



Pyrrhic victory

Religious extremism, militancy in Afghanistan will be counterproductive for Pakistan

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan was the first world leader who wholeheartedly welcomed the Taliban's capture of Kabul on August 15 – before its fall, Pakistan had maintained that it had little leverage on the Taliban to force them to accept a ceasefire and that it backed a political solution in Afghanistan. However, on August 16, he said Afghans have “broken the shackles of slavery”, leaving little doubt on where Pakistan stands on the Taliban's return. This is hardly surprising. Pakistan not only played a central role in the Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s but was also one of the three countries to have had formal diplomatic ties with them. Pakistan continued to support the Taliban even after they were driven out of power by the U.S. in 2001. Its strategic calculus was that a stable Afghanistan backed by the U.S. and India would harm its core interests. It hosted the Taliban leadership in Quetta, Balochistan, and allowed their militants to regroup and resume insurgency in Afghanistan. In that sense, the Taliban's capture of Kabul can be seen as the success of a long-term strategy Pakistan's military establishment had adopted. But it is too early to begin celebrations.

The geopolitical implications of the Taliban's victory are still unclear. But, irrespective of what kind of a government they will establish, the resurgence of a Sunni radical jihadist group could embolden similar outfits elsewhere. Pakistan has a problem with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, the ideological twin of the Taliban, that has carried out deadly attacks inside Pakistan. Also, the August 26 Kabul blasts are a warning of what is awaiting Afghanistan. The country is still chaotic and lawless where groups such as the Islamic State Khurasan Province (IS-K), the IS affiliate that has claimed responsibility for the blasts, would seek to flourish. Without order, the country could fall into a multi-directional, civil war between the Taliban, the IS-K, and the remnants of the old regime. The question is whether Pakistan, overwhelmed by the Taliban's success, sees the possible dangers of the triumph of hardline Islamism now poses. Religious extremism and militancy can help one country tactically but will be counterproductive in the long term. When the U.S. backed the Mujahideen in the 1980s, it might never have imagined that the Taliban would rise from the Mujahideen and host the al Qaeda that would carry out the deadliest attack on America since the Second World War. Similarly, a chaotic Afghanistan ruled by extremist Islamists is as much a geopolitical victory as a security and strategic challenge to Pakistan. During the insurgency, Pakistan refused to use its leverage over the Taliban for peace. It should do so at least now because a stable Afghanistan which treats its people with dignity and does not provide safe havens to transnational terrorist organisations is in the best interests of all regional powers, including Pakistan.

For the record

Djokovic could script history if he completes the calendar Grand Slam at the US Open

In a megapolis teeming with skyscrapers, Novak Djokovic wants to be the tallest of them all. History beckons the Serbian tennis legend at the US Open currently progressing in New York. At present, Djokovic has drawn level with the other members of tennis royalty from the men's side: Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. The ‘Big Three’ have won 20 Grand Slams each and Djokovic has a chance to move ahead and perhaps stay there unchallenged. His acclaimed and relatively older rivals have skipped their annual tryst with the Flushing Meadows, formally called the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. Federer is recuperating from a knee surgery while Nadal is coping with a foot injury and it leaves the field marginally clear for the 34-year-old Djokovic, who is also chasing a calendar year Grand Slam after having won the Australian and French Opens besides the iconic Wimbledon. If Djokovic could lord over a year, he would become the first man to do that since the great Rod Laver's clean sweep back in 1969. Among women, Steffi Graf was the last to achieve this feat in 1988. However, a record-busting quest is never easy. Djokovic is acutely conscious of that after having blown a chance to pocket a Golden Slam as he crashed out of the recent Tokyo Olympics, failing to even win a bronze.

Federer and Nadal's contrasting styles, much akin to lyrical poetry and magnetic prose, may have colonised fans' hearts but Djokovic has shown that unerring consistency has an enduring charm. The Serb has often roared back into contention, covering the court, closing out the angles and digging into vast reserves of physical and mental strength. Off the turf, he may not be the ideal hero, expressing reservations against COVID-19 vaccines, but on court, despite the odd petulant bouts reserved for his racquet, Djokovic has reigned. There is also the need to make amends at the US Open as last year he accidentally struck a line judge while taking a swipe at the ball and was suspended. Austrian Dominic Thiem won the championship then but he is missing now due to a wrist injury. Among the other young turks, Alexander Zverev, who defeated Djokovic at the Tokyo Olympic semifinals, Daniil Medvedev and Stefanos Tsitsipas get another opportunity to show their mettle. Meanwhile the women's section will miss an injured Serena Williams and in a fluid set-up, Australian Ashleigh Barty holds the edge. Defending champion Naomi Osaka is on a comeback trail after she stepped aside citing mental issues during the French Open. Osaka has struggled on her return and lost in the third round of the Tokyo Olympics. She will draw attention just like a history-chasing Djokovic.

The next step in democratic evolution is overdue

India must change, from a darkening elected authoritarianism to building institutions for citizens' inclusion in governance



ARUN MAIRA

The human body, like a nation, is composed of structures and processes. A bony skeleton holds it together. Processes such as breathing, blood circulation and the formation of new cells give the body life. When vital processes become weak, the body becomes unhealthy even if the frame is strong. And when they cease, overpowered by infection, life ceases, and the bones remain to be buried.

Elements of a democracy

A democratic nation, or any nation, is also composed of structures – its constitution and laws. What distinguishes democratic nations from authoritarian ones is the liveliness of citizens' participation in the governance of their nation. In healthy democracies, citizens participate effectively in the shaping of the policies and laws by which they are governed. Democratic constitutions provide elected assemblies for citizens' representatives to shape new policies and pass laws.

Open-minded deliberation in these forums is necessary to meet the requirements of democracy. It is also essential for finding good solutions for systemic problems which must be considered from many perspectives. When these forums become chambers for close-minded partisan politics, they cannot find solutions to the complex, systemic problems that all nations must address in the 21st century: climate change, historical inequities, increasing economic inequalities, and violence brewing

with discontents within. The U.S. houses of Congress seem hamstrung by party politics; debates in the Indian Parliament have degenerated into floor battles with missiles; and, citizens of many European democracies are dismayed by the performance of their elected institutions.

Constitutions, elections, and assemblies are not all that a democracy needs to function. Though this is what the simplistic U.S. vision of converting nations to democracies – on the heels of its armed interventions in many nations – seems to suggest. Democracies have life from what happens outside the elected chambers and what happens between elections. People who belong to different political factions, practise different religions, and have different histories within the history of their nation, must listen to each other, and learn to live democratically together every day of their lives. Therefore, what healthy democracies need most of all are processes of democratic deliberations among citizens themselves.

Widening fissures

Sadly, the cracks in the Indian nation dividing ‘people like us’ from ‘people not like us’, are widening in institutions at the top as well as in relationships on the ground. Majoritarian electoral systems of democracy will harden these divisions in India, as they are in the United States. Therefore, stronger processes are urgently required for democratic discourses amongst citizens themselves to bind the national fabric before it frays further.

The media, which used to provide space for diverse perspectives to be heard, is divided along partisan lines. And social media, touted as a saviour of democracy by enabling citizens to freely listen to many points of view, has turned out to be a hardener of divisions.



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Smart algorithms have created echo chambers of people who like each other, and who do not listen to those in other chambers, and lob hate bombs at each other across the walls.

Discussions of India's chronic problems that cry for new solutions have descended into debates about whether the origins of the problems were in the times of the National Democratic Alliance or the times of the United Progressive Alliance. It seems that in any discussion about what ails the country, whether in Parliament, the media, or social gatherings, one must be seen to either support the political dispensation in power, or its opposition. There is little room for thoughtful, non-partisan deliberations among citizens.

Taking a new step

It is time for the next step in the evolution of democratic institutions. Kalypto Nicolaïdis of the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute, says, “Consent of the governed is about more than periodic elections or referenda. The process of deepening the reach of democracy remains the same as it has been for the last 200 years: a struggle to expand the franchise. This time around, it is a franchise that does not necessarily express itself through the right to vote in periodic elections, but rather through widespread inclusion in the political process in all

its forms.” A civil society movement, Citizens for Europe, has proposed a solution: a European Citizens' Assembly – a permanent transnational forum for citizens' participation and deliberation.

Words of caution though. Citizens for Europe explains the drawbacks of purely online methods, which civil society groups in Europe have tried, viz., “the risk of accentuating ideological cleavages and excluding groups affected by the digital divide”. Online forums must be supplemented by real meetings. On the other hand, merely putting people together into a room does not create conditions for thoughtful deliberation. Elected assemblies everywhere are cleaved along partisan lines. James Madison, a framer of the U.S. Constitution, had anticipated this. He wrote in Federalist paper No.55, “Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.” It is not just the quality of the people in the room that matters. Citizens' meetings, online or offline, must be properly designed and professionally facilitated to enable all points-of-view to be listened to for new insights to emerge.

I return to the analogy of the human body. The human body is a complex system composed of many complex organs and processes – the heart, the brain, the liver, digestion, respiration, self-healing, etc. Breathing is a very simple process – it is the first one that a baby learns as soon as it emerges from its mother's womb. Yet, we forget how to breathe well as we grow up. Yoga teaches us that learning to breathe well can tone up all the complex systems of the body and mind.

The missing dialogues

Human societies are also complex systems, composed of many formal institutions, and many pro-

cesses of interactions among people. Listening like breathing is a basic process.

We have forgotten how to listen well, especially to “People Not Like Us”. In schools we are taught how to speak well and win elocution contests and debates. There are no lessons in how to listen well, and no prizes for the best listeners. We listen only to “what” others say; we do not listen to understand “why” they believe what they do. Often, we stop listening even while another is speaking, mentally preparing our ripostes to win a debate. Dialogues to understand are not debates to win. They are explorations of complex issues by combining the knowledge of diverse people.

Monocultures of thought can be as sterile as monocultures in Nature. Diversity in the composition of the participants is essential for ensuring that complex issues are fully understood and new insights can emerge. However, diversity of opinions can create cacophonies unless the deliberations are managed well.

The time has come to learn to listen well, not just speak well; and to conduct dialogues, not debates. The assemblies Emperors Ashoka and Akbar conducted centuries ago in India provide some role models. Technologies of democratic deliberation have advanced since the times of the Athenians, Ashoka, and Akbar, as James Fishkin explains in *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. The soft power of India, the world's most richly diverse nation perhaps, will increase when it returns from the presently darkening elected authoritarianism to lead in the evolution of institutions for citizens' participation in democratic governance.

Arun Maira is the author of *Listening for Well-Being: Conversations with People Not Like Us*

Making out a case for propping up the middle class

Leaving out a shrinking middle class in policy to handle the deep economic impact of COVID-19 will hamper recovery



FURQAN QAMAR & TAUFEQUE AHMAD SIDDIQUI

Nobel laureate (2017) Richard H. Thaler segregates the population into “Econs” and “Humans”. Short for ‘Homo Economicus’, ‘Econs’ seldom defy economic assumptions of rationality and are flawless decision makers – akin to a preprogrammed machine. But they exist in economic literature only figuratively and are conspicuous by their absence in real life. In contrast, a vast majority of people fall under the category of ‘Humans’. They rarely behave rationally and are, thus, credulously susceptible to a wide variety of behavioural biases in their decisions.

Planners and issues

What is true for the vast populace is equally applicable to policy planners. Their education, professional training, varied experiences and grass-roots connect notwithstanding, they remain ‘Humans’ than ‘Econs’. Even when their decisions have far-reaching consequences, they are scarcely immune to the ‘present bias’ and entrust greater weight to the payoffs that are closer to the present time, thus favouring ‘instant ambitions’ over ‘enduring economic gains’. Similarly, they could be amenable to ‘overconfidence’, ‘optimism’ and ‘framing effects’ and get swayed by the way information is presented to them.

Their thought processes may al-

so be hinged on the ‘confirmation bias’ tempting them to search, interpret, and recall information which support or validate their predisposition. Even as they mean no malice, they might be manoeuvred by ‘group reinforcement’ and ‘inter-group opposition’.

Cognitive distortion such as ‘availability heuristic’ may, concurrently impel them to believe that what comes to mind more easily is likely to be a far more accurate reflection of reality. What gives them further confidence is the ‘illusion of control’ leading to overestimating their ability to control events or to take mid-course correction if the designed policy fails to deliver the desired result.

The ‘present bias’

Let us examine these phenomena in the context of handling the economic impact of COVID-19 and policies to revive the economy. The stimulus packages announced so far to mitigate the impact of the novel coronavirus and to revive the economy have included the poorest sections of the society, and the major thrust has been on the supply side. This reflects the penchant for procrastinating the immediate cost activities and preoperating the immediate reward activities. In the process, the middle class has simply been left to fend for itself.

This is juxtaposed with the obvious policy option of directing attention to long-lasting benefits focusing on the larger picture rather than being reactive to instantaneous ambitions. This simply vindicates Richard Thaler's view that ‘humans’ tend to be myopic and Ted O'Donoghue and Matthew Rabin's proposition that decisions in-



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variably suffer from the ‘present bias’.

A segment with influence

Many studies, notably, a decade-old Asian Development Bank study covering 72 countries on ‘The Role of the Middle-Class in Economic Development: What Do Cross-Country Data Show?’ (ADB Economics Working Paper Series No. 245, January 2011; <https://bit.ly/3t59Eom>) established that the middle class fosters innovation. Their “values also encourage the accumulation of human capital (via education) and savings (that can then be used for productive investment in the economy)”. Ubiquitously, “policies that factor in the welfare of the middle-class and nurture their growth may be more effective in [the] long-term”. These findings confirm what Nobel Prize winners (2019) Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo have been arguing: that the middle class has a constructive influence on the economy and society.

Closer home, it may be recalled that a 20-time increase in the middle class during the post-reform period had laid a strong foundation for high economic growth. Even as of now, the middle class constitutes close to a fourth of the

population but accounts for a fourth-fifths of the taxpayers' base. Censoriously, it accounts for three-fourths of the total consumer spending leading to the demand for consumer durables.

The pandemic's impact

Going by a Pew Research Center report, that the middle class in the country shrunk by a third or over 32 million following the first wave of the novel coronavirus pandemic, their numbers may have further withered subsequent to the second wave, which was all the more devastating. During the past year or so, rural as well as urban unemployment rates have been high. At 8.13% on August 30, 2021, it is still quite high to impact the middle class adversely. Further, out of the total non-farm jobs losses since January 2021, the middle class comprising salaried employees and entrepreneurs has been as high as 13.7 million. Only in July, 3.2 million salaried people lost their jobs.

Rising petrol and diesel prices, and edible oil and retail inflation hovering at 32.5% and 5.6%, respectively, have been further eroding their disposable income. Explicitly, a hike in food prices reduces consumers' income which could have been spent elsewhere to generate demand and thus boost the economy. The plight of the middle class can be understood by the fact that they are selling their family silver and gold jewellery to pay hospital bills, school fees and shop rent, particularly during the last four months, which may lead to further suppression of demand.

In Thaler's taxonomy, ‘Econs’ are only imaginary; the populace as a whole, irrespective of their position in the society, are only

‘humans’. So are the middle class. Herbert A Simon, yet another Nobel laureate (1978), in his theory of ‘bounded rationality’, argues that individuals with their limited attention span do not follow complete rationality. The temperament of their brain limits their ability to recognise pertinent stimuli and get vacillated by the excessive information presented by the media, publicity, or propaganda.

Despite their deteriorating condition, the middle class have neither been reactive nor have found a collective voice. Concurrently, they have become quite risk averse, which is evident from the fact that bank deposits have increased by 11.4% in 2020-21, even though interest rates have declined as their inclination to spend has subsided. This further leads to a fall in the demand. The verity is also substantiated by Reserve Bank of India's consumer confidence index. For July 2021, the index stood at 48.6 points which is just about record low.

A shrinking middle class never augurs well for the economy anywhere in the world. They need to be propped up to bring dynamism in the economy, and thus rapidly revive growth by enthusing, among other things, consumer confidence and positive sentiments.

Furqan Qamar, a Professor in finance at Jamia Millia Islamia, is a former Secretary General of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) and also a former Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Himachal Pradesh and the University of Rajasthan. Taufeeque Ahmad Siddiqui is an Assistant Professor in finance at Jamia Millia Islamia. The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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It's 'denationalisation'

The use of the word “Monetisation” by the Narendra Modi government is nothing but a euphemism for undoing the process of nationalisation, or in other words, ‘denationalisation’. The long cherished goal of socialism, first included as a part in the Directive Principles, following a resolution by the Indian National Congress at its Avadi session in 1955, and later incorporated through the 42nd amendment to the Constitution in 1976, to strive towards the

establishment of a sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic, is being buried. It is in moments like these that the Indian electorate wonders why there is no strong political opposition.

SESHAGIRI ROW KARRY, Hyderabad

Grow oil palm plan

Going in for a non-native plant species is asking for trouble, especially if the plan is to cultivate it on a large scale. Yes, the oil palm plan is a recipe for an environmental disaster

(Page 1, August 30). The uncontrolled growth of ‘Seemai karuvellam’ trees in the plains of Tamil Nadu became a nightmare in many districts. At another level, plantation cash crops have caused havoc in the High Ranges. The so-called commercial benefits of the oil palm should not make us lose sight of the larger picture.

P. DAVID BALASINGH, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu

The Centre's proposal will result in the destruction of rainforests, one of nature's

best ‘carbon sinks’. Rainforests, especially in areas where the Centre plans to cultivate oil palm – the north-east and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands – will face grave danger. There is sure to be the use of fertilizers and pesticides which will bring in their own set of problems. Why cannot there be a plan to help our farmers grow indigenous and sustainable oilseed varieties? A detail in the report is cause for suspicion – the allegation by Congress leader and former Union Environment Minister that the plan is

designed to “benefit Patanjali and Adani, both corporates with interests in edible oil expansion”.

M. DEEPIKA, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

The apprehensions of activists about the ill-effects that the introduction of oil palm will have in the north-east and the Andaman have basis. That oil palm is an extremely water intensive plant (an estimated 300 litres per plant) is a matter of concern. In case the plan moves ahead, sustainable production is essential. The

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sites for the plantations have to be chosen with great care. DIBAKAR MITRA, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

Haul of medals

The medal rain for India at the on-going Tokyo Paralympics is a shining example of ‘Yes, they can’. There is ability in disability also. The athletes have demonstrated that they can change the word and the world for us.

R. SAMPATH, Chennai