.

Another problem is that Pakistan has minimal trade with neighbours, like India and Iran. Our prime trading partners include the US, the UK, and Germany, which are located far away. This implies higher transportation costs. Moreover, Pakistan's labour has a dismal productivity level on an average. Pakistan's labour productivity not only lags behind its neighbours but also many poor African nations.

According to some experts, there is a strong case for trade liberalisation in order to push the growth momentum. Initially, the industries competing with foreign manufacturers will suffer and the workers employed in the sectors may lose their jobs. But in the long run, the economy will gain as our productive resources become more efficient and innovative to meet the challenge of international trade.

In economic terms, the interest groups, protected by successive governments for far too long, will suffer a decrease in their relative incomes. Hence, it is for the government to decide between siding with the special groups' interest or national interests.

# The growing threat of climate change

Muhammad Jahangir

Climate change is no longer an imaginary hobgoblin but a real threat. According to various international studies, South Asia is now facing a catastrophic challenge of climate change. It threatens to slow the region's economic growth, depress standards of living, increase the threat of devastation and death, and possibly even aggravate intraregional conflict. Some analysts call climate change a "catalyst for conflict."

Climate change is a worldwide phenomenon but South Asia is particularly vulnerable, because of the prevailing low standards of living, the continuing importance of agriculture for employment and the peculiar weather system created by the Himalayas and the warm, moist waters of the Indian Ocean.

It is estimated that the total climate change cost in South Asia will increase over time and would be excessively high in the long term. Resultantly, South Asia could lose an equivalent 10.8 per cent of its annual gross domestic product (GDP) by 2050, which will progressively increase to 8.8 per cent in later years.

Experts say if nothing is done to slow or reverse climate change, the global economy could lose 2.6 per cent per year by 2100. Scientific research has found a causal link between South Asia's brown cloud and the increased intensity of cyclones in the northern Indian Ocean region. Warmer seas will generate more and larger storms with severe adverse impact on economic growth. Higher temperatures eventually reduce yields of desirable crops while encouraging weed and pest proliferation.

There is a strong likelihood of short-run crop failures and long-run production declines, posing a serious threat to food security. Climate change can affect energy generation too – especially hydropower and thermal – and demand. Cyclones and floods damage infrastructure. The coastal fisheries, forests, salt, minerals, export processing, harbours and airports on the coastal zones are also at risk.

Worse still, climate change will increase the costs of production of essentials, like water, electricity and land for all domestic goods or exports, like garments. Livelihoods will become more precarious, especially in coastal areas and industries, like farming. Water, energy, and food supplies will become more uncertain – and possibly more costly.

Climate change will also affect the health sector. Deaths from dengue and malaria and other water-borne diseases are likely to rise, particularly during the monsoon months and extreme weather may force migration as people move to safer, more secure areas of their country. South Asia, like other regions, suffers from greenhouse emissions into the atmosphere from everywhere around the planet. The huge increase in air pollution across the subcontinent over the last 60 years has created a huge brown cloud of particulate matter over the region.

As is well known, India is already the world's third largest producer of greenhouse gases, and its carbon emissions are expected to more than triple within the next twenty years. Scientific research has found a causal link between South Asia's brown cloud and the increased intensity of cy-



clones in the northern Indian Ocean region. Warmer seas will generate more and larger storms. The storms, combined with higher sea levels and shallow marine topography, will increase the destructiveness of storm surges. Countries, like Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, are likely to be the most seriously affected.

It may be recalled here that the fifth report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that continued emission of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts.

All sectors of the economy must be prepared to withstand climate change. In agriculture, for example, new technologies such as rice cultivation systems with more efficient water and nutrient use should be promoted. Altering planting times, using resistant varieties, and diversifying crops can also help. Countries need to look at better management of resources and services. Better coastal zone management, efforts to protect river banks from erosion and building climate-proofed roads, bridges and other infrastructure is needed.

In the water sector, groundwater should be protected. Better water management and use of recycled water can also help. Better living conditions, better emergency responses, and better surveillance and monitoring of diseases are other remedial measures.

There is an urgent need for increased inter-nation cooperation to share resources and knowledge to meet the threat of climate change. More efficient regional economic diversification can create entirely new patterns and supporting infrastructure to tackle the emerging situation. We can build resilience to the impacts of climate change by identifying the risks and vulnerabilities of different sectors and putting in place mitigation measures that are environmentally sound.

# How virus has changed vital educational norms

Rasheed Ali

Ms. Rabia Ahmad Ali wonders how only one year could change decades-old education systems and crucial pedagogical norms on such a large scale. She feels the current COVID-19 pandemic has affected our education system, teaching methodology and traditions as well as the learning processes to the core.

She is a Chemistry teacher at a private college system on Wahdat Road of Lahore. Till March last year, teaching a class used to be the most cherished activity for her. Due to her keen observation and curious nature, she would come to know about almost all necessary information about her students in the first two, three weeks of the start of a new class. She would recognise them by their names; she would be aware of their ways of studies, their behaviour in the classroom and their difficulties in learning some specific topics. All the information would help her throughout the next two or more years to manage the class in a better way. She would know very clearly which student should be treated in what manner, who should be paid more attention to help him/her bring a good name to the college in board exams, which students should be snubbed from time to time to save the class from their mischievous activities, and who should be encouraged to speak to build their confidence.

She would know beforehand which student would top the class in monthly tests or term exams. In case of not getting the desired and expected results, she would interview her brilliant students separately, and try to resolve their individual issues to prepare them for the board exams.

Sometimes, she would contact some parents by telephone to discuss their children's problems, making herself a favourite teacher of almost all of her students.

But then the most dreaded novel coronavirus broke out. The pandemic took Pakistan, like almost all other countries of the world, by storm. In the second week of March 2020, the government announced the closing of all educational institutions across the country, in the wake of the epidemic.

During the next year, the government authorities, education ministry and departments, education institution administrations and teachers took unprecedented decisions. Online and virtual classes were launched, the government inaugurated a so-called tele-school, and even students of schools, colleges and universities were promoted to the next classes without any exam.

Most part of the year, regular classes remained suspended on one pretext or the other. Ms. Rabia Ahmad's college started online classes and tests/exams for its students, to keep them engaged.

It was an altogether different learning environment: all students sitting at different places, in their homes, and the teacher sitting in a classroom alone, with the equipment needed for delivering a lecture. Ms. Rabia experimented with different methodologies to improve the learning process, and experienced the physical noises involved in the process. In the beginning, she asked all her students to keep their microphones on, to ensure

that they get the feeling of attending a class. However, it proved to be a great stress on her nerves and a hindrance to the smooth functioning of the class. While all mics were on, she was hearing toddlers and minors crying in the background, some television channels presenting news programmes or dramas, in some cases mics catching voices from streets, vendors selling vegetables and fruit, or selling old household items, old newspapers (raddi) or iron and plastic waste. She could not bear with it for long, and advised her students to put their mics off after marking their attendance. Any student with some query was allowed to switch on the mic and ask a question meanwhile. But, in the situation, she would never know which student was listening to her lecture, and which not. Who was attentive, who was learning something, and who not?

Students were shared tests through the online system and on WhatsApp numbers, with directions to submit answer-sheets online, through email, or hard copies at the college reception. Many a time, she was surprised to receive the answer-sheets and solved papers. Those never showing any good performance in monthly tests and term exams had attempted the papers extraordinarily, with great skills, while her "brilliant" students had failed to come up to her expectations. When she called some of her students, they said they had solved their question papers with 100pc honesty, and thus poor performance.

What about those showing exceptionally good performance?

Ms. Rabia Ahmad Ali, and all her colleagues were really disappointed with the performance of their students when schools and colleges reopened after subsiding of the first wave of the virus. A large majority of them had returned to classes totally blank, after a six-month closure of educational institutions. A World Bank report suggested that learning poverty in the country had gone up to 79pc as a result of school closures due to the pandemic. A government higher secondary school teacher, Irfan Saleem, put the loss figures at over 90pc.

The Annual Status of Education Report 2018 (ASER-2018) had shocked the nation last year by disclosing that almost 50pc of Pakistani students enrolled in grade five cannot perform arithmetic and reading tasks, set for the second grade. Nearly 53pc of children cannot read and understand a simple story by the end of their primary school-level education. The poor learning outcomes are not only limited to public schools but also low-cost private schools. As a result, many students are years behind the appropriate learning level for their age group and have weak foundational concepts.

The educationist has reasons to explain the outcome of the ASER survey and the WB report, showing an increase in learning poverty in Pakistani schools. "The education process, especially at the primary level, needs completion of a triangle comprising student, teacher and parents. All three fortify efforts of each other for the successful learning of students in an ideal situation. But regrettably, the triangle remains incomplete in



more than 90pc cases in government schools, and so is the case with the learning process,” Irfan Saleem says. In most cases, adds the educationist, parents of government school students are uneducated themselves and they do not give importance to education and learning of their children.

In a large number of cases, they send their children to schools to get rid of them for a few hours, and they have no interest in what they study in schools and how much they learn or gain knowledge, believes the senior teacher on the basis of his experience in the field. However, he adds, the case of those studying in private schools may be different. After paying heavy fees, parents of children studying in private schools mostly keep an eye on them; they keep asking their children as well as their teachers about the learning situation and their grades, the educationist says. He admits that in some cases, teachers in government schools also show slackness in imparting education to their students.

The WB report, “Learning Losses in Pakistan due to COVID-19 School Closures”, however, says that the estimates are not cast in stone, and in collaboration with the government, the development partners can influence the numbers by taking appropriate action, particularly now that schools have reopened.

The report suggests the measures, among others, to ensure that dropouts do not materialise, and organise an enrolment drive and leverage cash transfers to encourage enrolment or re-enrolment of children.

According to the report, an estimated 930,000 additional children are expected to drop out from both primary and secondary education. Given that 22 million are already out of school, it represents an increase of almost 4.2pc. Pakistan is a country where dropouts are the highest due to the COVID-19 crisis in relative terms.

The estimate is based on the observed income elasticity of education for various socio-economic quintiles and on the June 2020 growth estimates for Pakistan which were estimated to be minus 4.4pc. Income elasticity in Pakistan is high for two main reasons: high poverty levels, which lead families to push their children into labour or marriage from an early age; and the cost of private schooling in which 38pc of school-going children aged six to 10 were enrolled before the crisis.

On the dropout issue, however, Irfan Saleem, as well as Ms. Nyla Shabbir, a senior teacher at a famous private school branch, seemed satisfied. The government schoolteacher said the dropout loss was almost negligible, while the class 9th in-charge at the Wahdat Road Lahore branch of a big private school system said that 100pc students had re-

joined classes after educational institutions reopened.

Ms. Nyla Shabbir’s estimates about learning losses among students of their school were quite different from Mr. Irfan Saleem’s. She told *Cutting Edge* by telephone that the tests conducted by them soon after the return of students showed that overall 50pc students had suffered learning losses, and 30pc were the worst cases.

She said special arrangements had been made to keep the students engaged in studies during the COVID-19 lockdown days. All class in-charges and teachers had formed WhatsApp groups of their students. They were informed about their lecture timing and online tests on a daily basis through WhatsApp and text messages, and in many cases calls were also made to parents of the students for an uninterrupted learning process. Parents were requested to submit tests of their children, conducted online, to school offices on a weekly or fortnightly basis. The tests were assessed by the teachers concerned, and the results were shared with the parents through WhatsApp and text messages on their cell-phones. “This was a real hard task, but it produced good results and their learning losses were curtailed to a large extent,” says Ms. Nyla with satisfaction.

The WB report, however, appreciated the efforts of Pakistan for minimising learning losses of students through the internet and launch of a television channel for imparting lessons to students through distance or remote learning methods. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistan has put in place an impressive infrastructure to support remote learning, added the report.

The 2020 Human Capital Index showed that Pakistan had improved its Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling from 4.8 years to 5.1 years over the last few years. But the gains may have been lost already. The report estimated that school closures during the pandemic will result in a loss of between 0.3 and 0.8 years of learning-adjusted schooling. “We expect that the four months of school closures during the pandemic could reduce learning adjusted years of schooling for Pakistan back to 4.8 years,” added the report.

“If we quantify the loss of learning in terms of labour market returns, the average student will face a reduction between \$193 and \$445 in yearly earnings once he or she enters the labour market, which represents between 2.8pc and 6.6pc of annual income.

“Aggregated for all students in Pakistan and projected 20 years into the future when all graduates have entered the labour market, this would cost the Pakistan economy between \$67 billion and \$155bn in GDP at Net Present Value,” said the report.

# Why are social media platforms silencing Kashmiri voices?

Farhan Mujahid Chak

For decades, India has sought to obfuscate what is happening in Kashmir. Since 1947, it has worked hard to appropriate Kashmir's history, culture, and identity and distort them. It has sought to muffle Kashmiri voices speaking out against the oppression of the Kashmiri people and whitewash its crimes.

With the advent of social media, Kashmiris found a much-needed platform for free expression where they were able to share their plight with the world. Kashmiri solidarity pages proliferated and conversations about the Kashmiri struggle moved online. But this newly found freedom did not last long.

Social media platforms, under the pressure of the Indian government, started shutting down Kashmir-related pages and the accounts of Kashmiri activists. In 2016, amid a crackdown on protests in Kashmir, Facebook took down pages focusing on Kashmir and posts about the ongoing events. Journalists reported that videos of police brutality were blocked. Academics and intellectuals also saw their accounts disabled.

Following the Indian government's abrogation of Kashmir's special status on August 5, 2019, and the imposition of a brutal lockdown, social media platforms were quick to censor content on Kashmir once again. As Kashmir was cut off from the world, with the internet and mobile communications suspended, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter started to remove posts, block videos and shut down accounts trying to shed light on the dire situation in the region. Since then, the Indian government has partially lifted the lockdown on Kashmir, but social media platforms have continued to purge Kashmir-related content.

In the latest episode of censorship, Twitter shut down the accounts of Kashmir Civitas, Stand With Kashmir, the Kashmir Podcast, the account of young Kashmiri academic Ifat Gazia, and my personal Twitter account @fchak in March. By removing content and accounts critical of India's policies in Kashmir, Facebook and Twitter are complicit in suffocating those Kashmiri voices that are resisting the military occupation and settler-colonialism of their land. By censoring these voices, social media networks are curtailing the right to freedom of speech.

Our organisation, Kashmir Civitas is a non-governmental civil society and strategic advocacy entity registered in Canada and committed to the socio-political, and economic empowerment of the peoples in the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. It is an open, transparent organisation that peacefully challenges the false narratives that India has been propagating about the disputed region. It campaigns for the fundamental right of self-determination for the Kashmiri people. No democratic polity or principled individual, group or nation would credibly deny that right.

Moreover, the organisation's foundational decree is not only premised on the Kashmiris' inalienable rights as enshrined in the United Nations Charter, but is based on the principles expressed in a total of 18 United Nations (UN) resolutions on Kashmir, including Security Council Resolutions 39 and 47, adopted in 1948. Both unequivocally recognise the inherent right of self-determination for the Kashmiri people and provide for the status of Kashmir to be decided in a free and fair plebiscite under the auspices of the UN.

Our organisation firmly believes that the Kashmir dispute is not a bilateral issue between Pakistan and India. Rather, it is an international issue. Still, the most important stakeholders are the Kashmiri people – the "state subjects" of the disputed territory, who have every right to resist, by all lawful means, the colonisation of their land by Indian occupation forces. As such,



our organisation champions the democratic principles of freedom, equality and the inherent dignity of all human beings, irrespective of race, religion, gender or creed. It aims to lobby, facilitate and work for the moral, educational, economic, cultural and political uplifting of Kashmiri society on both sides of the ceasefire line and among the diaspora.

Why would Facebook and Twitter silence those who are speaking truth and fact, then lionise those who operate in deceit? We sent several inquiries to Twitter, but they never explained to us why our account was shut down. Then, suddenly, it was reinstated, as were the other suspended accounts. Twitter's censorship comes amid India's unprecedented campaign to silence Kashmiri voices, strip the Kashmiri people of their rights and remove the Kashmir issue from the international agenda altogether. Since the abrogation of Kashmir's special status in 2019, which removed its self-governance rights and paved the way for the settlement of non-Kashmiris on Kashmiri land, more troops have been deployed to the region. Repression has increased. Journalists trying to report on the situation in Kashmir have faced censorship and intimidation, while politicians, activists and even ordinary citizens, including children, have been arrested by the thousands.

Even before this escalation, Kashmir was the most militarised place on the planet. Currently, more than one million Indian soldiers are deployed in the valley. The Kashmir issue is one of the longest unresolved conflicts on the agenda of the UN. More than 95,000 people have been killed since the early 1990s, and around 6,700 unmarked and mass graves have been uncovered. An untold number of women have been harassed and assaulted. It is in this dire situation that platforms like Twitter and Facebook are choosing to side with the repressive Indian government, which – amid its rising authoritarianism – still claims to be democratic.

Among the most admirable aspects of democracy – along with freedom, equality, pluralism and inclusion – is the empowerment of civil society which holds the powerful to account. A free, vibrant civil society is not only able to curb the abuse of power, but also to promote healthy civic engagement and participation, which is the bedrock of democratic, participatory polities. By shutting down the accounts of collectives like Kashmir Civitas and Stand With Kashmir, Facebook and Twitter are siding with undemocratic forces that seek to silence not just Kashmiris but anyone who dares to oppose them.

# 'Islamism-leftism': France enters its McCarthyist era

Ali Saad

In recent weeks, another wave of political polarisation hit France, as the concept of "Islamism-leftism" occupied centre stage in a heated cultural debate.

In an interview with CNews, the French equivalent of Fox News, Higher Education and Research Minister Frédérique Vidal was asked whether or not she agreed that "Islamism-leftism is plaguing universities". Her response was instant and shocking: "Islamism-leftism is plaguing the entire society," she declared. She went on to say: "I am going to call for an investigation into all the currents of research on these subjects in the universities, so we can distinguish proper academic research from activism and opinion."

Vidal's statement on "Islamism-leftism" is the latest in a string of similar pronouncements by elected officials in France. In June, President Emmanuel Macron told journalists: "The academic world has its share of blame. It has encouraged the ethnicisation of the social question, thinking this was a good line of research. But the result can only be secessionism. This means splitting the Republic in two." In October, Minister of National Education Jean-Michel Blanquer warned that "Islamism-leftism" was "wreaking havoc in society" and denounced what he called "the intellectual complicity in terrorism".

These vicious attacks on academia and leftist intellectuals have been repeated across French mainstream media and among the pseudo-intellectual elite. They aim to whip up public hatred against the left – a traditionally secular force – by linking it to "Islamism", the eternal bogeyman in French society. This kind of incitement, while politically expedient for the government, is slowly but steadily pushing France into its own McCarthyist era. Macron and his supporters are laying the groundwork for a witch-hunt similar to the one in the United States led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s which was aimed at "purging" American institutions of suspected communist agents, militants or sympathisers.

It is important to understand the political context in which this process is taking place. All these statements should be viewed as part of an electoral ploy. Macron is set to run for reelection in 2022, but his government has done poorly handling the COVID-19 pandemic. The country has seen over 4 million infections and more than 90,000 coronavirus-related deaths to date. Last year, the French economy shrank by 8.3 percent, while poverty rates almost doubled. In a September survey, 33 percent of respondents said their income is just enough to make ends meet; 18 percent said it was not enough at all. In an October poll, 61 percent of those surveyed felt Macron had failed to lead an adequate response to the pandemic.

With the COVID-19 crisis likely to heavily impact next year's elections, Macron is expecting fierce competition at the polls and is looking for an effective strategy to galvanise support. At the moment, nothing seems to work better in distracting the public from the many failings of the government than attacking Islam and pursuing "Islamist conspiracies", and Macron seems to have jumped at the opportunity to raise his flattening ratings.

His government already launched a brutal campaign aimed at intimidating the Muslim community and suppressing its civil society organisations. Among other repressive measures, it dissolved the Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France (Collective against Islamophobia in France), which defended Muslim victims of Islamophobia within the legal framework of the Republic.



But Macron wants to go beyond attacking the Muslim community and is now taking aim at the left as well. And in doing so, he is taking a page from the playbook of one of his main rivals, Marine Le Pen, president of the far-right National Rally. The idea of "Islamism-leftism" is something she popularised in her first presidential campaign in 2012. It now appears that Macron's politics have swung so far to the right that he has fully embraced the language of the National Rally. By starting a public crusade against the imagined Islamist-leftist conspiracy in French society, he hopes not only to steal some of Le Pen's votes but also to undermine the left.

Macron is specifically taking an aim at the leftist La France insoumise (France Unbowed) party. Its leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon is the only politician to denounce Islamophobia and French Muslims' stigmatisation – he was the only party head who attended the March against Islamophobia in 2019. Today he is also the only prominent leftist who stands a chance at the presidential polls next year.

By adopting Le Pen's racist language and demonising the left, and specifically Mélenchon's party, Macron hopes to emerge again as the compromise candidate, the "lesser evil", who the French people will vote for to avoid a far-right government and still feel protected from the "Islamist bogeyman". But in pursuing re-election with ruthless, unscrupulous ploys, the president is causing much damage to French society. By putting academia in the crosshairs, he is directly threatening academic freedom.

Shortly after Vidal's interview was aired, the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), the most prominent academic institution hosting the country's finest minds from all scientific disciplines, published a statement rejecting her accusations and condemning "those who try to use (the term "Islamism-leftism") to call into question academic freedom". It emphasised that "the political exploitation" of this term "is emblematic of a regrettable instrumentalisation of scholarship" and "does not correspond to any scientific reality".

In the meantime, Vidal has doubled down on her words and insisted that an investigation into the "Islamism-leftism" in academia will take place. If she makes good on her promise, this could have a devastating impact on academic life in France. Purging educational institutions of any intellectual or political opposition that may question the government's policies or mainstream attitudes would seriously curb public debate on important political and socioeconomic issues.

# Hydropower projects are wreaking havoc in the Himalayas

Prakash Kashwan, Neelima Vallangi

On February 7, a Himalayan glacier broke and caused a flash flood in the North Indian state of Uttarakhand. The avalanche smashed two hydroelectric dam projects and killed more than 200 people. A total of 205 people were reported missing in the disaster, but so far only 74 bodies and 34 separate body parts have been recovered from the debris. Local authorities have declared those still unaccounted for as “presumed dead” and initiated the process of issuing death certificates for them.

Environmentalists who have been studying Himalayan glaciers for decades have linked this deadly disaster, like many others before it, to climate change, adding weight to the growing calls for aggressive climate action in the region. Attributing the blame for the flash flood solely or mainly to the ongoing climate crisis, however, risks obfuscating the failure of national and international agencies involved in construction projects in the region to act on the lessons learned from past disasters. Less than 10 years ago, in 2013, flash floods left more than 5,700 people dead in Uttarakhand. Back then, experts quickly drew links between the disaster and the numerous hydropower construction projects in the high mountain valleys in Uttarakhand, arguing that the projects had exacerbated the intensity of the floods. “The disaster is a costly wake-up call,” Peter Bosshard, the policy director at International Rivers, said in the aftermath of that deadly flood. “It shows that nature will strike back if we disregard the ecological limits of fragile regions like the Himalayas through reckless dam building and other infrastructure development.”

After the 2013 flash flood, the Supreme Court of India also mandated a national panel of experts to investigate the policy failures responsible for the disaster. After conducting an investigation, the panel called for hydropower development in this “disaster-prone” region to cease, arguing that it significantly amplifies the damages caused by natural disasters. It also asked for the installation of a flood warning system. Later, two Supreme Court justices noted that they “are very much concerned about the mushrooming of a large number of hydroelectric projects in Uttarakhand. The cumulative impact of those project components like dams, tunnels, blasting, muck disposal, mining, deforestation, etc. on the ecosystem has yet to be scientifically examined.”

Indian governmental agencies, however, refused to heed these warnings and continued their efforts to build dams on Himalayan rivers. Today, there are plans to build over two dozen medium and large hydropower projects in Uttarakhand alone. Dozens more are planned in other parts of the Indian Himalayas. Environmentalists argue that the construction of the Tapovan Vishnugad hydroelectric project, one of the two damaged by the February 7 flash flood, likely increased the damage caused by the disaster. This dam was being built by India’s National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), with the financial backing of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Both the NTPC and ADB were undoubtedly aware of the warnings environmental groups and other agencies have been issuing about hydropower development in the area since at least 2013. Their apparent decision to ignore these warnings cost the lives of hundreds of people working on the project site on the fateful morning of February 7. Had it not been a Sunday, the number of fatalities on the site would have been significantly higher.

The second project affected by last month’s flash flood, the Rishiganga Hydroelectric Project, was not merely damaged but completely swept away

by the violent surge. And the disaster did not hit that construction without warning, either. The Rishiganga project site was struck by a cloudburst, floods and landslides several times between 2008-2016. None of these incidents led to the project’s suspension. In the summer of 2019, the residents of Raini village, world renowned for the role they played in the Chipko (Hug the Trees) movement of the 1970s, filed a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Uttarakhand High Court, calling on the district magistrate of Chamoli and the state government to review the environmental and social impact of the Rishiganga Hydroelectric Project site. The PIL also did not lead to any constructive action.

Those behind the hydropower projects in the Indian Himalayas long defended their efforts against criticism from environmentalists by arguing that these hydropower plants would reduce India’s harmful emissions and the detrimental effects of climate change on the local population. Indeed, the construction of hydroelectric dams in the Himalayan river valleys is part of a national plan to cut emissions linked to the energy sector. If and when these plans are fully realised, the disaster-prone Indian Himalayas will have one dam every 32 kilometres. But, as the fate of the Rishiganga project clearly demonstrated, building carbon offset projects in fragile ecologies is a dangerous and misguided endeavour. The Rishiganga project was approved under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It was anticipated that once fully operational, the project would deliver emission reductions equivalent to 49,585 metric tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per annum. Those anticipations were washed away, quite literally, in part because of the damage that the project likely caused to the local ecology and geology.

The rapid expansion of hydropower projects in the region is not fuelled only by a desire to produce clean energy, either. The continuing “water war” between India and China is also a motivating factor behind the mushrooming of these projects in the Indian Himalayas. In November 2020, the Power Construction Corporation of China, a Chinese state-owned company, announced plans to develop a massive hydroelectric project, with production capacity of up to 60 gigawatts, on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo river. India responded by announcing plans to build a 10-gigawatt project on the Siang, the main tributary of the same river, to “offset the impact of the hydropower project by China”.

Whether they are built solely to produce clean energy or in response to regional rivalries, the hydropower projects in the Indian Himalayas pose a significant threat to the region’s ecology and the wellbeing of local communities. Despite repeated warnings from experts, local authorities and government agencies involved in these hydroelectric projects have failed to enact proper safeguards.

Even after last month’s deadly flash flood, then Chief Minister of Uttarakhand Tirath Singh Rawat refused to acknowledge the role the massive hydropower projects in the region had played in bringing about the tragedy. Instead of committing to take the necessary precautions to prevent its repeat, the chief minister called the incident a “natural disaster” and reiterated his commitment to hydropower development. The central government, meanwhile, merely read out a statement announcing the number of dead and missing persons in parliament.

# Greed is the problem, not the solution, for vaccine woes

Nick Dearden

On the anniversary of the United Kingdom's first lockdown of the coronavirus pandemic, as candles were lit in doorways and the country mourned 125,000 deaths, the prime minister was in the mood for gloating.

"The reason we have the vaccine success is because of capitalism, because of greed my friends," Boris Johnson reportedly told Conservative MPs, before pleading "forget I said that". The timing of the comments was distasteful in the extreme as countries across the world are struggling to find any vaccines, while Britain has acquired several times the doses it needs by bypassing the international bodies meant to ensure a fair global allocation. But more worrying was the warped understanding revealed by the remark of what is actually behind Britain's successful vaccine rollout.

Johnson claimed the vaccine breakthrough was brought about by "giant corporations that wanted to give good returns to shareholders". But nothing could be further from the truth. The British government, like other governments, invested heavy public funds into the research and development of vaccines, assuming most of the risk in the process. The AstraZeneca jab was actually developed by scientists from the University of Oxford, a publicly-funded institution, working with scientists from a range of backgrounds, including many educated in state schools. Those scientists had initially wanted to make their vaccine patent-free, before AstraZeneca entered the scene, effectively privatising the research.

The vaccines have been brought to market thanks to tens of thousands of trial volunteers who risked their health by putting themselves forward, not out of greed, but out of a desire to end this pandemic and help their families and communities. And the rollout is being managed by the UK's National Health Service (NHS), a world-class public healthcare system that, despite market-driven reforms in recent years, exists entirely outside the logic of the market. Greed, however, drove Big Pharma companies to privatise vaccines developed with public resources, and patent lifesaving medicines, in an effort to keep a grip on their monopolies. As a result, pharmaceutical giants sold these jabs almost exclusively to rich countries, allowing the UK to secure enough doses to vaccinate its population three times over.

Even the European Union is struggling to secure doses, and is now engaged in a bitter war of words with Britain. This is because Johnson's "me-first" approach, combined with the secret contracts which are a consistent feature of Big Pharma-owned drugs, has fuelled anger and suspicion. Much worse, many low- and middle-income countries will have to wait until at least 2023 to vaccinate a large enough percentage of their populations to achieve herd immunity. And what has stopped the global south countries from making their own vaccines, and instead forced them to wait for the pharmaceutical giants to decide it is their turn? Greed again. The UK, US, and the EU – home to the world's largest pharmaceutical companies – have blocked attempts led by India and South Africa to temporarily waive patents on COVID-19 vaccines. A waiver would, they claimed, hurt "incentives" – or profits, in plain English.

All this is a perfect example of Johnson's economic strategy – transferring massive public resources into the hands of large corporations and



then tasking them with carrying out vitally important services for the public. Increasingly these contracts seem to be awarded on the basis of closeness to the Conservative Party. Transparency is an afterthought at best, and while these companies do indeed seem to excel at transferring value to their shareholders, they are much less competent at delivering public services. The multibillion-pound disaster that is Britain's test and trace system is just one leading example of this.

When it comes to vaccines, the consequences of this strategy are clear for all to see. If all of the vaccines due to be delivered in 2021 were distributed equitably, we could vaccinate 70 percent of the world this year, effectively ending the pandemic. Greed is preventing it. The incompetence of AstraZeneca's rollout is now helping fuel vaccine scepticism across the world. And the secrecy of its contracts is fostering a dangerous vaccine war between the EU and the UK.

AstraZeneca is not the only greedy company in the vaccine race. Many other corporations have also happily taken public resources, sold virtually their entire stock to rich countries, and are now looking forward to securing sky-high profit margins. Pfizer is on target to make more than \$4b clear profit this year, and Moderna's executives are raking in hundreds of millions of dollars based on the company's rocketing share price.

Johnson is rapidly emerging as the most vocal proponent of this form of capitalism – an economic model characterised by monopoly power, cronyism and the transfer of huge resources from the public sector, the environment, and working people into the private wealth of the global elite. The immediate consequence of this is the prolonging of the pandemic, as coronavirus is allowed to run rampant in poorer countries, taking countless lives that could have been saved. But the longer-term consequences will be even more catastrophic: unprecedented levels of inequality, runaway climate change and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions.

Greed is not what has led to the UK's successful vaccine rollout. Instead, it risks derailing efforts to end this crisis. Those of us who want to make sure the world is not only safe from COVID-19, but from the crises of poverty, inequality and climate change, rather than celebrating greed, need to work out how to restrain it as quickly as possible.

# Restoring the right to breathe: Migration detention must end

Julie Stokholm Daugaard, Elisabet Kass

“Ellebæk has been used by police to humiliate, segregate and racially profile people who came to ask asylum. We who have been locked up in Ellebæk, were not criminals for your information, even though the police treat us like we are criminals.”

These are the words of Andrew, who was twice imprisoned for eleven months and one month respectively in the Danish migration detention centre Ellebæk, which the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture has called among the worst of its kind in Europe. Andrew’s testimony of discrimination and degradation resonates with criticism voiced by people held in migration detention camps in Denmark and elsewhere in Europe. As detention visitors and advocates for detainees’ rights, researchers, and people who experienced incarceration first-hand, we find it imperative that this criticism is taken seriously and that the systemic harms of detention are addressed.

Migration-related detention has become a standardised instrument used by states to regulate undesired mobility. It entails the incarceration of people who have not committed any crime but who, as Andrew observes, are racially profiled and criminalised for who they are. In addition to being discriminatory, detention exposes migrants to mental and physical abuse, arbitrary violence, and rights violations. Detained migrants have limited access to legal safeguards and external monitoring mechanisms are extremely limited. Compared with the lethal violence deployed against migrants at Europe’s external borders, the violence affecting migrants held in these obscured sites rarely makes the headlines.

The hidden violence of Europe’s migration detention centres has been aggravated by the ongoing pandemic. Our collective observations from Ellebæk detention centre in Denmark illustrate some of them. Ellebæk is run by the Danish prison and probation service, and located in former military facilities. In their 2019 report, the European Committee against Torture (CPT) called Ellebæk “unacceptable” and criticised its poor material conditions, inadequate access to healthcare, arbitrary use of solitary confinement, and degrading treatment from staff. The majority of those held in Ellebæk stay there for a few weeks, yet some remain up to 18 months awaiting possibly violent deportation. Many, however, cannot be forcefully deported due to their de facto statelessness or because the state Denmark wants to deport them to does not accept citizens forcefully returned. In these cases, months-long incarceration is used to pressure people into “collaborating” to return “freely”. Yet others do “collaborate” and express a wish to return, yet might still remain held for months.

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, people detained in Ellebæk reported experiencing chronic anxiety, fear, and anger. Many of them received medication against depression or sleep-deprivation. Andrew describes Ellebæk as a “death zone”, and several detainees have reported being haunted by traumatic memories of the centre long after being released. Since the onset of the pandemic, detainees’ anxiety has gotten worse. The measures taken by authorities to reduce the risk of infection, including limiting the number of visitors allowed, cancelling activities and church services, which provided a connection to the outside world, together with the risk of being forcibly tested for COVID-19 and quarantined in solitary confinement have aggravated their isolation and

reduced the possibilities for external actors to monitor the conditions for detainees.

Bingzhi Zhu, who was arrested and deported during the pandemic, recalls being pushed several times by guards and when she reported these incidents to other guards, no action was taken. We have heard several similar testimonies of ill-treatment, which suggest that they are not an aberration but common institutional practice that remains unrecorded and unpunished. Due to travel restrictions associated with COVID-19 and the health risks that detained migrants are exposed to, the European Human Rights Commissioner has alongside other human rights organisations called for states to release detained migrants who cannot be deported in the foreseeable future.

However, Danish authorities have kept on enforcing detention and deportation orders during the pandemic. Several people we talked to in 2020 and 2021 have had their detention orders repeatedly prolonged and remained in Ellebæk for an extended time period, without properly being informed about the legality or proportionality of their continued incarceration. Many detainees experience the monthly review of their detention in court as a shallow performance of a trial, which serves to punish them rather than safeguard their rights. Having their detention orders repeatedly prolonged during the pandemic, despite the Danish authorities’ inability to enforce their deportation, has left detainees in a Kafkaesque situation where they are unduly punished for circumstances outside their control.

The pandemic has further exacerbated the detrimental effects detention has on health and the rightlessness that many detained migrants experience. It has not only exposed government authorities’ disregard for their lives but also the ineffectiveness of detention as an instrument to “motivate” those who for various reasons cannot be deported by force to accept voluntary return.

For a brief moment, the pandemic seemed to open up for a debate that problematised states’ prioritisation of migration enforcement over migrants’ health and rights. However, this moment now seems to have passed, and the plight of the people detained in Europe’s archipelago of detention camps has fallen into public oblivion. In his reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic, Philosopher Achille Mbembe emphasised the need to fight not only the virus but any forms of systemic oppression that “condemns the majority of humankind to a premature cessation of breathing”. COVID-19 cannot be considered separately from these other pandemics – of systemic racism, border violence, and global injustices – which expose some communities to premature death.

Migration detention centres are symptomatic of these pandemics. They serve and sustain a violent border regime that jeopardises migrants’ health, dignity, and rights – including their fundamental right to breathe freely. To restore this fundamental human right, we must challenge the public neglect of detained migrants. The least we can do is ensure external monitoring of detention centres and hold state authorities accountable for the mistreatment of detained migrants. In the long run, however, and in the interest of a universal right to breathe freely, migration detention centres need to be abolished altogether.

### Water woes

Pirkoh is a sub-tehsil of Dera Bugti district with a population of 50,000 people. This is where natural gas was discovered in 1953 and which still is home to the country's second largest reserves of natural gas after Sui. Soon after the discovery, the company responsible for the extraction of gas was bound to provide jobs and drinking water to the locals. But no one has taken any interest other than extracting the area's natural resources.

The water issue in the region is common during the summer season and although funds have been approved for the development of the region, the money, unfortunately, was not released. Despite several promises by the representatives, the masses are yet to be granted any relief. The relevant authorities should alleviate the suffering of the locals by ensuring the provision of clean drinking water as the holy month of Ramazan is fast approaching. Otherwise, they will have no other option but to vacate the area and move elsewhere.

Khalid Bugti  
Islamabad

### Political stability

Noted sociologist, philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun was of the opinion that political stability is impossible without economic development. He knew that centuries ago, but we seem to struggle to grasp this simple fact of life.

It is unfortunate that Pakistan is witnessing grave political instability for the last few decades. The persistent turmoil and chaos on the political front in the form of sit-ins, long marches and road blockades have held the country's economic development hostage. Foreign direct investment is dismally low and the back-breaking foreign loans are pushing the country towards further troubles. In contrast, our neighbours, like China and India, are turning into economic giants due to persistent stability. Even Bangladesh, our separated half, has attained economic development once it was able to rid itself of political upheavals. The government must put its house in order and should say goodbye to political victimisation, making room for peaceful coexistence and developing a culture of tolerance. We need political stability at all costs because economic stability will only follow political stability; not vice versa.

Rizwan Zarar  
Dera Ismail Khan

### Weddings during pandemic

Wave after wave of the Covid pandemic is affecting life all over the world, including Pakistan. It is so paradoxical that the civilised world has put a number of restrictions on social gatherings, while in our part of the world, life somehow is being treated as normal; giving a new twist to the term 'New Normal'. A case in point is wedding ceremonies which are in full swing and continue to be marked by great pomp, pageantry and gaiety. Recently, I attended three weddings in Islamabad. All the functions were arranged under the open skies. One factor common in all the well-attended ceremonies was the non-observance of standard operating procedures (SOPs) by the invitees. These were not only flouted, but were blatantly defied. The guests were openly embracing and hugging each other. Nobody in the gatherings had any concern about the wedding extravaganzas being the breeding grounds for the coronavirus. With such a non-serious attitude, how can we expect to overcome the pandemic? Tying the nuptial knot, in practical terms, is a private affair between two families, and, as such, the ritual is supposed to be simple. Instead, in our country, the traditional approach is to extend the celebrations for days and weeks together. And the pandemic has not dampened the force of tradition. During the first coronavirus wave, some sensibility prevailed and the weddings which took place were solemnised in a low-key manner. I wonder why we cannot continue with the practice. The skies will not fall if the bride and groom take their wedding vows at home or in a nearby mosque, with a minimum number of family members. Meanwhile, instead of getting to the root cause, we are repeatedly experimenting and exercising the option of shutting down schools now and then, adversely affecting and compromising the education system, and the future of the coming generations. Two major factors come to mind while considering the spread of the virus, particularly in schools. First, the transportation of children from home to school in vans packed like sardines, and, second, the seating of children in improvised classrooms, especially the private schools in residential houses. I wonder what stops us from investing in our future generations? It all boils down to our sense of priority. Is it the education of children, 40 per cent of whom are already handicapped due to stunted growth, or is it guarding the business interest of marquee and poultry farm owners? The manner in which weddings are being held, and are allowed to be held, in these troubled times indicates a muddled sense of priority on the part of those concerned.

Muhammad K. Sufi  
Islamabad

### Urdu in parliament

As per the Constitution, Urdu is the national language. Sadly, however, English is used as the medium of communication by the National Assembly Speaker during official sessions. A very good example is that of the recently held session where the prime minister earned the vote of confidence during which the speaker read the proceedings and the agenda in English instead of Urdu. It was indeed disappointing. Nelson Mandela rightly said: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart." We should give it a try.

M. Faizan Punjwani  
Karachi

# ROUND UP

*Our guide to keeping you updated on the latest news and reviews from around the world*

**Movies, Books, Science, Health**

## 01 Science

### Andromeda's and the Milky Way's black holes will collide: Here's how it may play out

Sid Perkins

The supermassive black holes at the centers of the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies are doomed to engulf each other in an ill-fated cosmological dance.

Astronomers have long known that



Andromeda is on a collision course with our galaxy. But not much has been known about what will happen to the gargantuan black holes each galaxy harbors at its core. New simulations reveal their ultimate fate. The galaxies will coalesce into one giant elliptical galaxy — dubbed “Milkomeda” — in about 10 billion years. Then, the central black holes will begin orbiting one another and finally collide less than 17 million years later, researchers propose. Just before the black holes smash into each other, they’ll radiate gravitational waves with the power of 10 quintillion suns. Any civilization within 3.25 million light-years from us that has gravitational wave-sensing technology on par with our current abilities would be able to detect the collision, the researchers estimate. The latest data suggest Andromeda is approaching us at about 116 kilometers per second, says Riccardo Schiavi, an astrophysicist at the Sapienza University of Rome. Using computer simulations that include the gravitational pull of the two spiral galaxies on each other as well as the possible presence of sparse gas and other material between them, Schiavi and his colleagues played out how the galactic collision will unfold. A computer simulation shows how the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies will brush past each other about 4 billion years from now before merging into a single galaxy roughly 6 billion years later.

### Africa's biggest collection of ancient human footprints has been found

Bruce Bower

More than 400 human footprints preserved in hardened volcanic sediment are providing a rare peek at social life among ancient East African hunter-gatherers.

These impressions, found in northern Tan-



zania near a village called Engare Sero, add up to the largest collection of ancient human footprints ever found in Africa, say evolutionary biologist Kevin Hatala of Chatham University in Pittsburgh and his colleagues. People walked across a muddy layer of volcanic debris that dates to between around 19,100 and 5,760 years ago, the researchers report. Dating of a thin rock layer that partly overlaps footprint sediment narrows the age range for the footprints to between roughly 12,000 and 10,000 years ago, the team says. Engare Sero lies in the vicinity of two much older hominid footprint sites — nearly 3.7-million-year-old Laetoli in Tanzania and 1.5-million-year-old Ileret (SN: 4/16/12) in Kenya.

At Engare Sero, Hatala’s team analyzed foot impression sizes, distances between prints and which way prints pointed. One collection of tracks was made by a group of 17 people walking southwest across the landscape, the researchers found. Comparisons with modern human footprint measurements indicate that this group consisted of 14 women, two men and one young boy. The women may have been foraging for food, while a few males visited or accompanied them, the researchers speculate. Some present-day hunter-gatherers, including Tanzania’s Hadza people, form largely female food-gathering groups. In another set of six tracks, the footprints point northeast. Those tracks probably weren’t made by people traveling in a group.

## Smoking makes a comeback in the pandemic

Cara Murez

Katie Rodgers was just 15 years old when she started smoking, and in her early 20s when it became a more significant habit.

Rodgers found quitting tough, but she managed to kick the habit at age 33 during a global pandemic because she knew that smoking would increase her anxiety and put her at higher risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19. Her achievement was unusual at a time when cigarette purchases have risen slightly in the United States and requests for smoking cessation services have dramatically dropped.

"I have a strong aversion to the hospital and being really powerless because of a virus. And I knew that, especially because it affects the respiratory system, that if I continued to smoke, it would just increase my chances for – me being a relatively healthy person – taking a completely different route and becoming extremely sick," Rodgers said. During a recent panel discussion, smoking cessation and addiction experts raised concerns about the uptick in tobacco use and emphasized the urgent need to reverse it. "Researchers noticed this changed also for alcohol and other substances, and have suggested that stress and anxiety that resulted from the pandemic may be factors that are driving up the use of tobacco, alcohol and other substances," said Linda Bailey, president and CEO of the North American Quitline Consortium (NAQC).

"At the consortium, we believe that ... stress and anxiety have also contributed to the decrease in people seeking help to quit tobacco use," Bailey said. About 480,000 people in the United States die from tobacco-related illnesses each year, making it the number one preventable cause of death



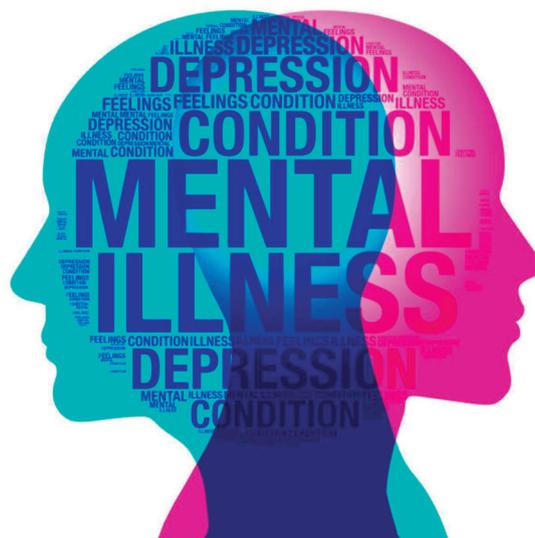
in the country. And SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, has put tobacco users at added risk. British researchers found that smokers were more likely to suffer more severe variants of the disease. Another study identified a link between smoking and increased severity and risk of death in hospitalized COVID-19 patients. In the United States, smoking rates had dropped from 42% in 1965 to 25% in 1997 and 14% in 2019. Data for 2020 are not available yet. What experts do know is that calls to quitlines in the United States were down 27% from 2019. In the first quarter of last year, calls were down 6%, then plummeted 39% from April to June. Until 2020, U.S. quitline calls ranged from about 700,000 to more than 900,000 a year since 2012, according to the NAQC.

## Pandemic has harmed mental health of teens

Robert Preidt

If your teenagers have been struggling to cope during the coronavirus pandemic, a new survey suggests they are far from alone.

Researchers found that 46% of 977 parents of teens said their child has shown signs of a new or worsening mental health condition since the start of the pandemic. More parents of teen girls than parents of teen boys reported an increase in anxiety/worry (36% vs. 19%) or depression/sadness (31% vs. 18%). Girls and boys had similar rates of negative changes in their sleep (24% for girls vs. 21% for boys), withdrawing from family (14% vs. 13%) and aggressive behavior (8% vs. 9%), according to the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health at Michigan Medicine. "Just as young people are at the age of being biologically primed to seek independence from their families, COVID-19 precautions have kept them at home," said poll co-director and Mott pediatrician Dr. Gary Freed. "Pandemic-related lifestyle changes have wreaked havoc on teens' lives, with many experiencing disruptions to their normal routines," Freed said in a poll news release. "Our poll suggests that pandemic-era changes may have had a significant mental health impact for some



teenagers."

Research shows that teen depression during the pandemic is associated with teens' own fears and uncertainties, as well as high levels of parental stress, according to Freed. "Isolation during the pandemic may be triggering new problems for some teens but for others, the situation has exacerbated existing emotional health issues," he said.

Three-quarters of parents said the pandemic has negatively affected their teens' connections to friends, and 64% said their teens have been texting, using social media (56%), online gaming (43%), and talking on the phone (35%) every day or almost every day. Few of the parents said their teens have been getting together in person with friends daily or almost every day, indoors (9%) or outdoors (6%). "Peer groups and social interactions are a critical part of development during adolescence. But these opportunities have been limited during the pandemic," Freed said. "Many teens may feel frustrated, anxious and disconnected due to social distancing and missing usual social outlets, like sports, extracurricular activities and hanging out with friends." Families should encourage social interactions that follow COVID-19 safety guidelines, such as spending time outside or participating in activities while wearing masks and socially distancing, Freed suggested. The poll found that parents who noticed negative changes in their teens' mental health tried different strategies to help their teen, including relaxing COVID-19 rules and family rules on social media, seeking professional help and using mental health apps.

## Chaos Walking

John Nugent

After a while, *Chaos Walking* became one of those films where the behind-the-scenes mythology threatened to overshadow anything in the actual film. Across a checkered production history, it's had multiple directors and writers attached (including tantalisingly, at one point, Charlie Kaufman). There were reports of extensive reshoots after the initial cut was deemed, according to one source, as "unreleasable". A pandemic got in the way too. Which is a shame, because the premise is rich with possibilities, and appealingly weird. A world where men's unfiltered thoughts are constantly on display — think *What Men Want*, but with aliens — is an idea thick with implications and opportunities for a satirical look at society and gender roles (only amplified by the male-only environment it's set in — like a futuristic, reverse take on *Y: The Last Man*). But it feels disorientating and incoherent. At a basic filmmaking level, 'the Noise' is just that: a cacophony of background characters' thoughts projected into a CG bubble, making it oddly hard — especially in crowd scenes — to keep track of what's going on, who's actually talking and who's just thinking it. It's treated as a blunt way to get to character motivations, too, rather than an ingenious and creative study of the male psyche. In Tom Holland's boyish lead character Todd, it plays out like an adolescent version of Dug from *Up*, his Noise often blurting out one-word descriptions of what he can see or what he's feeling ("Girl!", "Pretty!"). An accurate insight into a teenage boy's mind, certainly, but not the most elegant storytelling device.



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## Yes Day

James Dyer

Ask any parent who they'd most like to bludgeon to death with a Hatchimal and odds are good that Tom Lichtenheld and Amy Krouse will come up as viable targets. The pair's 2009 children's book, *Yes Day!*, first introduced kids (and despairing caregivers) to the concept of this time-limited parental amnesty, during which the answer to any request (Can we have Wagon Wheels for breakfast? Are we allowed to drink maple syrup? Can we dye the cat orange?) must be met with a sobbed affirmative. While the picture-led book is largely plotless, the film, directed by Cedar Rapids' Miguel Arteta, attempts to expand its chaotic premise. We are introduced to Allison (Jennifer Garner) and Carlos Torres (Edgar Ramirez): once a pair of fun-loving twentysomethings, now frazzled parents to three demanding kids. After middle child Nando (Julian Lerner) turns in a school project comparing his buzzkill mother to Mussolini (surely deserving of at least a week on the naughty step), she foolishly agrees to the aforementioned day of carnage in order to re-assert her fun-mum credentials. Unsurprisingly, what begins as a touching story of parent-child bonding soon descends into a wild Saturnalia of competitive eating, paramilitary water-ballooning, fist-fights over toy gorillas and even a brief stint in jail. But while there's undoubtedly comedy kindling in the set-up, Justin Malen's (*Office Christmas Party*) disappointingly bland script stubbornly refuses to catch fire.



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## Zack Snyder's Justice League

Amon Warmann

It's been a long and unlikely road to Zack Snyder's *Justice League*. The underwhelming mess that is 2017's *Justice League* — which saw Avengers helmer Joss Whedon step in after Snyder left mid-production due to personal tragedy — is better remembered for a bizarre CGI upper lip than any iconic superheroics. It also felt like the product of two competing visions: one from a filmmaker, and the other from a studio trying to course-correct after the lukewarm receptions to *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Almost four years and an unrelenting fan campaign later, we now have a four-hour cut that lives up to its title. For the most part, it's for the better. With no mandate to make a two-hour movie, Snyder has the time to dig into his team of heroes. The biggest addition involves Victor Stone (Ray Fisher), aka Cyborg. Where in 2017 his arc was significantly cut, here he is the heart and soul of the movie, with greater focus being placed on his strained relationship with his father Silas (Joe Morton) to occasionally moving effect. The fleshed-out through-lines simply allow the story as a whole to breathe: small character beats add humanity (a scene involving Jeremy Irons' Alfred, Gal Gadot's Diana and some tea is charming), extended scenes (there's a surprising amount of the original cut here) provide clarity, and the absence of the broadest humour in the Whedon cut helps keep the tone consistent.



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## Coming 2 America

Whelan Barzey

Time has been kind to *Coming To America*. From a commercially popular but critically divisive hit in 1988, the Eddie Murphy vehicle, bearing a ground-breaking all-Black cast, has developed a second wind, becoming a cultural touchstone in everything from hip hop lyrics — crowd-pleasing line "The royal penis is clean, your highness" features in Nas' remix of Snoop Dogg's 'That's That' — to Jay-Z and Beyoncé cosplaying as Murphy's Prince Akeem and Madge Sinclair's Queen Aoleon. Factor in the current yen for '80s nostalgia and a belated sequel seems like a no-brainer. The result, a Prime Video pick-up from Paramount, falls short of its predecessor but offers enough good-natured laughs and spirit to make the journey worthwhile. If John Landis' original was by design a coming-of-age journey, its sequel starts by being invested in telling the story of fatherhood. Prince Akeem is no longer a pampered aristocrat, but a father to three strong daughters. With his father King Jaffe (James Earl Jones) on his deathbed, Akeem's kingdom comes under threat from neighbouring despot General Izzi (an enjoyably OTT Wesley Snipes) who wants his son to wed Akeem's oldest daughter, Meeka (Kiki Layne) in a marriage of political convenience. Yet Witch Doctor Baba (Arsenio Hall) reveals Akeem has an illegitimate son in Queens, so the newly crowned king once again heads to New York with trusted assistant Semmi (Hall again) to track down the rightful heir to the throne.



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# 04

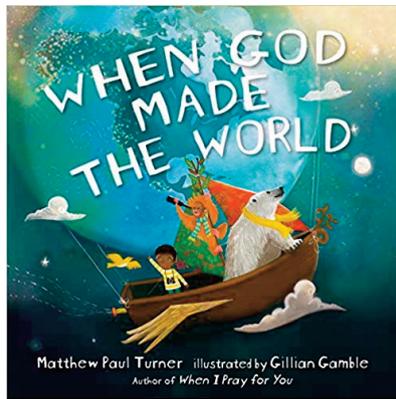
## Books

### **When God Made the World**

Matthew Paul Turner

From the author of the best-selling children's book *When God Made You* comes a rhythmic, whimsical journey through creation—for little readers who love science and wonder and the beginnings of all things.

For spiritual parents who are looking for a different kind of creation book, Matthew Paul Turner's *When God Made the World* focuses on the complex



way that God created our vast and scientifically operating universe, including the biodiversity of life on our planet and the intricacies of a vast solar system. Scottish illustrator Gillian Gamble brings the natural world to vibrant life with rich colors and poignant detail certain to stretch young minds and engage imaginations.

Planet Earth, God made a blue and green sphere,  
And designed it to orbit the sun once a year.

God made daytime and nighttime, climates and seasons,  
And all kinds of weather that vary by region.

God made continents and oceans, islands and seas,  
A north and south pole that God put in deep freeze.

God carved rivers and brooks, mountains and caves,  
Made beaches with sand and huge crashing waves.

God made tropics and plateaus, glaciers and meadows,  
marshes and tundras and erupting volcanoes.

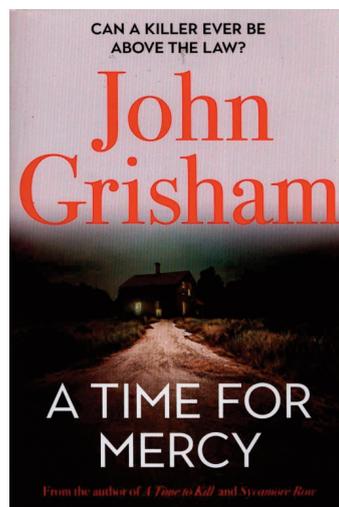
### **A Time for Mercy**

John Grisham

Deputy Stuart Kofer is a protected man. Though he's turned his drunken rages on his girlfriend, Josie, and her children many times before, the police code of silence has always shielded him.

But one night he goes too far, leaving Josie for dead on the floor before passing out. Her son, sixteen-year-old Drew, knows he only has this one chance to save them. He picks up a gun and takes the law into his own hands. In Clanton, Mississippi, there is no one more hated than a cop killer - but a cop killer's defence lawyer comes close. Jake Brigance doesn't

want this impossible case but he's the only one with enough experience to defend the boy. As the trial begins, it seems there is only one outcome: the gas chamber for Drew. But, as the town of Clanton discovers once again, when Jake Brigance takes on an impossible case, anything is possible. Starring the same hero and setting that featured in John Grisham's multi-million-selling bestsellers *A Time to Kill* (adapted as a film starring Samuel L. Jackson and Matthew McConaughey) and *Sycamore Row*, *A Time for Mercy* is an unforgettable thriller you won't be able to put down.



### **How Fascism Works**

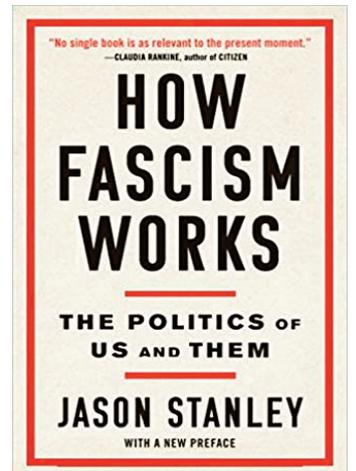
Jason Stanley

Fascist politics are running rampant in America today—and spreading around the world. A Yale philosopher identifies the ten pillars of fascist politics, and charts their horrifying rise and deep history.

As the child of refugees of World War II Europe and a renowned philosopher and scholar of propaganda, Jason Stanley has a deep understanding of how democratic societies can be vulnerable to fascism: Nations don't have to be fascist to suffer from fascist politics. In fact, fascism's roots have been present in the United States for more

than a century. Alarmed by the pervasive rise of fascist tactics both at home and around the globe, Stanley focuses here on the structures that unite them, laying out and analyzing the ten pillars of fascist politics—the language and beliefs that separate people into an “us” and a “them.” He knits together reflections on history, philosophy, sociology, and critical race theory with stories from contemporary Hungary, Poland, India, Myanmar, and the United States, among other nations. He makes clear the immense danger of underestimating the cumulative power of these tactics, which include exploiting a mythic version of a nation's past; propaganda that twists the language of democratic ideals against themselves; anti-intellectualism directed against universities and experts; law and order politics predicated on the assumption that members of minority groups are criminals; and fierce attacks on labor groups and welfare. These mechanisms all build on one another, creating and reinforcing divisions and shaping a society vulnerable to the appeals of authoritarian leadership.

By uncovering disturbing patterns that are as prevalent today as ever, Stanley reveals that the stuff of politics—charged by rhetoric and myth—can quickly become policy and reality. Only by recognizing fascists politics, he argues, may we resist its most harmful effects and return to democratic ideals.



### **The Man in the High Castle**

Philip K. Dick

Philip K. Dick's acclaimed cult novel gives us a horrifying glimpse of an alternative world - one where the Allies have lost the Second World War. In this nightmare dystopia the Nazis have taken over New York, the Japanese control California and the African continent is virtually wiped out. In a neutral buffer zone in America that divides the world's new rival superpowers, lives the author of an underground best-seller. His book offers a new vision of reality - an alternative theory of world history in which the Axis powers were defeated - giving hope to the disenchanting. Does 'reality' lie with him, or is his world just one among many others?



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