

Pakistan: A year of reversals

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A year ago, Imran Khan was sworn in as the newly elected prime minister of Pakistan. It appeared Khan had cemented his legacy as someone who could achieve the impossible, fitting into the carefully cultivated narrative around his cricketing and philanthropic achievements. The headlines were stacked in his favour with only Bilawal Bhutto's use of the term "selected" momentarily disrupting the pervasive anticipation for Naya Pakistan.

Today a year after the fanfare, the enthusiasm seems much dimmer, and Khan's support base a lot more anxious (and abusive). An endless economic crisis, not only the opposition but the media complaining of hostility, and the foreign policy setback in Kashmir have drained some of the excitement generated by his arrival. Reviewing Khan's first year in office provides important clues to understanding the character of Naya Pakistan and its future trajectory.

There were two salient features of the political mythology built around Khan. One was the ambitious nature of his personality and his towering dreams for Pakistan. It was not enough to improve Pakistan, but to make it the envy of the world – and that too at a breathtaking speed. So, bravado trumped historical constraints. Second, there was a reduction of politics to personality traits, with the 'honest Khan' himself enough to overcome the multiple crises faced by Pakistan. A fixation with personal ethics replaced debates on ideological orientation.

An example of these tendencies among PTI supporters is the precious little appreciation of ways in which political parties and their workers have resisted years of draconian authoritarianism. Instead, the complex drama of intrigues, sacrifices, and betrayals that forms our turbulent history is simplified in two words – 'corruption' and 'dynasties'. Such historical erasure sets the stage for a larger-than-life figure who would set things right based on his whim.

The spectacular policy reversals of the last one year, however, have been shock-inducing even for critics like myself who thought the PTI's political project was vacuous to begin with. For example, a party that positioned itself as anti-IMF led one of the most astonishing capitulations in front of the financial institution. Not only did Pakistan agree to anti-poor policies but it also handed over the finance ministry and the State Bank to men trusted more by IMF representatives than by the Pakistani people. One cannot recall this level of docility in front of international finance sans the interim regimes of the 1990s. Similarly, the ill-preparation and subsequent paralysis of the government in the face of Modi's assault on Kashmir has been embarrassing for a party that left no opportunity to accuse opponents of being Indian agents, if not Modi's friends.

Perhaps what is more tragic is to see the PTI support base indulge in somersaults to build a coherent defence of a chaotic governance model. Increasingly, the extravagant claims of instantly overcoming the debt crisis or turning Pakistan into "Sweden" have given way to cold, calculated cynicism on the possibilities of change in the country. Such defence first emerged when critics pointed out the infiltration of numerous political heavyweights with dubious records into the PTI. Yet, supporters toed the line of the leader, insisting that 'electables' were a necessary feature of Pakistani politics and their entry would be dwarfed by Khan's presence at the top.

This opportunistic use of realism proved to be a slippery slope, as nearly all major policy decisions have not only been unpopular, but have been justified using the same logic. We are told that the government had no choice but to engage with the IMF and that Khan's "heart" is not with the deal even if he is overseeing one of the toughest programmes in the Fund's history. The mounting debt burden and price hike are just "harsh" realities that have to be accepted, an argument that was equated with corruption and nepotism when presented by previous governments. And the recent crisis in Kashmir has seen a hawkish base turn into doves overnight, arguing against the "dangers" inherent in opposition demands to confront India, a turnaround so abrupt that it would bewilder even the most cynical realists.

Despite claims of rupturing from the present, the PTI's discourse can now be termed as a defence of the worst excesses of the same present. And its leadership, far from being a representative of hope and impossible ambition, now appears diminished, symbolizing the incapacity of wishful thinking when faced with historical realities.

Notwithstanding its self-description, the PTI's historical role has turned into that of a cynical entity, an example against the futility of dreaming that fits rather neatly into our cynical age. Clearly, history has played a cruel joke on those who never took history seriously.

The defeat of bravado of the policy realm has compelled the PTI leadership to distance itself from its actions by blaming the situation on previous governments. This distancing allows the leadership to revert to its comfort zone of personalizing politics by pinning blame on specific individuals for the dismal state of the economy. The supposed crackdown on corruption and 'anti-state' elements has seen the arrests of senior figures from politics, media, the civil society and the academia.

This crackdown is not meant to create an efficient bureaucratic machine that can fight corruption. Instead, there is a theatricality associated with these arrests by turning them into spectacles that can be enjoyed by a voyeuristic base seeking pleasure in acts of cruelty. What else would explain the roar of the crowd in Washington over the vow to take away air-conditioning from Nawaz Sharif's cell? The manner in which some recent arrests have been made has also served no purpose other than projecting raw power at a time when the government appears rather incapable at the policy level.

The general tendency of the current setup therefore is one of compensating for policy failures by indulging in spectacular acts turning Pakistan into a carceral democracy. The more it appears helpless in front of the constraints of the historical realities, the harsher/fiercer/more ruthless it becomes against opponents to solidify its base. There is no longer any concrete or identifiable vision for the future in Naya Pakistan. Instead, all we are offered is an iron cage of the present, only a lot more punishing and petty as compared to its predecessors. As the current setup exhausts its potential to deliver, it may appear as a footnote in the larger story of authoritarianism in Pakistan.

Our experience in working class neighbourhoods suggests that large swathes of urban poor feel disillusioned as they do not have the luxury of endless somersaults to justify chaotic governance. But the increasing aggression of middle-class PTI supporters on social media suggests that there is pervasive understanding that things are faltering and that the persona of "Cornered Tigers" may not be sustainable for a sitting government.

What is most unfortunate is that the rapid fall from grace of the candidacy of "hope" and "change" will harden pessimism at a time when young people must engage with big ideas to confront the challenges our world faces.

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