

Trivializing hope

Dr. Sania Nishtar

The events of May 2nd and 21st have left the nation embarrassed and demoralized. The challenges arising as a result thereof may compound Pakistan's existing problems. Many find it difficult to search for beacons of hope within the myriad of problems at a time like this. Within this context, this comment is an attempt to explore if there is reason for hope, and if so, what is it, that needs to transpire to turn the tide in a positive direction.

Whilst trying to frame an answer to this question, I am reminded of another question I was once asked at an international meeting: "how would you describe the Pakistani society?"

Struggling to portray a positive image of my country, I was fortunately able to quickly recall that a "society" is much broader than the "state" and that whilst the state may be predatory and beholden to capture at various levels, these attributes don't necessarily describe societal characteristics. A society in any nation state comprises a number of human and institutional actors and relationships and is much broader than those concerning political aspects, which fall within the remit of the state.

The Pakistani society has many positive attributes. With respect to ideological trends, the society falls on the spectrum, with a majority subscribing to moderation as opposed to extremism, desirous of a peaceful, prosperous and progressive role for Pakistan in a globalized world. The Pakistani society has a strong tradition of volunteering and giving—not just rooted in faith but also as part of the sense of social responsibility. This attribute has come into play on several occasions at times of natural calamities, with the 2005 earthquake and more recent 2010 floods, being illustrative. It is also evidenced on an every day basis as the proportion of individual philanthropy supporting public hospitals and schools. The Pakistani societal fabric is woven deeply with family values, as a result of which the Pakistani diasporas remain committed to their roots.

We are the 6th largest country in the world, with a large segment of a population much younger, and potentially useful, than in other parts of the world. The Pakistani society is also a large consumer base, a large market, with a vibrant private sector. Despite the myriad of challenges in the country and the stagnant economy, consumer statistics have an upward trend, indicative of growing demand.

Moreover, there exists within the Pakistani milieu a vibrant civil society, which, subsequent to the lawyers' movement has discovered its newfound strength. A tradition of activism appears to be burgeoning as a result. The country has a vibrant and free media, which has been proactive in shaping the societal political culture. Another strength of the Pakistani society, ironically, is its resilience. Millions of people survive in harsh economic circumstances; for many, the state exists only in the sense of the fragmented justice and law enforcement system

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Moreover, there exists within the Pakistani milieu a vibrant civil society, which, subsequent to the lawyers' movement has discovered newfound strength. A tradition of activism appears to be burgeoning as a result. The country has a vibrant and free media, which has been proactive in shaping the societal political culture. Another strength of the Pakistani society, ironically, is its resilience. Millions of people survive in harsh economic circumstances; for many, the state exists only in the sense of the fragmented justice and law enforcement system they stumble on every now and then. They subsist without ever knowing what their rights are, and how the state fails them in its obligations.

Whilst these potential societal strengths exist, many challenges lurk. Societal fault lines are emerging with reli-

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gion, ethnicity and social inequities as their basis and ideological allegiances are fast polarising. The population dividend is becoming increasingly untenable. The burgeoning market is fast becoming a prey to organised cartels and the informal and black economy is increasing in quantum. Vested interests groups are organising within the civil society. Factions within the media are falling prey to capture. The resilient poor are being pushed to the limit as sluggish growth, compounded by the energy crisis increases unemployment and high inflation assumes a backbreaking magnitude. It is important to recognise that it is weaknesses at the level of the state, which are fast eroding most of the strengths within the society.

The role of a strong state in harnessing societal strengths for improving national outcomes should not be underestimated. The population dividend can hold promise, if it is harnessed with the right vision for a growth strategy, led and implemented by successive responsible governments in an environment of policy consistency. The remarkable societal attribute of giving, supporting and contributing can be amplified if synergies are exploited systematically through legal and fiscal instruments, which incentivise phi-

lanthropy both for the indigenous population as well the diasporas and through mechanisms that can demonstrate transparent use of contributions towards national causes. The state can make the market work for equity and quality, harness entrepreneurial talent of the private sector for revitalising state enterprise, leverage outreach of private providers for public goals, capitalise civil society's independent spirit and innovative thinking, ride the media wave for strengthening the societal fabric, the list of opportunities can go on.

Most importantly, it is only through an honest, impartial and uncoloured hand of the state that the channels of resources, which feed the extremist elements, can be plugged. It is only the state which can checkmate mafia groups, their predatory behaviours, and their inextricable relationship with political party finance. These systemic fault-lines are playing havoc with law and order. In addition to threatening lives they are having a domino effect on the economy and are further deepening inequities in the society, which have a chicken and egg relationship with unrest and violence, perpetuating a vicious cycle.

It is time for a reality check. We must recognise that our failures are largely indigenously manufactured. Rather than blaming external actors, it is best to look inwards for fault-lines that can be cemented.

We must know that our biggest security threat today is lack of economic security and that the country's most pervasive limitations are technological, knowledge base and human resource capacity related. We must recognise that our lack of integration with the global economic system is a major disadvantage. The biggest threat to the country comes not from outside but from our own shortcomings. From our failure to ensure separation of powers between the pillars of the state and institutionalise checks and balances. From our inability to uphold the principles of democracy and the practice of openness and collective deliberations, consensus-building, participation and evidence-based decision-making, critically important attributes in statecraft. From our failure to build safeguards against abuse, collusion and patronage and our ambivalence to the lack of fairness, transparency and accountability within the system.

The solutions to these problems will not come in the shape of "external assistance". They have to emanate constructively from within us. Leadership, at all levels of society, with a vision for unity, hope and discipline is the need of the hour.

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The solutions to these problems will not come in the shape of "external assistance". They have to emanate constructively from within us. Leadership, at all levels of society, with a vision for unity, hope and discipline is the need of the hour. In one of my forthcoming comments I will attempt to draw a list of what will help and how each one of us can contribute.

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