



A tough year for the people

With the onset of 2019, the PTI-led coalition government at the centre – formed a few months earlier in the preceding year – was firmly in the saddle. The party and its coalition partners were also ruling three out of four provinces, including the largest province, Punjab. Furthermore, from the highest echelons of power, it was asserted time and again during the year that there remained no historical civil-military cleavage in policy formulation and implementation. We were told that all who hold the fate of this country in their hands were on one page.

The edifice of a new idea of Pakistan, pushed to the electorate in 2018 by the ruling party, was built on these foundations: bringing an end to corruption in the economy and politics, and justice for all, irrespective of their political or social status. Needless to recall, the elections were marred by accusations of pre-poll manipulation through encouraging or pressurising various electable candidates from diverse political backgrounds to join the PTI. Besides, irregularity in polling was reportedly observed in some areas by the authorities administering the process on election day.

Nevertheless, there were many rational critics who understood that a nascent democracy – constrained by the colonial structure of the state – has to navigate turbulent waters in order to evolve. Therefore, people had little choice but to accept the legitimacy of the new dispensation and give it an even chance to translate its rhetoric into reality. Even the main opposition parties were cautious and thought that rejecting the results of the elections outright would be tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. They feared that their non-cooperation might bring an end to the democratic process altogether.

The incumbent government began with an edge over the last two governments since the restoration of democracy in 2008. The conditions were not only comparable but better than those inherited by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's PPP government in 1972 and Nawaz Sharif's PML government in 1990, when they formed governments with the state establishment firmly on their side.

But as 2019 came to an end, not only did the ruling party's commitment to improving the economy and governance remain unfulfilled, there also seemed to be no clear direction for developing an economy that would benefit people at large. The rhetoric of curbing corruption and ending financial debt was turned upside down much sooner than imagined. The compromises made with favoured politicians and big businesses were huge and palpable.

The lack of understanding and therefore weak performance of the government's first economic team had them ousted unceremoniously within months. They were replaced with new people who included old faces from previous regimes and professionals approved of by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

A desperate loan agreement with the IMF—entered into late, given the government's earlier rhetoric of discouraging borrowing because it would increase the debt burden—not only left Pakistan in a tight spot, but also meant that the IMF had decisive domination over the country's financial and monetary decision-making.

To fully comply with the conditions set forth by debt-providing international financial institutions, the government adopted a policy of austerity measures—introducing major cuts in public expenditure on development, and increasing tax rates and levying new taxes without any proper preparation in a largely undocumented economy. Consequently, growth was stifled, the currency was devalued substantially, the stock exchange plummeted, and businesses slowed down. We witnessed neither an increase in productivity and exports as a result of these policies, nor did we see any comprehensive agricultural, industrial or infrastructure plans.

Hyperinflation and unprecedented power and energy price hikes, coupled with a sharp decline in income among the middle, lower-middle and working classes, brought about extraordinary hardships for ordinary people. Poverty indicators soared and unemployment rose to new levels. The major cuts in spending on health and education hit underprivileged citizens—a large part of Pakistan's population—directly.

The inherent structural issues of Pakistan's economy and polity, which have led to widespread social and economic marginalisation—particularly of the poor and dispossessed—continued to haunt us even more in 2019.

The weakest segments of society remained invisible, unheard, neglected, and undermined when it came to the real priorities of the state. Be it children who were malnourished, subjected to hazardous labour, sexually abused, physically tortured and murdered. Or women who continued to face violence and discrimination at home, at the workplace and in public spaces. Or prisoners in the country's overpopulated jails, who have long been relegated to subhuman level.

Pakistan continued to bear a dismal human rights record in terms of complying with the constitutional guarantees to its own citizens and the international obligations to which it is a state party. There were no

significant developments during the year in the administration of justice, maintaining law and order, criminalising enforced disappearances, improving the status of women, transgender persons and sexual minorities, ending child abuse, ceasing the shabby treatment of citizens from minority faiths, or addressing the dire socioeconomic problems faced by labourers, miners, farmers, sanitation workers, media persons, nurses, teachers, and fisherfolk.

The year 2019 will be remembered for the systematic curbing of political dissent by various means, constraints to the freedom of the mainstream media, digital surveillance, and the over-regulation of social media spaces. Interviews with opposition leaders were taken off air during broadcast. The government decided to put a squeeze on independent and critical voices, particularly targeting premier newspapers such as *Dawn* and muffling voices on many television channels, including Geo News and Aaj TV. Several thousand journalists, photographers and other categories of media persons lost their jobs, and a number of newspapers and magazines ceased to publish because government advertisements were blocked and dues to media houses remained unpaid.

At the time of writing this overview, Pakistan is well into 2020 and suffering at the hands of the global Covid-19 pandemic. This health emergency only confirms what we have inferred from the experience of 2019.

The government needs to undertake critical introspection with a view to realising the social and economic rights of its citizens—be it investing in the public healthcare system or creating opportunities for decent livelihoods. Pakistan needs to eliminate poverty not only through effective and universal social safety nets in the short run, but also by developing a people-centred economy where market forces are subservient to citizens' welfare.

The government needs to reorient the economy towards increased productivity and gainful employment for all. It must reprioritise public spending in favour of health, education and fundamental municipal services. Much can be delivered through elected local governments, which must be restored and empowered immediately.

Finally, the government must appreciate the importance of civil and political rights, and respect the freedoms of expression, association and assembly for all: common citizens, political workers, professionals, labour, farmers and students. The protection of these rights is a prerequisite to creating a healthy society and sustainable polity. If we recall Pakistan's political history—however chequered—the muffling of voices eventually leads to an unmanageable dissonance in the body politic, which in turn erodes the very base of government.

We look forward to the state and the incumbent government correcting the course by demonstrating their allegiance to the federal and democratic character of the constitution, with civilian supremacy ensured through Parliament. We also demand a commitment to creating equal citizenship rights for all without prejudice.

Harris Khaliq
Secretary-General