Will They Ever Be Friends?

The love-hate relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to be a permanent feature in the region.
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Analysing the love-hate relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
UPCOMING B2B EVENTS . . .

PLASTI&PACK
1 - 3 September 2015, Karachi Expo Centre
13th International Plastics & Packaging Industry Trade Fair
Website: www.plastipac.com.pk
E-mail: info@plastipac.com.pk

PRINT
1 - 3 September 2015, Karachi Expo Centre
3rd International Printing, Labeling, Paper & Paper Converting Industry Exhibition
Website: www.plastipac.com.pk
E-mail: info@plastipac.com.pk

Pakistan food+hospitality
1 - 3 September 2015, Karachi Expo Centre
4th International Food, Beverages & Hospitality Trade Fair
Website: www.foodtech.com.pk
E-mail: info@foodtech.com.pk

SAFE SECURE Pakistan
1-3 March 2016
Pak-China Friendship Centre, Islamabad
12th International Safety & Security Exhibition & Conference
Website: www.safesecurepakistan.com
E-mail: info@safesecurepakistan.com

Pakistan food + bev tec
1 - 3 September 2015, Karachi Expo Centre
12th Edition of the International Food, Beverage & Packaging Technology Trade Fair
Website: www.foodtech.com.pk
E-mail: info@foodtech.com.pk

POGEE
19 - 21 May 2016, Lahore Expo Centre
14th International Exhibition for the Energy Industry
Website: www.pogee.com.pk
E-mail: info@pogee.com.pk

INTERTRANS
4th International Multi-Modal Transportation, Logistics Conference
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Queering the Pitch

It seems India has again upped the temperature against Pakistan. On the one hand, the continuous Indian shelling on the working boundary with Pakistan, has caused deaths of several innocent Pakistanis in the Sialkot sector. On the other is India’s cultural invasion of Pakistan. It is not quite clear as to why India has felt the need to pound the Pakistan side of the international border with unprovoked mortar shelling whereas the Pakistan army has exercised relative restraint and has not retaliated with the same venom. Subsequently, a team of UN military observers has visited the border areas to see the damage caused. Known as the UNMOGIP (UN Military Observers Group in India and Pakistan), these observers have been located at the ceasefire line between India and Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir since 1949 and supervise the truce between the two neighbours. However, India has been maintaining that the UNMOGIP has outlived its utility and has become irrelevant after the Simla Agreement and the consequent establishment of the Line of Control (LoC).

In an earlier development, Pakistan scrapped scheduled talks with India (due to start on August 23, 2015), saying the Indian condition to keep Kashmir off the agenda was a hurdle in the talks. This was probably in reaction to a statement by the Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj that the talks between India and Pakistan should only focus on the issue of terrorism. There were also reports that India had briefly put Kashmiri separatist leaders under house arrest and this had further soured the environment before the talks between the Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and his Pakistani counterpart Sartaj Aziz. In calling off the talks, Pakistan said that if discussing terrorism was the only purpose of the discussions, this would only intensify the blame game. It may be recalled that in 2014, India had called off secretary-level talks with Pakistan following India’s criticism of Pakistani High Commissioner in India, Abdul Basit meeting Kashmiri leaders. Pakistan had said at that point that it was a longstanding practice that, prior to any Pakistan-India talks, meetings with Kashmiri leaders were held to facilitate their meaningful participation in the discussions on the issue of Kashmir.

This time, however, the very issue of Kashmir was completely left out by the Indians and all they wanted to talk about was Pakistan’s purported role in terrorism. It did not quite register with the Indian side that terrorism was a key issue in the region and a problem that the Pakistan government, army and the people at large were also battling at all levels. The Indians also needed to understand that, along with the ‘how,’ ‘why’ and ‘who’ of terrorism, which was equally important for the Pakistanis, any meaningful dialogue between India and Pakistan needed to include Kashmir, the mother of all issues, as well as the problems of Sir Creek, Siachin and river waters, for the talks to make any headway vis-à-vis. improving relations between the two major South Asian neighbours. India has now singled out Pakistan as a perpetrator of terrorism in the region while Pakistan is licking its wounds over having left out Kashmir from the agenda in Ufa. All that the two countries now seem to be doing is go round in circles while serious problems continue to fester between them for well nigh seven decades and the South Asian region is left way behind on the human development and socio-economic fronts.

India is a much bigger country than Pakistan in every respect but since the peoples of both countries share almost similar cultures and an almost common lingua franca (Urdu-Hindi), the media in both countries, particularly cinema and television, cater to an audience of almost 1.3 billion people. India takes full advantage of its supremacy and feeds a high level of cultural propaganda to the Pakistani masses, primarily through cinema. Indian films were banned in Pakistan following the 1965 war. But the gates were thrown wide open with the advent of video technology, the revival of Indian film imports and now the easy to access online media. It was in this backdrop that the Indian film ‘Phantom’ focused on the so-called terrorism that was alleged to be perpetrated in India by certain Pakistani terrorist groups. It is good that the exhibition of such films has been banned in Pakistan because these ventures only serve to queer the pitch in an already volatile political environment.
Lack of cooperation among SAARC nations

Published in Southasia’s August 2015 issue, the lead article on energy-deficient SAARC region was well researched and informative. A lack of cooperation among the South Asian countries is the biggest obstacle that hinders their ability to generate sufficient electricity and power, particularly from the renewable energy resources. At the moment, not a single country in South Asia has abundant energy to meet its needs completely and regular power outages are very common in this part of the world. The uniformity of the issue speaks volumes of their inability to devise viable means to generate sufficient power through untapped energy resources, e.g., solar energy, wind power, geothermal, biomass, hydropower and wave and tidal power, etc. Other than the looming energy-deficiency and power crisis, the whole SAARC region has been also grappling with climate change challenges which, as a result, lead them to acute water scarcities as well. However, SAARC countries have yet to increase their pace in quest of sustainable energy solutions that cannot be achieved without cooperation and mutual support. Since the energy crisis remains the same in these countries, there is a need to set regional disputes aside and work together to find a permanent energy solution before it’s too late.

Dr. Farid Uddin Shahab, Karachi, Pakistan

Bangladesh and Millennium Development Goals

This letter is apropos the article ‘Human development challenge’ by Dr. Moonis Ahmar, published in Southasia in its August, 2015 issue. The government of Bangladesh has performed well to achieve these predefined MDGs so far, but the pace is not as fast as it is supposed to be. As rightly noted by the writer, the present government is enjoying complete authority and power with no such pressure or challenges posed by the opposition, but still the government’s efforts are not well directed and focused. The main reason behind this lethargy is an unclear agenda mixed with unrealistic goals and objectives. For example, the net enrolment ratio of children in primary education has been increasing in Bangladesh day by day. On the other hand, the dropout rate has increased too, especially in rural areas. Similarly, the nation has positively noted a reduction of infant mortality, but this trend is mainly restricted to urban areas compared to rural communities where the infant mortality rate is alarmingly higher. It is high time for the Bangladeshi government to closely monitor its performance and make an all out effort to achieve its human development goals soon.

Farida Bano
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Tamils in Sri Lanka

After a decade long civil war, Tamils are now making an effort to conform to contemporary society in Sri Lanka. However, the overall scenario regarding the adjustment of Tamils into the mainstream is not that encouraging, as many people from Tamil communities have shared their grievances regarding the lack of equal opportunities available compared to the other communities living in the same land. Now, when the new government has taken place in Sri Lanka, it must act to bring the Tamils back to the system by offering equal opportunities in education, employment, healthcare and other socioeconomic sectors. It is vital to make the estranged Tamils feel they are as essential a part of Sri Lanka and stand equal to those referred to as the sons of the soil. This process may take time, but it is the only way the present Sri Lankan government can win their lost confidence.

Rajini Thiyagarajah, Gampola, Sri Lanka

Vyapam scandal in India

In India, the Vyapam scandal has come out as the biggest admissions and recruitment scam to date. Though the scam has appeared in Madhya Pradesh only, there are many other states where dozens of such small and medium sized racketeers are operating freely and unnoticeably. Of course, the mafia rules the roost when the state loses its writ. This is happening right now in many parts of the India. As time goes by, the ongoing scandal is becoming more complicated to handle and despite the severity of the matter, concerned authorities are unable to find the main culprits behind this scam. It is a matter of surprise how these terrible criminal activities are carried out right under your nose with so much discipline and order and that too in the presence of law enforcement departments.

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Bhutan Going Global

This is with reference to the article “Flirting with the dragon” published in Southasia’s August 2015 issue. No doubt, it is pleasing to see that Bhutan is now going global trying to make renewed connections with the larger economies of the world. In my opinion, the young leadership in Bhutan has realized the fact that they cannot afford to be isolated from the rest of the world and it is necessary to see beyond their neighbour and old allies. I am an ardent fan of Bhutan’s Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, as he has been really working hard to make a tiny Bhutan stand shoulder to shoulder with the international community on equal ground and principles. Coming out of the cocoon, Bhutan is gradually emerging and it must keep up the momentum to derive economic benefits from ongoing diplomatic efforts.

Sabitri Sunwar, Wangdue Phodrang, Bhutan

government must look at this matter seriously and take a tough stand against the wrongdoers without delay.

Jaigopal Singh, Ashok Nagar, India

Future of Afghan refugees

As per the latest statistics revealed by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Pakistan hosts around 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees, which is still the largest refugee population internationally. Other than the registered count, there are also many unregistered refugees who have been living in Pakistan since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. Unfortunately, none of the Afghan governments have taken any measures to bring these refugees back to Afghanistan and the future of these Afghan refugees hangs in the balance. On numerous occasions, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has shown his willingness for the repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, but he has not done anything mentionable in this regard. Now it looks like the present government in Afghanistan is not really interested in bringing its displaced citizens back to the country, which is very disappointing. The Afghan government as well as the United Nations must speed up the repatriation of refugees to their motherland with dignity and respect.

Jamal Ahmed Ghani, Kandahar, Afghanistan

“We should raise the issue of Samjhauta Express to counter India while taking up the matter of 26/11 Mumbai attacks.”

Pervez Musharraf, former President of Pakistan

“We have special relations with the US which are based on mutual respect and confidence.”

Mamnoon Hussain, President of Pakistan

“Though I happily recall incidents of my school life with hardships experience by walking miles and miles, I am not ready to allow future generations of children to suffer such hardships.”

Maithripala Sirisena, President of Sri Lanka

“The Maldivian government has given assurances to the Indian government and our neighbouring countries as well to keep the Indian Ocean a demilitarised zone.”

Abdulla Yameen, President of the Maldives

“A bullet shell is a symbol of an interrupted life.”

Daria Marchenko, Ukrainian artiste

“Electricity is like oil for us and is the most abundant resource.”

Tshering Tobgay, Prime Minister of Bhutan

“Days of chalking out development plans sitting in Delhi are over. Priority of my government is to devise plans suited to development of states.”

Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India

“Dr. Abdul Kalam was a source of inspiration to the young generation of South Asia, someone who gave wings to their dreams.”

Sheikh Hasina Wajid, Prime Minister of Bangladesh

“The negotiations are the solution, the way and this is what our nation wants, to end the bloodshed.”

Ashraf Ghani, President of Afghanistan

“Terrorism is a big enemy to peace, stability, democracy and development.”

Sushil Koirala, Prime Minister of Nepal

“It’s very strange to talk to people who have lost their awareness that that’s what they’re doing.”

Jon Stewart, American Producer/Director and TV Host

“I look forward to being able to sit on my couch now and follow the boys closely from there.”

Michael Clarke, Australian cricketer
**PAKISTAN**

### Mega Project

The government of Pakistan has signed an agreement with Russia for the construction of a North-South gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore. The accord between both countries is a part of a mega project, which also includes the construction of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Pakistan. The Russian Ministry of Energy is offering complete technology and technical support to build Pakistan's oil and gas infrastructure. As per the agreement, the project will only use Russian technology, equipment, materials, and products. Many Russian companies are going to participate and undertake research, design and construction activities in the 25-year project. 🇷🇺

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**PAKISTAN**

### More Cars

German automobile manufacturer Volkswagen has decided to set up an auto assembling plant in Pakistan. A 14-member business delegation of Germany visited Pakistan recently, including Volkswagen representatives. Business representatives have shown interest in setting up an assembly unit in Pakistan to manufacture and introduce a range of auto brands in the market. Volkswagen is the second largest auto manufacturer in the world in terms of international trade volumes and market share. The government in Pakistan is also revising its existing auto policy to encourage international car manufacturers to set up their manufacturing units in the country. 🇳🇵

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**INDIA**

### Solar Train

The Indian Railways will soon introduce the world’s first solar-powered train. The train will be totally locally made and will use a mix of thermal and solar energy, instead of diesel. The idea of making a solar train has been derived by ‘Solar Impulse’, an experimental solar-powered Swiss aircraft which had landed in India a few months earlier. With rooftop solar panels, the solar train will operate like a mobile solar power plant, as it will not only meet its energy requirements on its own, but will also export power to the grid. Currently, the solar train is in a testing phase. 🇮🇳

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**INDIA**

### Motorcycle Ambulance

A motorcycle ambulance service has been launched in Kerala state in India. The motorcycle is equipped with a first aid kit and lifesaving medical equipment such as automated external defibrillator (AED), pulse oximeter, oxygen cylinder, BP Apparatus, glucometer, half spine board, C Collar and portable suction. The main purpose behind the introduction of the two-wheeler ambulance service is to ensure immediate medical access to patients even during traffic jams. The motorcycle ambulance is driven by a trained paramedic while another ambulance-cum-mobile ICU follows the motorcycle throughout the journey. The service is available around the clock and free of cost. 🇮🇳
Balloon Internet

Google has signed an agreement with the Sri Lankan government to deploy a balloon-based internet network in the country. The project is called ‘Project Loon.’ The solar-powered balloon will float 12 miles above the earth and will provide immediate internet connectivity to the entire island. The sky-mounted Loon is a distinct internet infrastructure. Through this platform, Google will provide an LTE-speed network to local telecom operators in Sri Lanka who will share the signal with users without using any cables. The network is a hundred times faster than fixed, cabled-based internet connections. The project will be completely deployed in 2016 and Sri Lanka will become first South Asian country to use Google’s internet balloons.

No Toy Guns

There is good news for people living in a country with decades of war and insurgencies. The Afghan Interior Ministry has put a ban on selling and using toy guns throughout the country. The decision was taken when more than 180 children suffered eye injuries from toy weapons during Eid-Ul-Fitr holidays. The ministry has ordered local police to confiscate toy guns and seemingly harmless plastic pistols that can lead to long-term damage to children, both physically and psychologically. Since the ban went into effect, Afghan police forces have seized toy guns from local shops and toy stores.

Other Category

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal has added a separate gender category in passports for people who are normally categorized as LGBTI (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual). The new category ‘Other’ will refer to people who do not identify themselves as male or female as per their sexual leanings. In 2011, Nepal had already added a third gender category in its national identity cards. Other than Nepal, Australia and New Zealand are the only countries in the world that have amended their passport regulations and have included ‘other’ as a gender category in their passports.

Carbon Calculator

The Bangladesh 2050 energy and carbon emissions calculator, known as the BD2050, has been launched. The BD2050 calculator will help in identifying energy secure pathways according to the country’s total supply and demand of energy between 2015 and 2050. The calculator will help both government and local NGOs to explore energy, economic and emission pathways and to form viable climate change policies. Overall, it will help obtain comprehensive statistical data related to energy, emissions and land use in the country as well as data-driven climate forecasts. The application has been developed by Cardiff University in the UK.
Still seething from an uneasy and fairly volatile relationship with President Hamid Karzai, Pakistan was eager for a change in Afghan leadership perhaps anticipating a more pliant successor. Pliability is critical in the Af-Pak relationship given Afghanistan’s strategic value to Pakistan and the looming “threat” on its eastern border. A docile and amenable Afghan President is in the best interests of Pakistan, however, the intensity of influence Pakistan enjoys in the Afghan political sphere is fast waning.

Upon assuming office, President Ghani publicly prioritized Afghanistan’s relationship with Pakistan thus ushering in a new era of mutual cooperation. Initially, Ghani publicly praised Pakistan’s efforts at addressing terrorism in the region going so far as to also acknowledge the country’s hostility with India and remaining careful to not playing both sides against the other. In his visit to India, Ghani attempted to maintain a balance and paid careful heed to how his statements would be received in Pakistan. To term this as a show of noble intentions or anything less than a shrewdly calculated move would be naïve. Within the geo-political realm, as US troops gear up to withdraw, Afghanistan needs Pakistan more than ever. An amicable relationship between the two was essential in initiating the embryonic peace process (that has since been abandoned) deemed critical to ensure any level of political stability that Afghanistan could strive for. Marking a break from his predecessor, Ghani sought Pakistan’s support in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Despite initial positive overtures by the Afghan President, the bilateral relationship with Pakistan has quickly soured. However, converging interests and dangerous entrants point to the inevitability of cooperation.

By Arsla Jawaid
...this is where the problem lies. While Pakistan may have been committed to the negotiation process and playing its role in convincing Taliban members, its capacity to do so is over-estimated. A combination of fighters who fled North Waziristan into Afghanistan as a result of the military operation along with the growing presence of ISIS have already muddied the waters. Furthermore, the announcement of Mullah Omar’s death has thrown the Afghan Taliban into disarray with further fragmentation and an on-going battle for leadership. The new chief, Mullah Mansoor, faces severe criticism not only in his accession to the coveted position but also for his readiness to participate in the peace talks and welcome Pakistan’s initiative.

Both the Ghani government and the Taliban leadership now find themselves on the defensive, with each trying to distance themselves from Pakistan and first maintain their own footing. Mansoor has played to the gallery, as he should, and after a momentary delay of the talks, has publicly stated that the Taliban will not be participating at all. The leadership does not see any significant returns from participating and Pakistan will face an uphill task trying to convince them otherwise. Already facing defections, Mansoor will need to first earn his legitimacy and prove his worth in order to retain the strength the Taliban hope to command once the Americans leave. Alienating Pakistan for some time will undoubtedly be necessary. The presence of ISIS in Afghanistan provides a ready alternative for those seeking greater ambitions and feeling betrayed by the new Afghan leadership. IS is clear in its narrative mostly because it does not have a history of depending on Pakistani patronage.

Ghani’s government (accused by Pakistan for releasing the information about Mullah Omar’s death in an effort to derail the peace talks) also finds itself struggling to maintain control. Anti-Pakistan sentiment is high in Afghanistan yet so are security concerns and militancy. Ghani hedged his bets in believing that Pakistan could be the key partner in exerting influence and ushering in a new era of peace and stability. Giving Pakistan the opportunity at the time (one that it missed), the dominant view is that it will discourage future leaders from making offers like this to Pakistan again. Ghani is already struggling to maintain the National Unity Government and with foreign troop withdrawal expected by the end of 2016, it is severely unlikely that the Afghan National Army (ANA) will be able to maintain security. Militant attacks in Afghanistan have mounted tremendously this year and are expected to rise as the country becomes yet another battlefield to a myriad of different groups vying for influence. In light of that, the strength and continuity of the government is absolutely essential. Pakistan’s role would have been central in ensuring a peaceful transition. However, that window has rapidly shut as realities on ground have catered to new militant groups and disenchanted fighters looking for new patrons. Pakistan may not be seen as a preferred partner at the moment as internal concerns take center stage.

Facing strong pressure from his coalition government, Ghani too has adopted a harder stance against Pakistan arguing much like the US administration for Pakistan to “do more.”

The fact that Pakistan was handed the reigns to ensure that the Taliban come to the negotiating table also reveals the fragility of the current Afghan government and its sphere of influence. Pakistan for its part has certainly given the impression that it wields considerable influence; a degree which, now clearly, has been exaggerated. The Taliban will not come to the table, much less agree on a ceasefire, in the current environment of volatility and an on-going power struggle.

It is nonetheless essential that both sides understand that they need each other. With the entrance of ISIS, Pakistan cannot continue its policy of maintaining strategic depth in Afghanistan. Given the reshuffling of the Afghan Taliban, it may very well not be able to. A strong partnership and mutual cooperation between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan are truly essential to maintaining peace and stability in order to yield greater benefits for the long-term future. The Afghan government will desperately need Pakistan’s support as it continues to battle the insurgency waged within its borders. While publicly the two may maintain an acceptable level of political hostility, diplomatic efforts and intelligence sharing must prevail, even if covertly. The interests for both countries converge and better communication is in order. Before the stakes get too high, a prompt re-evaluation of the current relationship is essential in order to get back on track and move ahead, together.

Arsla Jawaid is currently pursuing a M.A in International Affairs at Columbia University. She has previously worked with the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) and has consulted for the U.S Institute of Peace (USIP).
Afghanistan has been in a mess for a long time. The Americans invaded the country in 2001. The last of them are still around and will stay on till December of 2016. and their 15 years of occupation is gradually tapering off. Since 1995, the Taliban ruled, which in itself was a serious anomaly because of the nature of their rule and social vision. It was likened to the stone-age and wasn't far from the truth. Before then, Afghanistan was literally at war within and this divided into ungovernable factions. The war of 1979-89 against the Soviet Union left in its wake regional commanders and warlords each with their own army.

As the larger civil war after 1989 manifested itself between the Persian speaking non-Pashtun Northern Alliance and the Pashtun Taliban, the local warlords with their respective armies changed sides to suit their advantage. That embroiled the entire Afghan society into an unending feud. Things aren't any different now, if you care to look beyond Kabul.

The Karzai years were in effect the American years with Karzai a puppet who owed his position to their pervasive presence. Forget his blow-hot, blow-cold diatribes against the Americans and everyone else who was in Afghanistan. His special attention was always reserved for neighbor Pakistan because it was easy to pin blame on them with the entire world shouting duplicity. How far was that true is another matter, but it left a Pakistan that was bruised and vulnerable to any who wished to seek culpability. As the American mission to Afghanistan faltered, they too found fault with Pakistan. When things are not going well for a nation, as indeed was the case with Pakistan, it tends to become an easy fall-guy for everyone. In the last couple of years of the Karzai rule, everyone waited for him to go; he was so widely hated – even by his benefactors, the Americans. The Indians who found him amenable and worked well with him in his years were equally embarrassed with that association and Karzai became quite a clown in the end. But he did leave his mark on Afghan thinking as well as on the direction that some Afghan institutions took under him and which they still find difficult to shed.

Ashraf Ghani's advent as the new leader was like fresh air for most of the world. Although he had been in Karzai's cabinet for all these years he was open to looking at the situation differently; he appeared more pragmatic and a realist. True to his professional grooming in the World Bank, having lived long in America with clear impressions of the purposefulness in policy and objectives, he launched himself differently and refused to become anyone's poodle. He knew what was needed foremost for Afghanistan – durable peace and social cohesion – and began working towards it.

He had, however, a major handicap: he wasn't a clear winner. Like the previous election where Karzai had to be force-placed as the President with American intervention and his competitor Abdullah Abdullah told off to wait for his next chance, this time too, the elections produced fractious and contentious results. Ghani, the declared winner refused to be accepted as such by Abdullah Abdullah, who felt cheated. This wrangling produced a composite Presidency, where if Ghani was the President, Abdullah was the Chief Executive. This equation hasn't
really settled in despite the year that has gone by. The government remains fractious and loyalties are suspect. There is no integrated and cohesive direction that the Afghan government can live by. The genesis lies again in the antecedence of the two principals.

Abdullah Abdullah, while a half-Pashtun himself, largely represents the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance and its interest in the government. Ghani himself is a Pashtun with only tentative roots in the community because of the long years he has lived abroad. He, however, is a consummate technocrat who will still offer Afghanistan a better chance at finding its direction which must be inclusive, cohesive and widely shared. Abdullah, on the other hand, has a desire and a role to establish his own standing in the government. The Afghan intelligence organization, NDS, has historically been run by non-Pashtun members from the former Northern Alliance. Some have openly declared their animosity for Pakistan and continue to hold reservations on any effort by the Afghan government to establish improved relations with Pakistan and its institutions. The Afghan Army, though largely Pashtun representing the large ethnic proportion of the population, has an officer corp. that is non-Pashtun. Most of the Intelligence people and the officer corp. are trained in India as their preferred source.

This makes for a contentious mix. Even when President Ghani wishes to have a more cordial relationship with Pakistan, as their futures are conjoined in a symbiotic relationship of not only a long territorial border but common cultural and ethnic ties, plus the historical experience of having been impacted by a continuous run of wars since 1979 with their respective fallout, his efforts remain stunted by a tradition of excessive external intervention that impacts Afghan policy. This manifests in how the relationship gets shaped between the two neighbours. India’s dominant relationship with Afghanistan is traditional as well as opportune which it leverages to foment trouble in Pakistan. Iran has its own influence with the Persian-speaking and Shia communities of Afghanistan. Regional influences complicate Afghanistan’s already precarious fragility.

The recent outburst of President Ashraf Ghani a la Hamid Karzai was against the run of events between the Afghanistan and Pakistan. After an auspicious start, Ghani literally tore into Pakistan for the numerous terror incidents that shook his country in recent weeks. The language that he used to express his outrage was the language of the NDS. This surely would have, in addition, pleased India no end.

Ghani has been under pressure from the largely vocal Kabul elite for giving into too much of the expected Pakistani affinity without a suitable return in the form of the promised Peace Dialogue with the Taliban. He began showing his impatience with the lack of progress. If indeed Pakistan had promised him delivery of the Taliban to the negotiating table, it surely was a larger bite than what Pakistan could easily chew. Over time, Pakistan had lost such lien over the Taliban, spawning instead a faction that had taken on the state of Pakistan itself. The talks, however, did take place, first informally in China and then in a more formal round in Murree, Pakistan. The results were promising. The Taliban were moving towards accepting the possibility of mainstreaming themselves back into the Afghan constitutional fold. But with the second round on the cards, a bolt from the blue struck.

The Afghan government leaked to the media that Mullah Omar was no more; that he had died a couple of years back in Pakistan, and that the Taliban movement in his name had faked his control for the last two years. Who informed the Afghan NDS is not known. It turned out that the news was true. It also triggered an immediate war of succession that fragmented the Taliban, indefinitely putting on hold any future talks. What the Pakistani state seemed to have gained in terms of ensuring positive leverage and encouraged the dialogue towards peace for Afghanistan and Pakistan was lost. The opportunity to repair Pakistan’s battered image over the years of strife in Afghanistan also lost traction. Pakistan desired peace desperately for its own stability and for improving the prospects for instituting the proposed China-hacked economic corridor so vital for Pakistan’s own economic rejuvenation close to Afghanistan’s border. These opportunities were set back in time and Pakistan was the net loser.

The NDS released the information about Mullah Omar while President Ghani was out of the country. This was a great embarrassment for Ghani since it found him wrong-footed even as he sought improved relations with his neighbor. Did Abdullah, as the chief executive, clear the release? Was it intended to sabotage the peace process and President Ghani’s policy to improve relations with Pakistan? Given the orthogonality that the NDS has over time displayed in its anti-Pakistan rhetoric, it is not difficult to surmise how this single event has impacted Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.

Mullah Mansour, Omar’s replacement, is still opposed by a faction. He has had to do a couple of things to establish his credentials: one, he has had to prove his tough stance against the Afghan government to gain popularity and acceptability across the Taliban spectrum by resorting to some entirely uncalled for bombings in Afghanistan, and two, he has had to put on hold the peace talks. Both have regressed the region in its aspiration to find early stability. This impacts Pakistan adversely in equal terms. Ghani’s diatribe against Pakistan was based around a frustration in his inability to move forward in seeking peace and forging a societal cohesion. The fractures in his government have tended to override a union in policy – especially security which defines the future viability of the state.

US beckons in the Afghan turmoil and many grown in the terror economy are finding refuge in such association. The usual recourse of Afghan inability to control its internal dynamics must find an expression which traditionally is Pakistan: hence on Afghan urgings, the US also reminded Pakistan that there is still the unfinished business of the Haqqanis which could place the provision of the Coalition Support Fund in jeopardy. Pakistan rushed into the business of clearing the last Taliban redoubt on the borders with Afghanistan in the difficult terrain of Shawwal. But merely Pakistan clearing its precincts may hardly deliver Afghanistan its desired peace. A concerted effort with dialogue will.

To that end Afghanistan will need to stop bidding external agenda in its policy, else the days of further turmoil in Afghanistan will only extend. The state will have to find its own balance and within that seek peace. The time has already come when all foreign interests in Afghanistan can help Afghanistan have exhausted their patience. Some influence will remain but those are competitive in nature using Afghan soil for respective foreign policy ends. Pakistan’s interest in Afghanistan has mutated over time and is now entirely defensive. The country will have to fight the aggressive use of Afghan soil for fomenting trouble in its territories. A weak afghan government is incapable of keeping such maleficient influences out. That will test Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan. Iran too brought into the picture may just complicate the scenario further. Testing times for Afghanistan are not yet over and it isn’t entirely the fault of its neighbours.

The writer is a retired Air Vice Marshal of the Pakistan Air Force and served as its Deputy Chief of Staff.
When Ashraf Ghani replaced Ahmad Karzai as Afghanistan’s president, it was hoped that it would mark the turning of a new leaf in Af-Pak relations. Karzai had been openly hostile to Pakistan. Ghani extended an olive branch. He visited Islamabad at the first opportunity. There was a new atmosphere of camaraderie generated by the visits of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan Army Chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif to Kabul and reports of vows of mutual cooperation.

According to ex-diplomat Munir Akram, “Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan’s prime minister and army chief were sincere in desiring normalization. The implicit bargain was that Pakistan would deliver the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table while Afghanistan would act against TTP leaders and militants hiding in Afghan territory.”

But that was sheer wishful thinking, for, never has Afghanistan delivered any tribal who sought sanctuary there. This is a hallowed tradition since British India.

Meanwhile, Af-Pak relations once again suffered a nosedive following a Taliban attack that killed 56 people in Kabul. Ghani telephoned Nawaz to complain. The latter suggested a high-level meeting.

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Pakistan. We are receiving messages of war from Pakistan. We hoped for peace but killing our people are as active as before bomb-producing factories which are suicide bomber training camps and that Pakistan is to Afghanistan, roughly, what India is to Pakistan. For instance, Pakistani troops fire into Afghanistan as much without provocation as Indian troops fire into Pakistan. Kabul summons the Pakistani ambassador and Islamabad summons the Indian High Commissioner to register protest.

Amazingly, even though the confrontation between Afghanistan and Pakistan is even older than the usual blah-blah about “close contact to promote bilateral cooperation, address all issues of common concern, and evolve a strategic consensus to respond to security challenges of the region,” it would seem that pursuit of the talks.

In its immediate reaction, the tone of the Pakistan Foreign Office was conciliatory. “The people and the Government of Pakistan can feel the pain and anguish of the brotherly people and the Government of Afghanistan over the recent wave of terrorist attacks, which have resulted in the loss of many valuable lives and injured scores of people,” the spokesman told newsmen. “Terrorism is our common enemy and our people,” the spokesman told newsmen.

In the case of the Indo-Pak standoff there is a casus belli: Kashmir. But Afghanistan and Pakistan have no such dispute. Yet, Afghanistan has been always hostile towards Pakistan. Afghanistan was the only country to oppose Pakistan’s application for UN membership. When Pakistan became independent. No government in Afghanistan, not even the Taliban, with whom Pakistan had the most cordial relations, ever recognized the Durand Line as the international boundary between the two countries. Though Pakistan was the first country to recognize the Taliban regime, but when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, Pakistan detained Mullah Zaeef, the Taliban envoy to Pakistan, without formally severing diplomatic relations and handed him over to America where he remained, incarcerated at Guantanamo for a number of years. Yet, Pakistan’s relations with the Taliban have remained cozy.

Pakistan is irked at the spread of Indian influence in Afghanistan and fears being encircled by India. But it does not attempt to compete with India in courting Kabul, perhaps because it cannot match India in resources. India had invested US $10.8 billion in Afghanistan as of 2012. It is working on a number of projects, including roads and other infrastructure, while more projects are in the pipeline, such as “setting up iron ore mines, a 6 MTPA steel plant by Steel Authority of India Limited, an 800 MW power plant, hydro-electric power projects, transmission lines and so forth.

If Pakistan could not afford giving economic assistance to Afghanistan, it could at least have explored other fields, such as training the Afghan military and police personnel. But it is India where they go for the purpose. Pakistan could at least have espoused Afghanistan’s entry into SAARC to demonstrate that it cares, but here, too, it failed to take the initiative and left the field for India to score another point.

It seems Pakistan relies on bullying and violence but attacks on the Indian embassy in Kabul and its consulate in Herat, or even the latest Taliban attack can achieve no purpose. They have not forced India to close its embassy or consulates or halt its work on reconstruction projects. Nor has the latest Kabul attack compelled Ashraf Ghani to surrender power to the Taliban.

Violence cannot endear Pakistan to the Afghans. It is perceived as a country that nurtures terrorists. While Tajik and Uzbek elements, represented, respectively, by the CEO, Abdullah Abdullah and the warlord Abdul Rasheed Dostum, are openly opposed to Pakistan, even among the Pashtuns, represented by the Taliban, Pakistan’s stock is not very high.

Pakistan holds the Afghan Talibans tightly in its embrace against the Kabul government, while India has signed a sheaf of MoUs with Kabul during the last few years. Three such MoUs relate to strengthening cooperation in the fields of rural development, education and standardization between the Bureau of Indian Standards and the Afghan National Standardisation Authority. In 2011, Afghanistan signed its first strategic pact with India.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s policymakers are comfortable with the thought that without Pakistan’s assistance there can be no peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s assistance has a price tag, though. It wants the Taliban to be back in power, because that is the only way to check India’s growing influence in Afghanistan. This, however, is easier said than done.

The good old days are not going to return. At best, the Taliban might be given some share in power which may not satisfy Pakistan. But hard attitudes will push Afghanistan into civil war and Af-Pak relations will remain unfriendly.

The writer is a senior political analyst and former editor of Southasia.
The honeymoon between Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan seems to be over. The bonhomie and camaraderie with Pakistan that became apparent with Dr. Ashraf Ghani’s assumption of the mantle of Presidency was always going to be brittle and frail because of the weak wicket of the incumbent Afghan President. His predecessor Hamid Karzai used to call Pakistan and Afghanistan conjoined twins in one breath while in the next he would hurl insults at it. Hamid Karzai’s case was different. Firstly, he was under Indian influence, secondly he had little control over the affairs in Afghanistan; thirdly there were severe allegations of corruption against the former Afghan President and his family. Possibly to draw attention from his shortcomings and failures he found a convenient scapegoat in Pakistan.

In his final days of presidency, Karzai was highly critical of his greatest benefactor, USA, refusing to sign the Bilateral Security Accord with the country.

Dr. Ashraf Ghani’s problem is diverse. Firstly, he heads a unity government, which comprises hardliner Northern Alliance leaders like Abdullah Abdullah and a motley crowd of warlords, who have different stakes in the government. Ashraf Ghani is a technocrat and a former senior World Bank official, whose international exposure has broadened his wisdom and vision. He does not carry any baggage of former favours by the US, India, Pakistan or any other external force. He genuinely believed that Pakistan could support the peace process in Afghanistan, thus his first port of call was Islamabad, where breaking with protocol, he met Pakistan’s Army Chief at the GHQ.

Despite serious hiccups like the Army Public School attack in Peshawar in which intelligence agencies had evidence of the perpetrators of the heinous assault being controlled from Afghan soil, the solidarity withstood. Pakistan’s premier intelligence agency ISI and the Afghan security organization Kabul and Islamabad need to come together in the interest of regional peace.

By S. M. Hali
NDS signed an agreement for sharing intelligence. Afghans cadets arrived for training at the Pakistan Military Academy in Kakul but apparently, some of Dr. Ashraf Ghani’s own partners in the government were highly critical of his overtures to Pakistan. There were other detractors too, who did not appreciate the growing propinquity between Kabul and Islamabad. One of the first actions that Dr. Ashraf Ghani took after being sworn in as President was canceling a defence supply agreement with India. His visit to New Delhi came many months after visiting Pakistan, where he did emphasize that relations with Pakistan are not a zero sum game but ties between India and Afghanistan remained lukewarm.

During the Chief of General Staff Afghan National Army General Sher Mohammad Karimi’s visit to Pakistan, while he was reviewing the passing out parade of the Cadets at the PMA Kakul, a suicide bomb blast in Jalalabad killed 33 people and injured more than 100 outside a bank, where government workers collect salaries. Just after the first peace talks between Afghan officials and Taliban, hosted by Pakistan and observed by China and USA at Murree, a series of terror attacks rocked different locations in Afghanistan. Certainly some critics did not want Pakistan and Afghanistan to shed their mistrust and work closely. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai was one of the most vocal opponents of Pakistan’s role in the peace process. Worse was yet to come; on the eve replaced Mullah Omar. Apparently he was not a unanimous choice and a split appeared in the rank and file of the Afghan Taliban. The new Taliban leader did announce his support for negotiations for peace but insisted that violent attacks would continue. As if on cue or perpetrated by splinter groups, Kabul was again targeted by terrorists and a huge toll of casualties resulted.

This was the last straw that broke the camel’s back and Dr. Ashraf Ghani, who was already under tremendous pressure from within his government for trusting Pakistan, now lost his patience and lashed out at his erstwhile ally. The oft-repeated accusations of Pakistan supporting the terrorists were echoing again. Ghani, in his address

If the venue of Pakistan is deemed unacceptable for hosting the peace talks, let it be a neutral location acceptable to both stakeholders.
to the nation, said that future moves toward peace talks would be made by Afghanistan alone. “We don’t want Pakistan to bring the Taliban to peace talks, but to stop the Taliban’s activities on their soil,” he said.

The demise of Mullah Omar also brought to the fore old protagonists like Amrullah Saleh, the former head of NDS, Afghanistan’s intelligence agency. Commenting on Omar’s death, Saleh stated in various interviews to international TV channels that Omar’s disappearance from the scene means nothing. It only reinforces the fact that the so-called supreme leader was actually a mythical figure who was being used by Pakistan to perpetuate violence in Afghanistan.

Let us examine the situation on the ground: the Taliban are indeed fractious and have become more so after the news of Mullah Omar’s death was confirmed but for Kabul to claim that they are ditching Pakistan is not a solution since Hamid Karzai too tried to reach out to the Taliban but failed. Moreover, blaming Pakistan for abetting the terror attacks is unfair. Pakistan does wield some influence over the Taliban but does not control them as puppets. The question arises as to why would Pakistan rock the boat by announcing the death of Mullah Omar on the eve of the second round of talks with US and Chinese observers overseeing the peace process?

Besides India and some others watching from the fences, the group that tends to gain from the breakdown in the Kabul-Islamabad rapprochement is the Daesh or the IS. The Arab component in the Daesh may not be physically present in Afghanistan but their franchise exists. Splinter groups in the Afghan Taliban and the battered factions of the TTP may take up the Daesh contract and wreak havoc in Afghanistan. There have been bloody clashes between the Daesh and Afghan Taliban in the past and sensing a weakness and disarray amongst Taliban, the Daesh may go for the jugular.

Under these extreme circumstances, perhaps Dr. Ashraf Ghani should swallow a bitter pill and cool down his rhetoric against Pakistan, which remains his best bet for peace. Pakistan on the other hand, missed a golden opportunity. As soon as Afghanistan was targeted by the heinous terror attacks, Mr. Sartaj Aziz the National Security Adviser should have rushed to Kabul to share its grief and offer wholehearted support. Even now, Pakistan must display its goodwill by rounding up whatever influence it has with the Taliban and convince them to discontinue the terror attacks and try and get them on the negotiations table. If the venue of Pakistan is deemed unacceptable for hosting the peace talks, let it be a neutral location acceptable to both stakeholders.

Time is of the essence and Kabul and Islamabad need each other. Karzai was right - they are conjoined twins and when Kabul sneezes, Islamabad catches cold. For the future of peace in both countries, they must come together again.

The writer is a practising journalist. He contributes to the print media, conducts a TV show and produces documentaries.
The people of Pakistan cannot continue to suffer from the ravages of floods every year. The government needs to draw up a definite strategy to prevent the recurring disaster.

By Muhammad Ali Ehsan

Every year Pakistan experiences floods of great proportions. People are left homeless and most end up losing their entire earnings and are forced into debt, with little or no means of livelihood.

The killing cycle has continued with little attention from the ‘metro loving’ and ‘motorway-developing’ Sharif government. The big question is what are our development priorities and are they right? When millions of people suffer in this country due to the rising waters, shouldn’t those in the government rise above their conscience to do something to change the status quo? The temporary flood camps hardly cater for food, shelter and hygiene and are no substitute for a concrete approach that would prevent the loss of so many lives and property every year.

In many ways, 2015 happens to be the fourth consecutive year of flood disasters in Pakistan. Every year, not only are millions of people left to suffer from diseases and malnutrition but many standing crops of wheat and rice are washed away, hurling the people in a vicious cycle of borrowing and debts to make their two ends meet. Unquestionably, they are the same people who suffer again and again just because the government does too little or even nothing in preparing to meet the flood disaster every year. Imagine the agony of the people who continue to demonstrate the fortitude to return from their makeshift shelters and tents to rebuild what they lose, only to start all over again the following year.

As a result, Pakistan today suffers from a huge humanitarian crisis. If nothing, at least national self-esteem demands that the crisis due to floods must be stopped from occurring every year. The country’s National Disaster Management Authority needs to be organized, funded and resourced to undertake contingency planning on the war footing. It should develop an early warning system so that the evacuation of people is carried out in time and with minimum loss. The NDMA should discourage people from building houses on floodbands (embankments) and, most importantly, inform and help them in not rebuilding houses in the risk-prone areas. Instead, it should encourage and finance the
reconstruction of houses on elevated plains. It looks like this will not be possible unless the parliament initiates a serious debate on the issue, determines the long-term goals and decides on the courses of action to achieve the goals. Most importantly, the government needs to allocate funds and resources to ensure that it is not just the army that runs helter-skelter every year to carry out flood relief operations. A well resourced, well equipped and well organized ‘flood management entity’ is always required to respond to the situation.

Interestingly, it is not that a policy on disaster management does not exist. In 2013 the government approved a National Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) policy. Under the policy funding for National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) increased from PKR 93 million in 2011/2012 to PKR 169 million in 2014/2015. Had the money been utilized properly, a defence shield against the disaster would be in place or at least a competent workforce would be handling emergencies after every disaster. Unfortunately, the government has prepared poorly which means the people have been made to suffer.

The absence of local government further aggravates the situation because immediate relief would have come at the local and district level. Had local bodies elections been held, the people from local communities would have been in the forefront to provide relief to the suffering. Well-funded local bodies could have rebuilt the roads due to flooding and landslides. They would not have waited for help to come from the provincial capitals and would have immediately allocated funds for the repair effort. Immediate local response would have also prevented skin diseases, dengue fever, diarrhea and other medical complications.

In the given circumstances, things are not likely to get better very soon. According to the think tank Germanwatch, Pakistan is ranked as the tenth most vulnerable country to climate change in the Global Climate Risk Index 2015. The NDMA needs to work at a very fast pace to build its capacity. It’s not all about the allocation of funds but the lack of institutionalization, the inability of the NDMA to implement its policies at different tiers of the government and the lack of coordination within the disaster management setup. That is why it said that the poor response to the floods is an indication of a severe crisis of management and governance.

During the recent floods, the Chitral area was one of the worst hit and flash floods there washed away more than 28 villages. No doubt it was a natural calamity but had the government taken timely measures, much of the loss to life and property could have been avoided. The government can start working on a term basis and focus on planting more trees and building small dams and diversion canals.

An estimated 715,000 people in Pakistan are affected by floods every year, leading to a loss of almost 1% of the national GDP, which translates into US $ 2.7 billion. It is essential for the government to take preventive measures so that these losses can be cut down and there is a smaller dent in the economy. If this does not happen, every year thousands of people will continue to be trapped in a state of uncertainty. They will continue to live makeshift lives in slums and will extend their hands out to the government for assistance and support. They will always remain at the receiving end and wait for the government to meet its rehabilitation promises.

It is an ironic situation that while this country has demonstrated that it is poor at controlling floods, it has also not made any efforts to adapt its existing infrastructure. More alert governments would have created new laws and implemented the existing ones to protect forests and the environment. It is this context that the national flood management strategy needs to be overhauled to ensure that ‘unnecessary losses’ because of our systemic inefficiencies and poor governance do not take place. The present government needs to demonstrate its involvement in good governance on a more convincing manner – and all across the country. It can start making a contribution to preventing future disasters from floods by restricting construction and development activity in the flood zones and ensuring that encroachments do not occur on river embankments and dried river beds.

According to one report, the National Engineering Services of Pakistan, with the assistance of the Netherlands based Deltares Institute, has developed the country’s fourth national flood protection plan for 2015-2025. The plan was formulated after almost two years of consultations with various stakeholders. After having reached a final shape, the ten year strategy has been forwarded to the Water and Power ministry. There is good reason to believe that the plan will see the light of day soon and its implementation will be undertaken on a fast-track basis...

The writer is a retired lieutenant colonel of the Pakistan Army. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D in civil-military relations.
Old story: An astronomer walking with his gaze fixed on the stars, slips into a ditch and calls for help. A passerby rescues him and observes, “You try to unravel the mysteries of celestial bodies but you overlook the pothole at your feet.”

The parable applies to India under the BJP. It has earned name and fame as a fast growing economy. It is a member of the distinguished BRICS group of emerging economies. It has also recently become a full member of the prestigious Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It is a keen aspirant for membership of the UN Security Council. It has a respectable number of billionaires, who are listed in Forbes. And it has recently sent a satellite to Mars.

But, the glitter is confined to the poor also live.

While India gallops towards glittering possibilities, its poor survive in abject living conditions.

By S.G. Jilanee
cities inhabited by the filthy rich. The vast rural expanse remains utterly neglected, wallowing in poverty and darkness.

The situation is so appalling that Markanday Katju, a retired judge of the Indian Supreme Court has, compared it with 17th century England. “Our democracy has been hijacked by the feudals,” he says. “and now elections in most places are held on the basis of caste and religious vote banks, and no one bothers about the merit of the candidate.”

He paints a bleak picture of the state of affairs. “It is estimated that ten million youth are entering the job market every year, but only half a million jobs are created in the organized sector of the economy. So what do the remaining youth do? They become hawkers, street vendors, stringers, bouncers, criminals, prostitutes or beggars. Healthcare is almost non-existent for our masses.”

“Half of our children are malnourished,” Katju continues. “A Unicef report says that one out of three malnourished children in the world is an Indian. There are numerous farmer suicides in many parts of India – e.g., Vidarbha, Gujarat, etc. There is covert and overt discrimination against minorities, dalits and women. Honour killings, dowry deaths, female foeticide, etc. are common in many areas.”

The former Justice recalls how Oliver Cromwell dealt with the Long Parliament on April 20, 1653. Cromwell told the MPs: “It is high time for me to tell the MPs; only worse, the Lok Sabha members, who are like the Long Parliament MPs; only worse, have you not defiled this sacred place, tell the MPs: “It is high time for me to...”

According to Katju, India also needs a Cromwell to say the same to the Lok Sabha members, who are like the Long Parliament MPs; only worse, because, many of them have criminal records unlike their British prototypes. Another alternative, according to Katju would be an action replay of the French Revolution in India.

In 2011 the government of India commissioned a socio-economic and caste census. Salient features included:

- In 75 per cent of 17.9 crore households in rural India, the monthly income of the highest-earning member is less than Rs.5,000.
- Nearly 40 per cent are landless and work as manual casual labourers.
- 25 per cent of the rural households still do not own a phone.
- 25 per cent rural households have no access to irrigation.
- Only 8.29 per cent of rural households have a member earning over Rs.10,000 per month.
- 10.69 crore rural families, or 60 per cent, qualify for "deprivation".
- Of these over 100 million deprived households, 21.5 per cent belong to scheduled castes or tribes.

This means that more than half of rural India owns no land at all. Among households who do own land, 25 per cent is not irrigated. The report further says that only four per cent own mechanized agricultural equipment and just 10 per cent own any irrigation equipment.

It also indicates that over 90% of rural India, does not have salaried jobs. Over half of all rural households derive their household income mainly from casual manual labour. Another 30 per cent derive it from cultivation. Over half the households are landless and most of them depend on casual manual labour for the larger part of their income. Just 20 per cent of households own any kind of a motor vehicle.

These results are extremely revealing as a grim reminder of the state of rural India and fly in the face of the bravado about India’s unbridled growth and its emergence on the global stage as a potential superpower.

Commenting on the Report, the Hindu said: “The countryside remains unable to find jobs that can pull families out of poverty. Agriculture remains at subsistence levels, with low mechanization, limited irrigation facilities and little access to credit. Just over 3 per cent of rural households have a family member who is a graduate, so skilled jobs are going to be hard to get. Female-headed households and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households are the worst off. The eastern and central States of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha have the poorest indicators. Even in the developed southern States of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, family incomes are low and dependence on casual manual labour is high.”

The SECC was commissioned during the previous government. Now the ball is in Narendra Modi’s court. The government also stands accused of suppressing vital information on the status of malnutrition among children, contained in a survey also commissioned by the previous government through Unicef.

However, it would seem that all is not lost. Justice Katju’s assessment may be exaggerated. The very fact that the government commissioned SECC is itself an indicator that it was prepared to learn facts and meet the challenge and the situation though grave, is not alarming so as to spawn a French Revolution in India.

To grapple with the situation is a herculean task. It would call for the best of Narendra Modi’s leadership skill. How he pulls it off remains to be seen, particularly because it would show the way to other countries of the region facing similar problem of rural poverty, such as Pakistan, where the rural masses are under similar feudal stranglehold and their economic conditions are no better. [1]

The writer is a senior political analyst and former editor of Southasia.
Elusive Peace

Mullah Omar’s death has put the Taliban movement in a tailspin.

By Dr. Raza Khan

Confirmation of the news of the death of Afghan Taliban founder Mullah Omar has completely changed the political and security scenario in Afghanistan. The immediate victim is the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgents. The death of Mullah Omar is going to have both short and long-term consequences not only for Afghanistan but also for Pakistan.

The timing of the revelation of the death of Mullah Omar by the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) raised many questions. The NDS revealed the information on the very eve of the second round of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban scheduled to be held on July 31. It appears the aim of the revelation of the news was to deliberately torpedo the nascent peace process which shows that the elected Afghan government led by Dr. Ashraf Ghani and his establishment were not on the same page regarding the peace talks with the Taliban.

There are different reasons for the Afghan security and intelligence
establishment to defy a pacificist policy of Dr. Ghani. Firstly, most members of the intelligence establishment comprise loyalists of the pre-Taliban communist regimes (1979-1992). During the Taliban rule in Afghanistan (1996-2001) they were forced to flee or were harshly treated by the regime. Since the ouster of the Taliban regime, they have made a successful return to their former positions. So successful peace talks of the Afghan state with the Taliban could be a death knell for both formerly pro-communist and generally anti-Taliban Afghan officials as these would pave the way for the insurgent partaking in the state power. Thus this approach of the Afghan establishment regarding the Taliban rests on fears, which has kept the Afghan peace process hostage.

It must be mentioned that in July the first round of rare peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government took place in the Pakistani mountain resort of Murree. It was the first instance in 14 years that the Taliban took part in any direct peace talks with the Afghan government. This flexibility was shown by the newly appointed leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansur. The Taliban participation in peace talks was not only path-breaking but convinced observers on Afghanistan that the intransigent Mullah Omar was no more there and the rumours of his death were correct. It may be mentioned that Mullah Omar died in July 2013. It is hard to believe that Afghan intelligence was unaware of his death. However, it wanted to publicly confirm the death at an appropriate time for itself. It is important to note that there were many opponents within the Taliban ranks to Akhtar Mansur’s peace overtures towards the Afghan government but he still took the risk. However, after the Afghan establishment demonstrated insincerity to the talks process, Mansur also rejected further talks.

The confirmation of Mullah Omar’s death would not only torpedo the Afghan peace process but it would also result in an all-out offensive from the Taliban militants. The speed in the attacks soon after the breakdown of the peace process corroborates this fact. There are reasons for the Taliban to go for the kill. Participation in peace talks with the Afghan government and betrayal by the Afghan establishment greatly affected the clout, position and respect of the Taliban. The large-scale attacks by the Taliban would be aimed at restoring the position of strength of the Taliban. Secondly, the new leader Akhtar Mansur needed to demonstrate to his opponents that his attempt to give peace a chance was not his weakness and he was equally capable of fighting and could order spectacular attacks. Thirdly, large-scale attacks by the Taliban after Mullah Omar’s death had also become their compulsion to deflect the propaganda of the Islamic State or ‘Daesh’.

The Middle East based group founded and led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has been trying to establish a foothold in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In order to achieve this, it had to bring the Afghan Taliban and particularly Mullah Omar, who was the undisputed Amir of all regional Muslim militants, into disrepute. It is interesting to note that the IS commanders, particularly its central spokesman Al-Adnani had been mocking Mullah Omar and had dubbed him a ‘fool’ who was only pursuing an Afghan nationalist agenda instead of a pure Islamist programme which does not believe in any national interest or borders.

In order to prove the IS propaganda against the Taliban and Mullah Omar wrong, the new leader, Akhtar Mansur, particularly after the failure of peace talks, went for full-scale attacks against the Afghan government. That the Taliban staged attacks and created trouble for the Afghan government is already visible. The quality and number of post-Mullah Omar offensives by the Taliban are a yardstick of their current strength and relevance for the future. The Taliban are essentially a militant outfit and have not transformed into a political party because either they have not wanted to or have not had the time to think on those lines. To take advantage of this, the Al Qaeda head Ayman Al Zawahiri has also come out of hibernation and has pledged support to the new Taliban leader Akhtar Mansur. The Al Qaeda not only wants to pay back the Taliban as the latter supported the former in very testing times, but would also like to settle scores with its Middle Eastern rival, the IS.

Confirmation of Mullah Omar’s death has created a rare opportunity for the Islamic State to make a comeback in Afghanistan. After establishing an initial network, which was evolving, the IS had to face reverses as almost the entire command of its Khorasan Shura (organization for Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran) led by a Pakistani, Hafiz Saeed (not the Hafiz Saeed of Jamat e Dawa), was eliminated in US drone attacks in Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. However, it seems the death of Mullah Omar and the resulting power struggle within the Taliban will help the IS attract many commanders and fighters as cracks have already appeared in the Taliban ranks on the issue of peace talks with the Afghan government.

This will also heighten the tension between the Afghan Taliban and the IS and may lead to more bloody clashes. After Mullah Omar’s death, Pakistani Taliban leaders will have little option to remain tied to the Afghan Taliban movement and may join the IS in Afghanistan. This will strengthen the IS in Pakistan and may lead to another wave of deadly terrorist attacks inside the country.

The writer is a political and security analyst.
Until recently, only a few people in Bangladesh had heard of US Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard. And yet, the member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific has been grabbing headlines after she introduced a bipartisan resolution regarding the country.

Although the resolution may have surprising origins, it raises some pertinent points about the flaws and inconsistencies in Bangladesh’s political system. It presses the government to enhance human rights protection of minorities, strengthen democracy and thwart the growth of extremism in the country.

Overall, the timing of the resolution is likely to generate a positive effect. South Asia has become a breeding ground for radical Islamic groups who are gradually trying to curb the freedom of minorities and derail the democratic process. Bangladesh is not insulated from this emerging trend. For little over a year, extremist groups have pierced through the social and political fabric and posed new challenges for the country.

At this critical juncture, Gabbard’s resolution heralds a new beginning. However, there are some loopholes which could limit the effectiveness of the move.

When the resolution was introduced in July, the US Congresswoman criticized all the major ingredients that make Bangladesh “a country in turmoil”.

During her speech on the House floor, Gabbard voiced her concerns over the country’s stability and insisted the mismanagement in recent elections had resulted in political violence.

A Case for Human Dignity

There is a need for the government of Bangladesh to stop those who incite and commit violence and to protect the rights of its minorities.

By Taha Kehar
At first glance, the resolution has adopted a strictly human rights approach and gives priority to legal concerns to change the status quo and quell extremism. However, Gabbard's request is largely based on unrealistic demands which can be difficult to implement in an objective manner. The well-being of minorities cannot be quantified so easily unless a proper system of assessing the level of satisfaction is chalked out and implemented. Minority rights cannot be safeguarded unless proper mechanisms are put in place. If such measures are not taken, the resolution will fail to generate the desired impact.

In addition, Gabbard's criticism and suggestions may stand a risk of being swept under the carpet as yet another attempt by the west to enforce a sense of order in the east. The resolution pits the desire for justice as a clash between human rights and bigotry. A series of unhelpful and vague comments by its co-sponsors serve as welcome proof of how the move could impose undue pressure on Bangladesh's government to set things right. According to Congressman Matt Salmon, the resolution will help Bangladesh eliminate political violence and extremism and uphold the rule of law and democratic principles. Salmon expect Bangladesh to respect human dignity, honour commitments to freedom of expression and protect human rights.

On the other hand, Congressman Bob Dold rather condescendingly believes the US has the right to send unequivocal messages to Bangladesh over its failure to protect minorities. Such resolutions may not only impose a fixed standard of right and wrong but also undermines the role of cultural nuances in the overarching debate on human rights.

Interestingly, Gabbard, who is the only Hindu US Congresswoman, has predominantly focused on the persecution of Hindus to emphasize the need for minority rights. This raises a series of speculations over how enthusiastically she would defend the violation of minority rights if other religious communities were in the line of fire. As an active proponent of human rights, Gabbard may discount such concerns as entirely baseless because her resolution encompasses a range of other vulnerable communities. However, doubts and uncertainty looms large as the US Congresswoman has been known for supporting a Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in India. These contradictions could undermine the sincerity of her cause and lead to countless problems.

The resolution also serves to infringe some of the US Congresswomen's actions in the past. In January 2015, Gabbard announced that she had voted against the Defence Authorization Bill that would grant $1 billion to Pakistan as military assistance. This goes to show that the US Congresswoman is unwilling to support efforts to curb the roots of militancy.

For little over a year, Pakistan has launched a series of military offensives to eliminate militancy and restore peace and stability. In June 2014, Operation Zarb-e-Azb was initiated in North Waziristan and has reached its final stages. A few months later, offensives were launched in the Khyber Agency as well to destroy the hideouts of militants. The decision to adopt a firm stance to eradicate terrorism was taken after the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi was attacked by Tehreek-e-Taliban militants. Pakistan has paid a heavy price to reduce the threat of militancy. On December 16, 2014, an army-run school in Peshawar was attacked and nearly 151 people, including 132 children, lost their lives.

The mood of doom and gloom surrounding Pakistan's war against militancy is visible to all. However, Gabbard appears to have overlooked these challenges and has refused to focus on tackling the roots of the problem. Furthermore, she has completely ignored the fact that over a million people have been displaced from their homes due to these military operations. As a result, the resolution – with its growing emphasis on human rights – has its limitations as it provides problems without providing a solution.

Nevertheless, the US Congresswoman's condemnation for the crimes orchestrated against minorities in 1971 is the only silver lining. At a time when the past continues to irk the people of Bangladesh, Gabbard's resolution raises the spectre of the East Pakistan imbroglio in an effective manner.

The writer is a poet and author. He is a law graduate of SOAS.
The Sri Lankan ruling party UNP has effectively blocked the way of former President Rajapaksa to stage a comeback by winning the general elections held on August 17. The party won 106 seats of the legislature as against 95 seats won by the alliance led by Rajapaksa’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Though the UNP has fallen short of 7 seats to gain a majority, it is believed that the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe would still be able to form a stable government.

The elections were viewed as an epic struggle between democratic forces represented by the UNP and anti-democratic forces led by the SLFP. Political analysts believe that a victory for the UNP would provide a life-time opportunity for the Sri Lankans to resolve some of the fault lines that had made their way in Sri Lanka’s conflict-ridden society, whereas a triumph for the SLFP would maintain the status quo. However, opinion polls had already put the UNP ahead of its

Fault lines have emerged in Sri Lankan society which can only be mended through responsible governance that addresses all religions and ethnicities.

By Malik Muhammad Ashraf
election predictions. To understand the significance of the elections in their true perspective, it is perhaps essential to get a brief insight into the political landscape of Sri Lanka and why it finds itself at a crossroads even after more than six decades of independence in 1948.

Sri Lanka is a religiously, ethnically and linguistically diverse country. More than 70% of its population subscribes to Buddhism, 12.58% to Hinduism and 9.66% belong to Islam, while Christians constitute 7.62%. Ethnicity-wise, the majority of the Sinhalese are Buddhists, Tamils are Hindus and the Moors are Muslims. The political landscape of the country has been dominated by two parties - the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP). They have ruled Sri Lanka by forming alliances with other smaller parties thus giving Sri Lanka a culture of coalition politics. Nevertheless the power dynamics in the country have been essentially characterized by ethnic considerations, a legacy of the colonial era. After independence, the elite that dominated the political and economic arena during colonial rule continued to enjoy the same status. The politicization of the ethnic identity led to a predominance of the Sinhalese, giving birth to a system which failed to protect minority rights and deepening of a sense of deprivation among the minority communities as well as eruption of armed struggles against the Sinhalese-dominated governments.

The foundation for insurgencies was laid with the limiting of citizenship rights of the plantation community of the Tamils in 1948, passage of ‘The Sinhala Only Act’ which declared Sinhala as the sole official language replacing English and university admission reforms which put the Jaffana Tamils at a disadvantageous position by blocking access of the minority communities to state employment. The was followed by granting of a special place in the constitution to Buddhism. All these factors contributed to the widening of fissures in Sri Lanka’s multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. The SLFP and UNP which are both Sinhalese-dominated political outfits have actually played a central role in perpetuating the ethnic conflict. They have both regularly used the terrorism of Tamils as a strategy to win votes at elections, further dividing the nation on ethnic lines.

The United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) under former President Rajapaksa, which ruled Sri Lanka between 2005 and January 2015, won a military victory against the Indian backed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, courtesy military assistance from China and Pakistan. Riding on the popularity wave due to this victory, the UPFA also won the 2010 elections and Rajapaksa was elected for the second term. During the Rajapaksa regime, Sri Lanka took discernible strides in the economic arena. Rajapaksa, who felt on top of the world due to his victory against the LTTE and the performance of the economy, wanted to win another term as President but that was not feasible under the constitution which allowed only two stints to an individual.

To have his way, Rajapaksa first had the Chief Justice of Sri Lanka removed by the parliament and installed a person of his own choice as the Chief Justice who, in response to a reference made by Rajapaksa, ruled that he could run for the third term. Rajapaksa announced presidential elections two years earlier than the completion of his six-year term thinking it was the right time to capitalize on the popularity wave. But he probably miscalculated the whole thing and could not make a proper assessment of the impact that his policies of denying legitimate rights to the Tamils, attacks on Muslims, plundering of state resources through corruption, disappearance of journalists and political opponents, his authoritarian rule and mistreatment of his political opponents had created to erode his political credentials. As soon as he announced elections, the United National Party (UNP) which seemed in complete disarray, suddenly regrouped and Maithripala Sirisena defected to it. He was elected President in January 2015.

Sirisena, in his election campaign against Rajapaksa, promised reforms and building Sri Lanka as a state belonging to all cultural and ethnic entities and granting rights to the Tamils, the conditions on which he was supported by the civil and political organizations. The defeat of Rajapaksa in January paved the way for open political expression and the removal of an atmosphere of fear. Sirisena, in an attempt to fulfill his election promises, had the nineteenth constitutional Amendment passed by the parliament, reducing the term of the resident and parliament from six to five years, re-introduction of the two-term limit that a person can have as president, revival of Constitutional Council and establishment of independent commissions. However, he found the parliament dominated by UPFA, which was resistant to other envisaged reforms. This forced him to dissolve the parliament and call for fresh elections.

The Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, after the victory called on all the stakeholders to join hands in developing a civilized society, formation of a consensus government and building a new country. Whether the UNP would be able to muster enough support for its promised reforms only time will tell, as Rajapaksa is still a political force to be reckoned with. The task seems quite arduous. However, the fact remains that Sri Lanka cannot afford to fail in implementing the promised agenda of reforms. Observers believe that defeat for Rajapaksa would keep Sri Lanka on a non-aligned course and loosen ties with China who pumped billions of dollars in trying to convert Sri Lanka into a maritime outpost, due to the fact that the incumbent President is a known pro-US leader and might show a tilt toward the US. By doing so he will not only be jeopardizing Sri Lanka’s credentials as a non-aligned country but will also harm long-term geo-strategic interests of the country. Building relations with the US at the cost of a regional power like China would be a big mistake. It is better if he stays away from the US-China tussle in the region and focuses more on his reform agenda, addressing the debilitating fault lines that have emerged in the Sri Lankan society.

The writer is a freelance columnist.
Nepal, a small Himalayan State with a population of around 28 million, has still not recovered from the devastation caused by the earthquakes in April and May this year. The country is now in the grip of another crisis. There are serious reservations and concerns of many in Nepal, especially the weaker segments of society, that fundamental rights will be lost if the proposed Constitution is adopted.

After the abolition of a 240-year-old monarchy in 2008, the country was declared a "secular, federal democratic republic." There is now almost a consensus now to remove the word 'secular.' It is no secret that the ruling Nepali Congress (NC) and its coalition partner Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) have always been opposed to the declaration of Nepal as a secular State. They have wanted to see Nepal as a “Hindu State.”

The NC leader and Constituent Assembly member Gagan Thapa recently told Al Jazeera that the word "secular" would be dropped, adding that the democratic republic under the new constitution is not to be identified with any religion. "People will be free to choose their religion and there will be no state interference in the matter of religion," he said. Strangely, he was defining what "secularism" really stands for in modern political philosophy. So, at the back of NC's mind is actually a revival of Hinduism.

The Maoist-dominated Constituent Assembly elected in 2008 failed to conclude the constitution-writing process within the original two-year deadline due to differences on the issue of the federal structure. After four extensions in as many years, the Assembly was suspended and a new one was elected in November 2013 that brought the NC and the UML to power.

After the deadly earthquakes on April 25 and May 12, 2015 that killed more than 8,700 people and left millions without proper homes reducing them to living in tents, Nepal’s major political parties decided to meet to conclude the charter-writing process and sign a 16-point deal on June 8, 2015. The urgency to do so was the result of mounting pressure on lawmakers and Prime Minister Sushil Koirala. The people and international donors were demanding to conclude the process and to focus on the relief and rebuilding efforts as billions of dollars in aid money had been promised.

According to critics, the political elite has taken undue advantage of the disaster to include regressive provisions in the constitution aimed at curbing the rights of women and marginalizing groups, including Dalits. Lawmakers are planning to promulgate the new constitution by August 2015.

The preliminary draft of the constitution was tabled on June 30, 2015. The government now intends to proceed with it despite the fact that the apex court has questioned its

Chasing a Dream

From a brutal civil war to the devastation of major earthquakes, Nepal faces the challenge of establishing a sustainable democracy through a consensus constitution.

By Huzaima Bukhari and Dr. Ikramul Haq
Maoists. People from the southern plains called Madhes, also known as the Terai, had staged sporadic protests against the draft saying that the delay in marking federal boundaries “is a ploy to deny their long-standing demand: self-rule for people in the region.”

The draft charter has citizenship clauses that intend to reduce the children of the Nepalis married to foreign nationals who are second-class citizens with limited constitutional rights. This provision is bound to affect the population living along the open borders Nepal shares with India where it is common for people to marry into communities with shared cultures and values. It is a discriminatory citizenship provision for women and has attracted widespread criticism.

The draft also makes it easier for a Nepalese man to confer citizenship on his foreign spouse, while a Nepalese woman needs to be married for 15 years to her foreign husband before even being allowed to apply. The opponents apprehend that such provisions could also be used to prevent Nepalese wives or widows from inheriting property unless stipulated in the deceased’s will.

Instead of specifying that daughters can inherit ancestral property, the draft vaguely says “all children.” Activists are concerned this could be interpreted as sons and unmarried daughters only, the wordings as used in the country’s civil code. Their objection is that it has removed the explicit reference of “sons and daughters.”

Sapana Pradhan Malla, head of Forum for Women, Law and Development, says that the draft dissects the identity of a woman and reflects a patriarchal mindset that seeks to maintain discriminatory practices. She and other campaigners are also concerned that the laws as suggested would be misused to restrict a woman’s right to abortion that was legalized in 2002 in this socially conservative country.

The charter bans sex-selective abortions, but activists say the provision is unnecessary since the practice is already illegal. They fear the charter will be used as a powerful tool to deny women abortions by falsely accusing them of trying to abort girls in a country where boys are preferred. "This issue should not be dealt with in the constitution," says Sonali Regmi, Asia regional manager for the Center for Reproductive Rights.

In the face of these concerns, a committee has been set up to draw up recommendations for changes to the draft, following a series of public consultations around the country. In recent weeks, violence has marred the consultations, especially in the southern plains, home to the historically marginalized Madhesi community, many of whose members marry into families living across the border in India.

In the meantime, lawmakers have brushed off the protests and concerns of campaigner, saying the draft is not intended to discriminate against anyone. “The constitution is not anti-women,” claims ruling coalition lawmaker Bhim Rawal, who helped draft the document. "Every country has provisions to protect its nationality and sovereignty," he says.

According to progressive liberal elements, over the past eight years there has been a sustained campaign from the conservative right-wing Hindus to destroy the secular character of the State that is sine qua non for democracy. They allege that conservatives want to snatch away many rights provided in the present interim Constitution, mainly freedom of speech and the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

These developments in Nepal show that the post-war attempt at institutionalizing democracy is not moving amicably. Delay in framing the Constitution as an agreed document is a political failure of all parties. Failure of the last Constituent Assembly on this account and delay by the present one, define Nepal’s political trajectory and its prospects of constitutional rule as still being a distant dream. However, it needs to be kept in mind that Nepal, with its history of 240 years monarchial rule, is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society. It has over 92 languages, which the Nepali people call their mother tongue. Similarly, different communities have their peculiar cultural heritage on which are based their norms and values. It would be a challenge to establish a sustainable democracy in such a country that has witnessed brutal armed civil war. For building an extensive social solidarity, the State will have to guarantee not only the recognition and equality of all languages and cultures, but protection of women and other marginalized segments of society as well. The lawmakers while adopting the constitution will have to tackle these issues.\[8\]
On August 8, 2015 a large and peaceful group of people streamed out into the streets of the Maldives. Holding placards with #FindMoyameehaa (Find Mad Man) written across, the participants of the group were asking for information about the missing blogger Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla. He was popularly known as Moya Meehaa because he would speak out against the atrocities in the country. He had been abducted from outside his home a year ago.

Among the group was an elderly lady, the mother of Abdulla, who wanted to know about her son’s whereabouts. Instead of giving her the information, she and the others were mistreated by the police which had been deployed to stop the rally. The government’s callous treatment reinforced its lack of empathy towards

Media in the Maldives and Bangladesh are speaking out against the brutal treatment meted out to bloggers.

By Lubna Jerar Naqvi
Since Moya Meehaa’s disappearance, his mother and friends, mostly local journalists, as well as international organizations like the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and even the UN, have been trying to find out about him.

According to a local blogger and friend Yameen Rasheed, Ahmed Rilwan went missing shortly after he had written a report on death threats received by journalists for reporting on the powerful gangs operating in the country. Rasheed said the situation in the Maldives had become quite difficult for journalists to work in and was only getting worse. He said almost all journalists had received threats and everyone was waiting to see who would be next.

The media in the Maldives never enjoyed complete freedom and was always controlled by the state and even independent newspapers were influenced by those close to the regime. Things changed slightly in the early 2000s, when democratic forces started to emerge. Media outlets, especially websites, became popular for the people to vent their views. Naturally this led to the government blocking them but it did not stop the people from accessing the sites through proxies.

The wave for change seemed to be imminent but the struggle had only begun. The change was supported by the ratification of the constitution in 2008, after which Article 28 of the constitution granted media freedom in the Maldives, thus increasing the space in which the media could work. This helped to improve the standard of press freedom in the country. As a result, the Maldives moved from the 103rd position on the Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) Press Freedom ranking to the 51st position. But this was hard to retain by the Maldives. In February 2012, President Nasheed’s government ended with a coup and the media reverted to the pre-2008 position. This was augmented with attacks on and disappearance of journalists, making the situation even more dismal. It is prudent to mention that the media in the Maldives may be freer to work in some ways but it is still not independent and journalists are prone to exercise self-censorship.

In June 2012, blogger Hilath Rasheed suffered a near fatal attack when his attackers slashed his throat. Miraculously he survived but only to flee the country. The attacks continued, some by groups allegedly supported by the regime. In October 2013, opposition aligned Raajje TV’s main station was destroyed in an arson attack. Then, in June 2014, many people were abducted and harassed by radicalized gang members for allegedly posting pro-secularist content.

Another country where bloggers in particular are being targeted is Bangladesh. In a little more than five months at least four bloggers were brutally murdered in the country but the authorities have seemed unable to stem the aggression towards bloggers. Blogger Avijit Roy was murdered on February 26, Oyasigur Rahman on March 30, Ananta Bijoy Das on May 12 and Niladri Chattapadhaya Niloy was also killed inside his home in the capital city’s Goran on August 7. Ansar-Al-Islam, the Bangladesh chapter of al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent, accepted the responsibility of the attack on Niloy. Its members were picked up for interrogation by the police and are currently under investigation.

The situation is quite grim in Bangladesh, and the authorities are walking on a thin rope in trying to grapple with the outspoken bloggers and their aggressive opponents. The Bangladesh Inspector General of Police, AKM Shahidul Haque said after Niloy’s murder, “There is no problem in writing blog posts. But, don’t write anything that hurts others’ religious sentiment. Hurting religious sentiment is an offence.”

The attacks on journalists in Bangladesh began two years ago in 2013, when blogger Rajiv Haider was blatantly hacked to death on February 15, 2013 in front of his home in Mirpur, Dhaka. Similarly, the other attacks on bloggers were in full public view – Niloy was killed in his own home with his wife present in the building. The boldness of the attackers reveals the vulnerability of bloggers in Bangladesh. All the bloggers who have been attacked in Bangladesh had one thing in common - they supported or were members of Gonojagoron Mancha, which literally means National Awakening Stage (gono means people, jagoron means awakening, and moncho means platform). A campaign began in 2013 against the verdict on Abdul Quader Mollah, a Bangladeshi Islamic leader and politician, demanding capital punishment for him and the Razakar and Al-Badr members who committed crimes against humanity in 1971.

J most journalists from all over the world need to support the struggle of journalists in the Maldives and Bangladesh against the dangers they face in their countries. The UN and other international journalists’ bodies need to step up efforts to try and resolve the situation in these countries and strengthen the journalists. One way to do this would be to strengthen the journalists in the country and highlight the problems faced by them. The international organizations need to open channels of negotiations with the governments to improve the state of affairs and to give freedom to the journalists. Atrocities against journalists should also be highlighted through global campaigns to build pressure on the relevant governments.

The writer is a senior journalist based in Karachi.
Rise of the City

Urbanization has its positives and negatives as Bhutan is increasingly discovering.

By Samina Wahid

More than four decades after urbanization started in Bhutan, the country’s demographic pattern appears to be following the global trend. However, unlike other countries where the establishment of towns and cities was the result of economic opportunities, urbanization in Bhutan was based on administrative centers. The process of town planning in Bhutan started in 1974 when a central town planning committee was formed to guide urban development. Urban planning in the past was not successful as no donors were keen on supporting infrastructure development although assistance was given for water supply and sanitation.
systems. Support for Bhutanese urban development started flowing in after the 1996 UN Habitat Conference. It is for this reason that Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan, has transformed from a beautiful little town into a modern, concrete city. The urbanization expansion has come at a cost and has created rapid environmental degradation in the region. The resulting climate change is putting the city at a greater risk. In fact, Thimpu is one of the world’s 15 cities most vulnerable to the impact of global warming, according to a report by the International Institute for Environment and Development, a London-based research organization.

The city sprawls down steep slopes between altitudes of 2,248 metres and 2,648 metres. Thimphu’s sharp inclines – many with gradients greater than 30% – make the city particularly vulnerable to landslides. Heavy rainfall and sudden cloudbursts, which increase the risk of landslides, will become more frequent as a result of future climate change, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2007 assessment report.

Thimphu’s urban development began at a slow pace in 1961, with the launch of Bhutan’s first Five-Year Plan. But it was not until the kingdom opened its doors to the outside world in the 1970s, that the process of urbanization really started to take off. Since then, there has been considerable construction in the city center and suburban development has mushroomed. According to Bhutan’s National Statistics Bureau, Thimphu had a population of 104,214 in 2010, and is growing at a rate of 1.3 per cent every year. Thimphu will continue to expand in the future, as migration from villages to the city becomes ever more popular.

Sadly, however, the environmental impact of this urban expansion is visible to anyone who goes to Bhutan, particularly to Thimpu. Previously, ecologically rich wetlands were interspersed with the city’s buildings near the swimming pool complex and the Changlimithang Stadium, south of the sewage treatment plant in Babesa, near the cremation ground by the river and next to the settlement of Langjophaka. Today, most of the wetlands have been converted into residential areas, shopping complexes and sports and recreational spaces. Only a few remain, but they too are at risk of disappearing.

Predictably, urbanization has had a negative effect on flora and fauna. Wood snipes, once common in Thimphu, have not been seen since 1999, according to ecologist Rebecca Pradhan from Bhutan’s Royal Society for Protection of Nature. Waste management has always been a problem in Thimphu, but the situation has deteriorated with the expanding population. According to Thimphu City Corporation records, the capital of Bhutan produced about 18,000 tonnes of waste in 2009, which means almost 50,000 kilograms every day. The waste-management system is already struggling to cope, but it is estimated that, by 2020, some 81,000 kilograms of waste will be produced every day.

In 2009, local waste comprised mainly organic materials, as well as some paper and plastic. But now electronic waste – particularly refrigerators, computers and mobile phones – is being dumped out in the open along with other waste, increasing the risk of dangerous chemicals leaking into the soil and the downstream water supplies.

With more and more Bhutanese settling in Thimphu, the numbers of vehicles are increasing too. Of the 53,382 vehicles in the country, 29,139 are in Thimphu and major cities in the west, according to the Royal Bhutan Police Traffic Division. Higher vehicle numbers have led to a higher demand for road construction in the fragile mountains and increased traffic on the 11-kilometre Thimphu-Babesa expressway has destroyed many bird habitats. The ongoing river diversion work on the Thimphu River has also resulted in further destruction of bird habitats.

According to the National Environment Commission, Thimphu and the town of Phuentsholing on the border with India has experienced deteriorating air quality over the years. Daily air pollution levels now often exceed WHO guidelines. Sources of air pollution include combustion of biomass and fossil fuels, industrial emissions, dust from unpaved roads, new construction sites and bitumen heating for road construction.

Houses in Thimphu are poorly designed when it comes to storing heat during the cold winters. Improving building design could save energy and money in the long run. If building designs are improved, energy consumption could be drastically reduced. For example, in an average household, windows account for 15 per cent to 30 per cent of the total heat loss. Well-designed, large glass windows could save energy through the benefits of passive solar heating. While the initial cost of installing double-glazed windows is high, reducing energy loss by up to 18% would eventually pay the cost for itself. Advanced insulation materials can reduce the energy consumption of buildings by as much as 90%, according to architect Herbert Girardet.

Rapid urban growth has already created pressures on services like drinking water, sanitation and waste disposal. This has also led to the deterioration of air quality and proliferation of squatter settlements in areas with a sensitive environment. Today, Bhutan is in dire need of planned urban development that will not only help mitigate rural to urban migration but will also create opportunities to meet rising expectations for commercial opportunities.

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The Iran-US deal is unprecedented in several aspects. While the primary purpose of the agreement is to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the checks built into the accord are unparalleled in their stringency. Not only does the deal make it extremely difficult and highly unlikely that Iran will be able to cheat, but it also effectively prevents Iran from acquiring any weapons-grade plutonium for at least 15 years, with some of the restrictions staying in place for as many as 25 years. By agreeing to such strict terms, the Iranian government has clearly signaled their eagerness to step back into the global market.

So what does Iran’s re-entry signify? The first factor that comes to mind relates to Iran’s crude oil reserves. Iran has the world’s fourth largest reserves, and with the 2012 EU restrictions that banned insurers from covering ships carrying Iranian oil, it is estimated that the country has placed around 30 to 40 million barrels in storage. While sanction relief is unlikely to occur until the first half of 2016, once it does set in, Iran cannot only begin to sell its oil in storage but it can also begin to ramp up its production. However, any concerns that Iran’s re-entry into the oil market will drastically depress prices are unfounded as, one, it is unlikely that Iran will unload all of its stored oil at once, and two, bolstering production in its existing fields which has seen a significant decline due to the sanctions, will require considerable foreign investment. While the moderation in sanctions post the nuclear deal will help improve FDI flows into the country, especially given that the ban on SWIFT, the financial-messaging system used to transfer money from the world’s banks will also be effectively lifted. Exactly how much investment the Iranian government is able to attract will depend heavily on how quickly and effectively it is able to roll back the significant red-tapism currently operating within the Iranian economy.

As economic sanctions are lifted, investments will not only flow into the...
Iranian economy but it is also likely the
country will play a greater economic
role in the region. In this regard, the
existing role of Iran in Afghanistan's
economic development will only
deepen. The region will also begin to
see several energy related projects
move towards fruition, such as the
proposed Iran-India-Pakistan pipeline.
Moreover, given Iran's 77 million-plus
population, as its consumers enter
the global market, it is expected that
trade in the region will see a huge
boost. Specifically, it is expected that
Iran's fourth largest trading partner,
Turkey, will see a boom in its retail and
services sectors. Similarly, countries
like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and
Turkmenistan which are hemmed
in by a war-torn Afghanistan and a
sanctions-hit Russia are particularly
eager for the economic opportunities
that the opening up of Iran represents.
Incidentally, the already existing
Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran Railway
will prove instrumental in integrating
these markets that much quicker. At
the same time though, countries like
Turkey will remain wary as Iran is a
competitor in the industrial and energy
sectors and can potentially swing FDI
away from other economies in the
region.

Iran's geostrategic position is
especially relevant in the situation
arising from the Iran-US deal. As China-
Russia cooperation continues, the
linking of Central Asia with South Asia
via Iran will only become increasingly
relevant for improved regional
cooperation. In this, the economic and
especially the political role of Iran is
of particular concern to international
observers. With Delhi and Beijing
bidding for the Chabahar port on the
Gulf of Oman, and a proposal for an
India-Russia-Iran transport corridor
into Central Asia already in the works,
how Tehran plays its cards with regard
to the port and the corridor may
provide significant insights into Iran's
envisioned role in the region.

While the points discussed so
far touch largely upon the economic
implications of the Iran-US deal,
the biggest concern relates to the
significance of the accord with regard
to the geo-politics of particularly the
Middle East. Given Iran and Saudi
Arabia's tumultuous history and their
continuing proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, as well as the animosity
between Iran and Israel, the United
States' willingness to negotiate with
and enter into the pact with Iran
may be interpreted to mean that the
superpower is looking to set up a new
ally in the region.

With regard to Iran's motivations, it
seems that rather than political these are
primarily economic in nature since the
sanctions were crippling the country's
energy-dependent economy. The US
motivations are considerably more
difficult to untangle. The US had been
looking to negotiate a nuclear deal with
Iran for nearly a decade now. At the
same time, although the US continues
to support its Saudi allies while also
maintaining its pro-Israel stance, some
analysts believe that the timing of the
deal is not just driven by the election of
the moderate Iranian president. Rather,
it is the continued consolidation of the
Asian region as well as its new trade
routes and economic cooperation
which may well spell a reduction in
the US global market share that has
led the US to introduce a new player
in the economic and political arena of
the area.

The nuclear deal undoubtedly
signifies a huge set-back in terms of
Iran's nuclear ambitions, yet
the economic implications of the
agreement are largely positive for the
country. While the re-entry of Iran in
the global arena has positive spillovers for
its trading partners, it also means that
these same countries are now looking
at a new competitor in the region. Even
with Iran's potential to re-direct FDI
away from other regional economies,
it is expected that as sanctions are
lifted, the associated regional economic
opportunities, particularly with regard
to new trade and energy routes, will
lead to greater trade creation as opposed
to trade diversion for all countries
concerned.

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Management Sciences.
The political relationship between Pakistan and what was then the Soviet Union dates back to 1948. Since then, relations between the two countries have been ‘rising and falling,’ as expressed by one former diplomat and they have remained in opposite camps in terms of global politics. Bilateral relations ebbed to a low point in May 1960 when, during a speech in the UN in the wake of the U2 incident, the former Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev threatened to wipe Peshawar off the face of the earth.

In the next decade or so, Pakistan moved to alleviate Soviet concerns in 1968 by serving notice on the US government, just days ahead of Premier Nicolai Kosygin’s visit to Rawalpindi, for premature termination of lease of communication facilities in Badaber near Peshawar, which was due to expire in July 1969. To some extent, this helped in removing the Soviet Union’s doubts about Pakistan’s obligations with respect to its military pacts with the west.

On its part, the Soviet Union softened its stance on Kashmir and, for the record, in 1964, it was the last time that it stated in the UN that Kashmir was an integral part of India. Since then it has refrained from holding this view in public pronouncements and communiqués. Even India admits that it can no longer rely on unqualified Russian support in its dispute with Pakistan.

But in 1971 the strategic Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation soured bilateral relations...
between Pakistan and the Soviet Union, as the balance of regional power tipped in favor of India when it succeeded in dismembering Pakistan. The acrimony continues to this day. In the 1980s, Pakistan-Soviet Union relations further nosedived following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistan actively supported the Afghan Mujahedeen and this led to a retreat of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan a decade later. The dissolution of the Soviet Union formally came about in 1991.

In 2003, Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf visited Russia at the invitation of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, followed by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov’s reciprocal visit to Pakistan in 2007. These visits paved the way for improvement of bilateral relations through signing of agreements for enhancing economic cooperation and trade and for educational and scientific exchanges.

In the wake of the US exit from Afghanistan in 2014, Pakistan has made good use of the window of opportunity in moving closer to Russia. The move may have been previously fraught with dangers as it could jeopardize Pakistan’s close ties with the US on which it had depended for military and economic aid for many decades.

The US has also leaned on Pakistan for its successful exit from Afghanistan and this has created an environment in which Pakistan can take initiatives towards establishing a relatively strong economic and trade relationship with Russia as compared to the past when Pakistan was considered a hot zone by the international community. This relationship further deepened when Russia gave its approval to China for the export of Russian design engines for Pakistan’s Block-II JF-17 Thunder. This was crucial if Pakistan were to meet its pressing air power requirements as well as develop a potential for unhindered export of the jets.

Russia’s recent ‘political approval’ for sale of Mi-35 ‘Hind E’ helicopters will further cement these ties. Pakistan had been interested in this helicopter since 2009 because of its proven battlefield track, but the deal got a boost after a recent visit of Pakistan’s Chief of the Army Staff General Raheel Sharif to Russia where he had important discussions with the Russian authorities. There are other helicopters in this category like the South African Rooivalk, Eurocopter Tiger and the Apache from the US but they are either not battle-tested, are too expensive or are not available for acquisition due to political expediency.

The growing ties with Russia is a major breakthrough for Pakistan which some years ago would have been considered too far-etched. Russia has over-ruled objections from India in this respect. India has been a major customer of Russian military equipment for years and still occupies an important position in the equation in spite of the latest Indian shift towards the US and other western sources for its ambitious defense procurement program.

The exact number of Russian helicopters to be acquired by Pakistan is not known though HIS Jane’s has reported that up to 20 helicopters could be sold to Pakistan, starting with delivery of the first batch of 4 machines in the not too distant future. The manufacturing of Mi-35 ‘Hind E’ started in 2005. It is a state-of-the-art attack helicopter in the inventory of the Russian Air Force squadrons and is an important weapons system. Other countries that have procured the helicopter in recent years are Venezuela, Brazil and Azerbaijan.

The Mi-35 ‘Hind E’ is a comprehensive and modernized version of its predecessor Mi-24 Hind. To a large extent, modifications in the Mi-35 ‘Hind E’ have addressed those limitations that were previously experienced in high altitude operations or high ambient temperatures environments in Afghanistan. Strengthening of armor around vulnerable areas such as engine bay, fuel tanks and cockpit has given the choppers greater combat resilience and improved the survivability factor in intense battlefield conditions.

To assist the cockpit crew in round the clock operations, the M-35 ‘Hind E’ has an impressive array of aids like the latest navigation and avionics suit. For accurate ordinance deliveries, it is equipped with a target sight system which includes a thermal imager and TV channels, laser range finder and location finder. The helicopter is rugged and can operate from unprepared surfaces or poorly equipped airfields and is equally effective using guided or unguided weapons in regular or challenging climatic conditions. The Pakistan Army, which is the major operator of helicopters in the country’s defense forces, has previously used Russian helicopters, notably the Mi-8 and more recently Mi-17s and the army is satisfied with the performance of these machines.

The recent success against Taliban notwithstanding, the country’s counter-insurgency operations in the inhospitable and difficult mountainous terrain in the north could be stretched for years in which the Mi-35 ‘Hind E’ could play a very important role. India has two squadrons of Mi-24 Hind helicopters in its inventory which were used during the Kargil war. Pakistan’s acquisition of around twenty of these helicopters will greatly help plug gaps in its defense against India in any regular war or misadventure under the Indian doctrine of ‘Cold Start’.

The most important indicator of Pakistan-Russian relations in the evolving global geo-political situation is that in times of crisis, ‘friends’ in the neighborhood can be more helpful than ‘distant close friends’. The fluctuation in Pakistan-Russia relations appear to be on the rise again and it is hoped they will continue to grow. Pakistan’s new overtures of friendship towards Russia must be seen in that light and must be regarded as the country’s fresh efforts towards building bridges of friendship in its own neighbourhood rather than depending on assistance from a power that is located continents and oceans away.

The writer is a retired Vice Admiral of the Pakistan Navy.

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Soon after independence, roads in Pakistan sported cars from the US and Europe, primarily because of their influence over the sub-continent during the pre-partition days. However, the automobile industry got a facelift in 1989-90 when the Indus Motor Company Limited (IMC) was established. It was a joint venture between the House of Habib (HOH) and two Japanese companies namely, Toyota Motor Corporation (TMC) and Toyota Tsusho Corporation (TTC). Since then, IMC’s flagship brand, Corolla, has been a market leader in Pakistan along with Honda’s Civic and City. It is interesting to see that nearly five years after the formation of IMC, Honda – a joint venture between the Honda Motor Company Limited and the Atlas Group of Companies, Pakistan - delivered the first car from its assembly line in May 1994. This was another turning point in Pakistan’s automobile sector when two Japanese automobile giants made their presence felt, while IMC was the first to spread its wings in Pakistan, and to date, enjoys the edge of becoming the first to enter the market.

Shifting Gears

European and Korean auto brands could find a place in the Pakistani market.

By Muhammad Omar Ifikhar
Moreover, after the 2013 general elections, investor confidence has surged in the country’s automobile sector, primarily because of the current government’s business friendly approach. Pakistan’s automobile sector, which is currently worth nearly $232 billion, is moving towards an economic revival and is expected to attract automobile companies from Europe and Korea.

According to a report, nearly 39,000 automobiles were imported in Pakistan in fiscal year 2015. The sales of locally assembled cars also jumped over the years. In 2009, 82,844 cars were sold in Pakistan while in 2014-2015 the number reached 151,134. The first in the economic came in June 2015 when car manufacturers declared that sales went up to 151,134 units in 2014-15 as compared to 118,102 in the preceding year.

This is good news for European and Korean automobile manufacturers who can increase their customer base in Pakistan. Although they are selling their vehicles in the country, they do not have assembly plants akin to those of Toyota, Honda and Suzuki. As both Toyota and Honda regularly bring in innovation in their designs and features, the Korean and European automobile manufactures will face tough competition if they decide to make an entry. They would also need to tackle Suzuki’s market dominance which has been running parallel with that of IMC and Honda.

Germany’s Volkswagen has recently showed interest in Pakistan. According to the Pakistan Board of Investment, Volkswagen is not the only company expressing interest. There are a number of other companies from South Korea and Europe that are thinking of setting up assembly plants in Pakistan. It is evident that Pakistan will soon witness an economic revival – and it would bring economic stability and foreign investment. It is bound to affect the equilibrium that Japanese automobiles have maintained in Pakistan. It may not bode well for the Japanese automakers’ confidence in the country as well as the loyal users of these automobiles.

Those who buy automobiles show interest in Japanese brands for their toughness, long-term value, higher resale value and availability of spare parts, which is why more Toyotas and Hondas are seen in Pakistan, especially in Karachi. To gain a competitive edge over Suzuki, the European and Korean companies may even attempt to follow a market penetration strategy because this Japanese brand has a presence in every part of the country.

European and Korean automobile manufacturers must learn from their past experience before making an entry into the Pakistani market. Fiat, an Italian car company came to Pakistan, first in the 1990s and later in the early 2000s, but could not manage to stay afloat due to the competition. Similarly, Korea’s Hyundai has been selling cars in Pakistan but has not been successful in winning a major chunk of the market. The European and Korean companies must create a worthwhile strategy to market their cars because the average Pakistani automobile user will take into consideration many factors before switching from Toyota, Honda or Suzuki, which have positioned themselves well in the market and in the buyer’s mind.

If the German automobile manufacturers can strike a deal with Pakistan in selling their cars, it will create an impetus in generating revenue and provide Pakistani automobile users with cars that last a lifetime. However, the prices of these cars will attract only the elite or the upper-middle class and the masses will still prefer buying Toyotas and Suzukis.

The European and Korean companies can make an entry by providing vehicles for business and commercial use. If plans are set and the hegemony of the public transport sector can be diminished, many foreign companies can install their manufacturing plants in Pakistan to assemble commercial vehicles that will provide job opportunities and induce new life in Pakistan’s automobile sector.

The car loan scheme initiated in 2001-02 did serve to increase the number of cars in Pakistan as anyone having the money to finance a car loan took advantage of the scheme. If the automobile sector’s economic revival is big enough to attract European and Korean companies, then the car loan scheme can be applied to these cars as well. The government also needs to seriously consider the growing traffic in Pakistani cities, especially Karachi, before granting permission to such companies to enter the country.

With Toyota, Honda, and Suzuki maintaining their place as giants in Pakistan’s automobile sector, there is a need for the European and Korean manufacturers to find a foothold and offer more variety and value for money for the car customer.

The writer is a freelance journalist.
Thousands of butchers, skinners and caretakers – also known as qassab who belong to the Muslim community involved in the meat business – saw their livelihoods go up in smoke when a law seeking a ban on the consumption and sale of cows came into force on March 4 early this year.

Building on the foundation of the 1976 prohibition of slaughter of cows, the law makes the killing of bulls and bullocks illegal with a maximum penalty of five years in prison along with fines of up to Rs. 10,000. It even...
Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Kerala, include Assam, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Kerala, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

Nevertheless, there are still big segments of the population that feel the pinch of the ban. They notably belong to the Muslim, Christian and lower-caste Hindu communities. Butchers in charge of abattoirs, once centres of immense hustle and bustle, now stand abandoned and deserted. “What are we to do?” asks Sheikh Qureshi. “All of us have become useless.” The 22-year-old butcher, having been out of work for the past 3 months, is now finding it extremely difficult to provide for his family.

Many of the affected had voted for the BJP for the first time last year after supporting the dynastic Congress Party for decades. The law has left many such people to feel disillusioned and betrayed. “The PM promised ‘achhe din aaney wale hain’ [good days will come],” says Halim Qureshi, a leader of the Bombay Suburban Beef Dealers Welfare Association. “What ‘achhe din?’ He’s taken away our jobs and our food.” The president of the association, Mohammed Ali Qureshi, stresses that a nationwide ban on beef will fail as people in several states enjoy the meat that is a cheap source of protein. “A nationwide ban on cow slaughter is impossible,” Qureshi said. “If the government takes any such decision we won’t sit quiet and there will be nationwide protest. They will have to regret their decision.”

Even Hindu farmers in rural Maharashtra face the brunt of the ban as they find it impossible to take care of ageing cattle they had originally intended to sell for slaughter. “The hypocrisy is evident. There’s a huge vested interest [in the ban]—the buffalo industry,” says sociologist Visvanathan, adding, “The classification of animals is done by sleight of hand. The impact of the ban becomes even more acute for many who are employed in industries related to beef, because they belong to the informal sector. They’re invisible, so their livelihood gets eliminated.”

The government denies that the law particularly targets Muslims and instead claims that it was brought into force for the benefit of the farmers and to arrest the decline of the animal population. Mahesh Pathak, the Maharashtra secretary of animal husbandry has highlighted the long-term benefits of the ban that include an increase in milk production and protein consumption in the state along with a decline in the use of chemical fertilizers. He says that butchers should adjust and “cut buff (buffalo) instead of beef. One choice of meat is not available, but buff will replace it,” he says.

However, the availability of buffalo meat does little to pacify disgruntled Muslim butchers who claim that they prefer bull meat instead. This has therefore led to a complete abstention from meat altogether as mutton, chicken and fish are too expensive for the poor. “None of us eat buffalo. Sometimes, we eat a quarter kilo of chicken. Sometimes, we eat bread. And sometimes, we go hungry,” says butcher Sheikh Nabi Lal, who is the sole breadwinner for his family of five.

Many have risen to challenge the ban, fearing a total sabotage of their centuries-old customs and traditions, not to mention their livelihoods. Petitions have been filed in the Bombay High Court asking the judiciary to stay certain provisions of the law as, in their view, it violates the constitutional rights of privacy and freedom of choice. Although the government did not grant a stay, it did acknowledge that an overnight ban did not give enough time for people to get rid of the beef they legally possessed. The court eventually directed the government not to prosecute people in possession of beef for three months after the date of the April 29 order or until the petitions are finally heard, whichever is later.

Whatever is it that needs to be done, must be done. For many Muslim butchers along with members of the Christian and lower-caste Hindu communities, life as they know it will become increasingly difficult.
Beyond the Poppy Fields

In a land marked by war, many of Afghanistan’s women are turning to makeshift therapists to help them deal with their pain.

By Mahrukh Farooq
According to a study, based on Afghanistan’s Ministry of Health records and hospital reports, which was conducted in 2010 by former Deputy Health Minister Faizullah Kakar, it is estimated that up to 1.8 million women in the 15-40 age bracket are suffering from severe depression. The report cited social disorder, the loss of loved ones, displacement, food insecurity, poverty, illiteracy, lawlessness and a lack of proper access to quality healthcare services as the main causes behind the rise in this figure over the years.

Although the study’s findings have not been confirmed by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) or the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), statistics from other sources sufficiently back this thesis. Further confirmed by the sheer rise in the number of patients seeking treatment at a mental diseases hospital managed by the NGO International Assistance Mission (IAM).

According to an official at the hospital, Khadim Hussain Rahimi, the hospital receives up to 50 patients every single day; a number that is much higher than what it was back in 2000, when the hospital had first opened.

A gender-based violence database maintained by the MoWA has so far recorded over 1,900 cases of violence against women and only 37 suicides in the past two years. Yet, as this data is based on reported cases only, there is concern that the figure is actually much higher. In fact, over 100 cases of self-immolation were registered at the burns ward of the Herat City Hospital during 2009-2010, out of which only 11 died. In the view of Mohammad Arif Jalali, head of the hospital’s burns ward, a substantial number were women suffering from debilitating mental disorders.

In such cases, the existence of therapists such as Farkhunda Shahab is practically considered a godsend. Despite the fact that therapists like Shahab have very little formal training in the field, she and other women like her have begun to play an integral role in the campaign to improve mental health in the region. Patients come from far and wide to see these therapists whose sole responsibility is to lend a sympathetic ear and offer guidance and advice on how to make their lives better. Amid a region torn apart by war, it is perhaps the only source of comfort Afghanistan’s women can ever hope to attain.

Afghanistan had barely gathered its bearings after a brutal civil war that lasted 5 years (1992-2001) when the United States announced its decision to invade the country in response to the attacks on September 11 in New York and Washington in 2001. Ever since, Afghanistan has been in a constant state of chaos and destruction, with hundreds of casualties on both sides. Even though the U.S. and NATO ended its combat operations in December 2014 and handed over the full responsibility of the country’s security to the government of Afghanistan, the country still faces a multitude of problems; its economy is in a shambles, its political situation is in complete disarray and its state of law and order worse than ever before. All this has contributed to the decline in the overall mental health of Afghan women. A fact that was recently highlighted in a series of debates organized by the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR).

Held at the Women’s Affairs Department in Afghanistan’s Wardak Province as part of the IWPR Programme, Afghan Reconciliation: Promoting Peace and Building Trust by Engaging Civil Society, the debates shed light on a number of examples of women and children who have had to face the disastrous effects of war. Jan Mohammad Hikmatju, a psychological expert, went to the extent of saying that conflict could have a traumatic effect on even unborn children. “War has a direct impact on the mental well-being of pregnant women,” says Hikmatju. “It can also cause miscarriages or leave a child at the risk of developing a disability, which can include heart defects or ‘selective mutism,’ a disorder that prevents the infant from speaking.”

Another problem that has been exacerbated as a result of social and economic upheaval is drug abuse. According to the Afghan Ministry of Public Health, there are nearly 1 million drug users in the country aged between 15 years to 64 years. This constitutes nearly 8% of the country’s entire adult population. Many women have also fallen victim to the addiction, their number ranking at a whopping 120,000. Add domestic violence to the mix and you have a ticking time bomb of problems that is just waiting to explode.

“For us, it has become a vicious cycle of repeated traumatic experiences over years and years,” says Dr. Suraya Dalil, a former Afghan minister of health. “It’s been too much, not only on individuals, but also on society, which is just waiting for a spark to let out the anger.” Inge Missmahl, the director of the International Psychological Organization, which trains therapists across Afghanistan, reiterated Dr. Suraya’s views. “If you are in a continued environment of violence, without empathy, it is difficult to survive psychologically,” says Missmahl. “You have to protect yourself somehow, to survive in everyday life.”

For Shahab, her job as a therapist revolves around that very concept. Married to an opium addict with whom she has three children – the oldest is 12 – Shahab knows all too well the effects of living amidst such challenges. “In my village alone, I know of 50 addicts,” she said. “When my husband goes out of the house, they are across the street calling for him. Some villagers taunt me sometimes: ‘You are a psychological counselor. How come your husband is an addict?’ ” Still, her struggles have helped lend insight that helps others cope with their pain. Now, two years on the job, Shahab considers her job as a relief from her sufferings as she has learned to leave her pain behind. “My training has helped me put up with my husband’s situation. When he doubts me, when he is difficult, I understand,” she said. “Now when he curses at me, I just smile.”

Although the Afghanistan government has made mental health a priority for only the last four years, one ministry official claimed that mental health is still a hard sell for international donors and senior Afghan leaders. With a population of nearly 35 million, there are only 260 counselors in the country. Still, the fact that such non-medical services are being offered is a big step, according to Missmahl. “This is certainly not enough, but it is already a wonderful achievement,” she said. “It helps people to cope better with their everyday life.”

In response to such positive results, the Health Ministry has striven to make care more affordable as well as to decrease the stigma attached to it by incorporating counseling into the primary health care service that it provides across the country, placing ‘psychological counselors’ like Shahab in some local clinics. Even though Afghanistan still has a long way to go before its people can even hope for a normal way of life, it helps to know that at least some work is being done to alleviate the suffering of those in need of help.

The writer is a member of the staff.
Spinning to Success

The Bangladesh cricket side has found a new maturity in recent months.

By Faizan Usmani

Having beaten such sides as Pakistan, India and South Africa in ODIs, the Bangladesh cricket team is really coming up. Since its arrival in international cricket in 1998-99, the Bangladeshis had struggled against the top teams but then their hard work is now paying off and they are performing well against the top-ranked sides with consistency and maturity in all departments of the game.

No wonder, they managed to finish 7th among the top 10 teams in the ICC ODI Team Rankings, which also helped them qualify for the ICC Champions Trophy 2017 which is to be played only among the eight...
highest-ranked ODI sides, while teams like Pakistan and West Indies are still finding ways to qualify for the event. This shows that Bangladesh cricket is moving in the right direction.

Usually, subcontinental sides rely on their spinners, especially when playing on their home grounds as pitches in this part of the world are dry and mainly support spin bowlers. Compared to the bouncy tracks found in Australia, New Zealand, England and South Africa, fast bowlers don’t find much seam or swing when playing in the subcontinent in countries like India, Pakistan Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshis have recharged their pace battery with fast bowlers who are not only young and spirited, but also have immense talent. This refers more specifically to young guns like Taskin Ahmed, Rubel Hossain and Mustafizur Rahman who have emerged as game changers for their country.

The 20-year old Taskin Ahmed, for instance, has taken 21 wickets in 14 one-day matches so far with a strike rate of 29.1, and that too against teams like India, South Africa and Pakistan. Rubel Hossain, 25, right-arm fast bowler, has picked up 87 wickets in 67 ODI matches with a strike rate of 35. And when it comes to an emerging star like Mustafizur Rahman, 19, left-arm medium, the young lad has produced even more astonishing figures to this point.

In recent performances, the Bangladeshi side has displayed a fast and steady attack which is consistent, accurate and able to destroy any batting lineup in limited overs cricket. They may not be as fast as Dale Steyn or as experienced as Sir Curtly Ambrose but what makes the Bangladeshi pace attack threatening is their ‘freshness,’ suggesting they are here to stay for long and will surely become more lethal and sharp with time.

The future of Bangladesh looks bright and promising, though considering their overall record in all formats of the game, they still need to do a lot more to jump the ICC rankings and be counted among the top 3 teams. Bangladesh has performed comparatively well on its home grounds compared playing outside the country.

The Bangladesh record in Test cricket is below the standards of any Test playing nation and they have yet to mark their first victory against any Test playing side.

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Offered by banking institutions through mobile phone, mobile banking is gaining momentum all over the world. In keeping up with rapidly changing technology, Sri Lanka, however, takes the edge as its postal department has been playing the role mostly played by banks in other parts of the world. Offering banking services through a chain of post offices is an innovative concept for remote rural towns and villages having no direct access to banking services.

In June 2014 Sri Lanka Post introduced M-ePay, a new mobile electronic payment system. Connecting all sub-post offices to the main post offices through mobile phones, the system was primarily implemented by the postal department using post offices as banks to reduce the duration it takes for money to travel across the island.

The M-ePay is a web service based mobile application which helps local people make all kinds of payments and financial transactions by using mobile phones in nearby sub-post offices, instead of going to banks located in specific areas. In a very short time, the new initiative came out to be a revolutionary step, which was mainly taken by the Sri Lankan government to facilitate both the urban and rural population. The reason behind the huge success of the new payment system was simple: it has provided citizens across the island the means to carry out a range of financial transactions and payments, such as utility bill payment, money transfer, etc. using their mobile phones.

In Sri Lanka, post offices are divided into two categories, - main-post offices and sub-post offices. Main post offices are located in rather developed urban areas, while sub-post offices operate as branches of the main offices and are generally located in remote rural areas. Main post offices are systematically
linked to a centralized server through the internet but sub-post offices in rural areas are not linked to the main server because of no internet connectivity. As telecommunication services are available across the island, the M-ePay system links sub-post offices to the centralized system using mobile phones. To use the service, users must have a mobile phone with a unique user identification (ID), which is provided by the Sri Lanka Post. To obtain a personal ID, a user needs to fill and submit a compulsory application form to the ICT division of Sri Lanka Post for further processing and verification. Once the application is approved, the user is provided with a unique ID, which also serves as a password to enter the mobile payment system. The information about the newly-registered users with their particular user-IDs is also shared with the sub postmaster who may carry out transactions on behalf of the user when asked.

In sub-post offices, every postmaster has a separate user identity which allows him to make payments through a pre-formatted text message by accessing the main server. Sent from the postmaster’s registered mobile number, a small SMS is enough to make any financial transaction on a user’s behalf. The postmaster also receives a confirmation message as soon as the transaction is made. The best part of this system is that it does not require users to have expensive, high-end phones, as transactions are based on simple text messages that can be delivered and received through any phone.

In rural parts of the South Asian countries, a postmaster always enjoys high regard in his village and stays closer to the people in a wider social context. As he is the person who is responsible for their letters, parcels and money orders, villagers do not hesitate to hand over money to him. The tradition has played a leading role in making M-ePay a phenomenal success, particularly in such rural communities where the literacy ratio is poor and people face many difficulties in using new payment systems.

Local people utilize this system for a variety of purposes such as making utility bill payments and money transfers, receiving EPF (employees’ provident fund) and ETF (employees’ trust fund) payments and other money transactions. The M-ePay service uses GovSMS, the government SMS gateway and enables people to send and receive SMSs from government departments across GSM and CDMA networks.

In Sri Lanka, the number of bank branches per 10,000 populations aged 16 and above is 14.12, while almost 98% of these banks operate in urban areas only. The rural areas in Sri Lanka comprise more than 80% of the national population, but being in a clear majority these areas don’t normally have banks or similar financial institutions.

On the other hand, the country has a sizeable network of post offices with 654 main post offices and around 3,410 sub-post offices in rural towns and villages. Almost every village has a sub-post office that plays a pivotal role in enhancing the living standards of the rural community.

The M-ePay mobile transaction service has turned the government-operated postal platform in Sri Lanka into a profitable institution that has an ever-growing customer base with sizeable earnings every year. According to statistics, since the implementation of the mobile payment system in June 2014, the Sri Lanka Post has earned around 1.3 lakh Sri Lankan rupees (LKR) from 8,540 phone bill payments, around LKR3.7 lakh from 5,537 money transfers and around 64 lakh rupees (LKR) through 396,040 electricity bill payment transactions.

Working under the Ministry of Telecommunications and Posts, Sri Lanka Post has 4738 offices with over 17,000 employees working in different departments, divisions and main and sub-post offices all over the Island. Besides delivering letters and parcels, these sub-post offices have started delivering money under the new system and that too in a matter of seconds. For the most part, the revolutionary M-ePay platform has appeared to be a financial lifeline for the rural communities in Sri Lanka who normally don’t have an easy access to conventional banking services compared to the mainstream urban areas.

If sent by offline money transfer channels, it would take some days to deliver money to its destination in Sri Lanka. Sometimes it takes even more than a week to send money from one point to another, considering the long distances, rough terrain as well as the lengthy times involved to reach far-flung rural areas. Moreover, the financial transactions that are carried out through manual methods in a paper environment lead to many mistakes and errors. The modern mobile transaction medium has reduced these errors manifold, leading the entire system to better productivity, efficiency and direction.

Living in distant rural towns and villages, rural people keep moving to access basic utilities and the much-needed banking services. In addition, the thought of suburbs, slums and shanties, brings forward impressions of backward, ignorant masses deprived of basic civic services. However, Sri Lanka’s M-ePay platform serves as an epitome of good governance as it has empowered its more than 80% rural population by bringing to the fore instant access to banking solutions through mobile phones. The success story also shows how a small, communication device can make a big impact on the lives of rural populations. }
A new document in Nepal could render close to a million people stateless if approved. Nepal’s new draft constitution has caused outrage among women who say their citizenship, property and other rights would be curtailed by the document that has been designed to draw a line under centuries of inequality. Under current rules, children are eligible for Nepalese citizenship as long as one parent is Nepalese but the proposed constitution prevents single parents from passing on the citizenship to their children – it requires both parents to be Nepalese for the children to inherit citizenship.

According to local human rights activists, the move could leave a million people stateless and will mostly affect women since they account for a vast majority of single parents in Nepal. What’s worse is the fact that it makes easier for a Nepalese man to confer citizenship on his foreign spouse while Nepalese women need to be married for at least 15 years to their foreign husbands before they are eligible to apply for citizenship.

What is more, instead of specifying that daughters can inherit ancestral citizenship.
property, the draft replaces the words “all children” with “sons and daughters.” Activists say this could be interpreted as sons and unmarried daughters only. This is the wording used in the country’s civil code.

“The draft dismisses the identity of a woman and reflects our country’s patriarchal mindset that seeks to maintain discriminatory practices,” says Sapana Pradhan Malla, who heads the pressure group, Forum for Women, Law and Development.

Meanwhile, campaigners are also concerned that the proposed constitution will be misused to restrict a woman’s right to abortion which was legalized in 2002. It foresees a ban on sex-selective abortions, which activists say could be used to deny women abortions by falsely accusing them of trying to abort girls in a country where boys are preferred.

“This issue should not be dealt with in the constitution,” said Sonali Regmi, Asia regional manager for the Center for Reproductive Rights. “We fear that the clause can be misused to limit a woman’s right to safe abortion, a key reason for the decrease in Nepal’s maternal mortality rates.”

Fifty-year-old shop owner Rama Bista says the charter poses a major step back for women in a country that has long favored men. Bista, who is married to an Indian man based in Nepal, has spent the last four years trying to secure citizenship for her two sons - their legal right under the current constitution.

“I cannot even speak of some of the things I’ve been told. They tell me my children are not Nepali, that I should go to my husband’s country,” Bista told journalists recently.

But Bista’s already tough struggle is set to become impossible under the new charter which bars single parents from passing on their citizenship to their children and additionally says both parents must be Nepalese. Bista says she is anxious about the future for her sons since citizenship is needed to get anything in Nepal from a driving license to a bank account.

Parliament is expected to eventually vote on the long-awaited constitution which had promised to end years of political limbo in the impoverished nation. Lawmakers were tasked with drafting the charter after a decade-long insurgency ignited by deep-rooted social, political and economic inequalities. A committee is now set to draw up recommendations for changes to the draft, following a series of public consultations around the country.

Draft is not intended to discriminate against anyone. “The constitution is not anti-women,” said ruling coalition lawmaker Bhim Rawal, who helped draft the document. “Every country has provisions to protect its nationality and sovereignty,” he added.

For other experts, such a provision represents a huge setback in the efforts to make women economically independent of their husbands. It also contradicts the government’s attempt to provide women access to property by providing 30 per cent exemption on tax whilst transferring land ownership to women in rural areas.

For Deependra Jha, a lawyer, the draft will make things worse for girls, most of whom already live in poverty. The other important area in which the proposal discriminates is in citizenship rights. Article 12 (1), also known as the “and” provision, grants Nepali citizenship to children born to Nepali parents. If this is adopted, children born to a foreign father or mother could be stateless. Activists want citizenship to be granted to children if either the father or the mother is Nepali. “Such a provision would create difficulties not only in the case where a child had a foreign parent, but also in case of a breakdown of the relationship between parents. The child could be stateless if an application for citizenship was not made or if the father refused to recognize him or her,” said Jha.

Discrimination under Article 12.1 is even worse when one considers that Article 282 of the draft proposal provides that only Nepali citizens (as defined by descent) can have access to the highest offices of the state, including that of president, vice president, prime minister, chief justice, speaker of the parliament, chief ministers and heads of security agencies.

If the constitution is passed, violent protests that have hit the impoverished Himalayan nation are likely to get worse.

In recent weeks, violence has marred the consultations, especially in the southern plains, home to the historically marginalized Madhesi community, many of whose members marry into families living across the border in India. Lawmakers have brushed off the protests and campaigners’ concerns, saying the constitution will be misused to restrict women’s right to abortion which was legalized in 2002.

The writer is a freelance journalist who contributes regularly to various leading publications.
Neighbours, Not Masters!

Allowing foreigners to own land in the Maldives causes a stir in India.

Former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee once said 'You can change friends, but not neighbours.' Following the same dictum, the Maldives now looks beyond the Indian Ocean to explore new friends to strengthen its dwindling economy through foreign investment and help the nation to go bigger despite its small size.

In July, the Maldivian parliament, called People’s Majlis, passed a major constitutional amendment by allowing foreigners with a minimum investment of $1 billion to own land in the country on a conditional freehold basis. Part of a move to lure foreign investment in the Maldives, a cluster of 1,200
beautiful islands, the amendment allows foreign investors to purchase land under the condition that 70 per cent of it will be reclaimed from the ocean.

The government believes that the new law does not pose any threat to the country’s sovereignty and will help it attract large-scale foreign investment for mega development projects. The move suggests that the Maldives is now going to follow the same investment models that were earlier applied by developing Asian countries like Singapore, Dubai and Saudi Arabia, with special zones.

With 14 votes against and 70 in favour of the amendment, the constitutional change has become a matter of continuous debate and reappraisal since its approval. The reason behind the uproar is obvious as India deems the move by the Maldives as being ‘pro-China’, clearly inviting the Chinese to gain a foothold in the Indian Ocean and make it a permanent strategic challenge for the Indians.

Maldives is located on the international east-west shipping route, but, according to India, Chinese presence on the route will not only threaten their maritime security but will also place a check on their backyard. India also views the amendment by the Maldives as another opportunity for China to establish a military base and extend its hold on the South Asian region.

The Maldivian government, however, disregards such concerns. In his address to the nation, the Maldives President Abdulla Yameen said, “The Maldivian government has given assurances to the Indian government and our neighbouring countries as well to keep the Indian Ocean a demilitarized zone.” Yameen also mentioned that the Maldives is not going to change its foreign policy and the amendment in the constitution would not pose "any danger to either the Maldivian people or our neighbouring countries." The Maldives Vice President Ahmed Adeeb also has similar views. He says, “Our sovereignty is not on offer, and we don’t want to give any of our neighbours, including India … any cause for concern.” We don’t want to be in a position when we become a threat to our neighbours.

Given that Chinese companies have rich expertise in executing mega development and construction projects through advanced reclamation technology, China may find itself in an ideal position to make the most of the new constitutional change to the Maldives to exert influence and power in the Indian Ocean.

China does say it has no plans of establishing a military base in the Indian Ocean and its prime objectives is only to achieve the development goals it has set for the whole region, which could not be accomplished without involving the countries in the region.

Despite having a long history of dependence on India, the Maldives seem to prefer China to India.

Located in the area, the Maritime Silk Route is a demilitarized zone and has open access for foreign investors. The new legislation protects the Maldives against China’s influence and allows foreign investors to purchase land within the area.

The earlier three-decade long geopolitical drift has given the Maldives an enigma as to what the core Chinese interests in the Indian Ocean are? Why does China perceive the Maldives as an important strategic partner despite its small size and negligible status? To understand China’s foreign policy is like understanding a Chinese puzzle.

But the fact cannot be questioned that China has emerged as a leading global economy with a huge human capital that is immensely talented and highly skilled compared to the remaining economic powers of the modern era.

Usually, it is America, being the lone superpower, that takes interest in developing nations and aspires to back democracy-driven infrastructures. For its part, India also needs to realize that the Maldives have got something else that attracts China despite having a poor record in democracy.

With a decisive technological edge and technical expertise, China seems to be a befitting strategic partner for the Maldives, whose economy is chiefly based on shipping, fishing and tourism. The new legislation the Maldives may trigger a cold war in the region between China and India, but the tussle is likely to benefit the Maldives in the long run, as the country could attract sizeable foreign investment from Chinese multinational companies and accelerate its economic progress.

It is clear that the Maldives is now making a serious effort to come out from the yoke of dependence on India and has made it obvious that it needs neighbours, not masters.
Since 1972, Bhutan’s measure of prosperity has been through the formal principle of Gross National Happiness (GNP) instead of the more commonly known and monetary-related Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Experts describe GNP as the physical and spiritual health of its citizens and environment. While Bhutan may not be a great world player, it is certainly home to some very big ideas because its program of modernization is not based on amassing wealth but on the happiness of its people. Incredibly, doing so has not just improved the quality of life of its people but has also brought vital infrastructure and facilities to the most neglected corners of the country. In fact, Bhutan’s economy was the world’s second-fastest growing economy in 2007.

This transformation can be credited to none other than Dr Saamdu Chetri. Saamdu was born in a cowshed of one of the most neglected parts of Bhutan; an area where phone and power lines have only recently been laid. While he had a successful career in the private sector, Saamdu found himself become a part of Bhutan’s political life when he was handpicked for service by Bhutan’s first democratically elected Prime Minister. Today, he oversees the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) and has taken on the responsibility for the construction of a center dedicated to improving the wellbeing of the nation’s citizens. Saamdu says this center is going to serve as an example of sustainable development and function as a self-sustaining NGO, running courses for locals as well as international visitors.
However, for a man tasked with bringing happiness to a nation, Saamdu’s own tale is one of immense suffering and pain. Born into an impoverished household, Saamdu was one of eleven siblings all of whom had no choice but to work to make ends meet. Saamdu says he didn’t go to school till he was nine when his older brother took him to school – something that worried his father a great deal. Saamdu says his parents loved him a great deal and did not want him to leave the house. In fact, he adds, his father was so worried about his health that he would send a cow with Saamdu to school. At the age of 14, however, he had to quit school because by that point, all his brothers and sisters had moved out and Saamdu felt it was his duty to help his parents. His day on the farm would begin at four in the morning when he would have to walk at least a kilometer to fetch water after which he would feed the ox and begin to plough.

Saamdu wanted to continue studying but his parents had other plans for him. When he turned 15, Saamdu’s parents took him for pilgrimage in Nepal where they tricked him into getting married. Saamdu says he had no idea he was about to get married till the girl was brought in front of him and the ceremonial rites began. Saamdu tried to resist but it was futile. Not about to give up easily, Saamdu decided to make a run for it but his father-in-law caught him and begged him to reconsider because his daughter’s life would be ruined.

Saamdu relented and eventually he and his wife went on to live with his parents and had two children. He continued with his education at a college in India. One day, however, she disappeared leaving Saamdu to take care of the two children. A friend from college offered to help and eventually he ended up marrying her only to have his first wife reappear briefly. Today, she lives in Nepal and is struggling with mental illness.

In spite of his sufferings, Saamdu says he never let life bring him down. He always had a smile on his face but never in his wildest dreams did he think he would be the man responsible for Bhutan’s happiness. As a fresh college graduate, Saamdu was offered a job by the government to fulfill the king’s dream of developing Bhutan’s private sector – a task that was challenging to say the least. The king had high expectations and there was very little room for error. In fact, every time Saamdu said he made a mistake, he was given a severe dressing down by the royal family.

Finally, after working for several years in the capital, Saamdu retired to his village so that he could go back to living among nature. But fate had other plans for him. When Bhutan’s first democratically elected government came to power, the Prime Minister summoned him to the capital once again where he was asked to work for the cabinet office. Five years later, he was chosen to head Bhutan’s first Gross National Happiness Center in Thimpu.

Saamdu says the center conducts nationwide surveys to improve people’s lives and find out why they were unhappy. Once the causes are determined, solutions are provided to change the way people live, thus making them happier and at peace with their environment.

Today, Saamdu is on the verge of realizing his dream of building a center in a beautiful natural setting where people from Bhutan as well as other countries can learn how to lead happier, well-adjusted lives. The center, which will open on October 18 this year, will educate visitors about three basic principles – to be part of nature, to serve others with kindness and compassion and to discover their innate value. This, says Saamdu, is the only way a country can prosper – by taking care of the well-being of its people.

The writer is a freelance journalist who contributes regularly to various leading publications.
Sympathies. Solomon Bandaranaike was killed in 1959 because of the pro-egalitarian, pro-minority tendencies emerging in his government. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, lacking any formal education to speak of and as a housewife without political experience, was expected to founder in the deep sea of electoral politics. But she was shrewd and entrusted the affairs of government to trusted lieutenants who could never usurp her, such as Felix Dias Bandaranaike.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s SLFP never came to power on its own steam. On all three occasions after 1960, it came either as part of a coalition or with an electoral arrangement with the left. These parties, known as the traditional left comprised the Trotskyite, Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the pro-Moscow Communist Party. Though calling themselves left, they remained firmly committed to parliamentaryism, backed by militant trade union movements. Their role was confined to criticising the SLFP’s centrist policies and the UNP’s more capitalist tendencies.

The first two regimes when Bandaranaike was PM saw attempts at overthrowing her government by violent means. Both attempts failed. In 1962, a coup led by senior police and military officers, almost all of whom belonged to the westernised elite and the minorities, who had lost their privileged position in the populist regimes of both SWRD and Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was crushed. In 1971, the ultra-left Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led an armed revolt of educated, unemployed rural and semi-urban youth, which was put down with merciless ferocity. This was despite left inclined elements in the government.

The Bandaranaike regime of 1970-1977 is yet remembered for its unimaginative economic policies. The 1970s which saw other Asian economies veering towards liberalised, market-oriented systems, found Sri Lanka clinging on to a closed or ‘import substitution’ economy. The objective of the government was reaching self-sufficiency in essentials—especially in food—through local production. But a lack
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