

A hopeful sign for inclusive police services

PM inaugurates OSS desk for women, children, disabled persons and the elderly

THE government's decision to have a special one-stop service (OSS) desk for women, children, disabled persons and the elderly at all police stations is, no doubt, praiseworthy. There are many circumstances where it's difficult for women and children—for social, political or other reasons—to talk about their problems with male police officers. In cases related to sexual violence, in particular, they often don't feel comfortable talking to male officers, and frequent incidents of our policemen mistreating and further harassing survivors of such crimes in the past have only made the situation worse. Fortunately, the special service desk, formally inaugurated by the prime minister on April 10, will be led by a female sub-inspector, who will have a handful of other policewomen working under her.

So far, the results from the special desk, which was launched on a pilot basis in January 2020, seems to be quite positive—181,000 women, 32,286 children, 138,000 elderly people and 11,081 people with disabilities have received the service so far, according to data from the Police Headquarters (PHQ). In Narayanganj sadar model police station, 218 complaints were recorded at the desk. Encouragingly, 198 of those grievances were settled by holding meetings. That 90 percent of the cases were resolved in such a short time is a good sign, particularly given that many cases in our country involving women and children often progress extremely slowly. However, given the ground reality that, in many cases, police take the side of powerful parties and pressurise the victims to “settle,” we can only hope that the OSS desk will set a different example and truly resolve the cases with the best interests of the victims at heart.

The desk will also inform visitors about other government services and provide legal aid to victims who are not financially well-off. This, we believe, is very important. When it comes to many delicate cases involving women, children, disabled persons and the elderly, awareness of what facilities they are entitled to can provide them with the courage and essential support that reassure them to pursue justice.

Police stations in our country are hardly ever welcoming towards victims—especially of gender-based violence—which discourages them from pursuing legal recourse. We hope this special desk will change that. It is imperative for those working at these desks to have a good understanding of how to handle sensitive cases; as such, there should be capacity-building and gender sensitivity training for all officers. Now that the OSS desks have proven to be somewhat successful, we hope that this initiative will be followed through and provided with the necessary support from the government, so that it doesn't fall by the wayside—like so many good government initiatives regularly do.

Premature end to another prime minister's tenure

A new innings in Pakistan politics

ANOTHER elected government in Pakistan has failed to finish its term. Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was shown the door after he lost a no-confidence vote in parliament, having lost the support of its coalition partners earlier. It was predictable after the Supreme Court of Pakistan's landmark verdict that declared Khan's move to dissolve the parliament unconstitutional and compelled him to face the vote. His acceptance of the Supreme Court verdict as well as the result of the vote has put to rest any possibility of confrontation between the various state constituents that many in Pakistan feared.

We shall deliberately refrain from commenting on the whys and wherefores of the no-confidence motion and all the foreplay that preceded it, but suffice it to say that Khan's nearly four-year tenure delivered mixed results for the Pakistani people. What we would like, though, is to focus on the important features of the ouster of the Tehreek-e-Insaf that merit reflection on.

There are two very creditable aspects of note in the entire saga. Firstly, it is noteworthy that the country's constitution has been upheld. The credit for that goes to the Supreme Court of Pakistan, which did its duty without fear or favour and played its part as the sole guardian of the constitution. It demonstrated the independence of the highest judiciary in the country. The second feature is the role the parliament played in stamping the supremacy of the legislature as the house of the people. Imran Khan lost the support of his party members, and they chose to vote against him. This is something that is not possible in most South Asian countries—at least not in Bangladesh, where Article 70 of our constitution punishes floor-crossing with expulsion from the party.

Now that an interim prime minister will take over and a fresh election is due to be held in August 2023, there are two paths forward for the erstwhile prime minister of Pakistan. One is to take the peaceful path to the next elections. The other is to take to the streets, which he has already hinted to, behooving the political culture of South Asian politics. We believe the latter will be a very ill-advised path to adopt. Given the economic crisis that Pakistan is in at the moment, the last thing it needs is a period of political unrest. It's time the political parties across the board sank their differences to retrieve the country from an economic turmoil.

What message does South Asia get from Sri Lanka?



MACRO MIRROR

Dr Fahmida Khatun is executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

RIGHT now, Sri Lanka is going through its worst economic crisis since independence in 1948. Mounting debt, negligible foreign exchange reserves and runaway inflation have brought the country's economy to the brink of collapse. Such a situation has led the Sri Lankan people to unbearable sufferings, with power cuts for about 13 hours and acute shortage of food, fuel, medicine, and other essentials. The economic crisis has been in the making for several years. The impact of Covid-19 on Sri Lanka has been prominent; the pandemic severely affected its tourism industry, which has been an important source of income for the island country. The signs of economic challenges were apparent for quite some time, but became more visible in the last one year.

What prompted the economic crisis?

The first is the mounting foreign debt, which stands at 119 percent of Sri Lanka's GDP. The government has taken foreign loans to implement projects and finance public services in an imprudent manner. As a result, public debt has reached an unsustainable level—much higher than the recommended 55 percent by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). And the country's foreign exchange reserve is insufficient to repay the debt. The debt payment has reached about USD 7 billion so far. Some of the loans have been taken at high interest rates, for projects that have not been economically profitable. Mismanagement and corruption have worsened the situation.

Some of the populist moves made by the Sri Lankan government backfired. For example, in March 2020, it announced it would fully adopt organic agriculture. So, it imposed an import ban on pesticides and chemical fertilisers. As a result, agricultural output declined by about 30 percent. So, it had to import more by using its foreign currency, putting further pressure on the reserve.

Then the government slashed the VAT rate from 15 percent to 8 percent to stimulate the economy. Also, the income tax bracket was raised from 500,000 Sri Lankan rupees to three million rupees annually, which cut down the number of taxpayers by 33.5 percent. Economists have estimated that the total tax income loss because of these measures is equivalent to two percent of Sri Lanka's GDP. Without adequate domestic resource mobilisation, the country had to use its forex reserves to repay its foreign debt. In 2018, Sri Lanka had a reserve of USD 6.9 billion, which fell to only USD 2.2 billion in 2022.



Vehicle owners waiting in line to fill their tanks, mostly during a power outage, is a common scenario Colombo, Sri Lanka.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

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resulting in an unprecedentedly high inflation. For example, in 2021, inflation was 6.9 percent, which spiked to 18.7 percent in March 2022. Food inflation shot to about 30 percent in March 2022.

How has the Sri Lankan government been tackling the crisis?

Sri Lanka has been seeking funds from various sources to tackle the crisis. In June 2021, Bangladesh gave a credit facility of USD 200 million under a currency swap deal with Sri Lanka, which was renewed in December 2021. In January 2022, Sri Lanka requested China to ease its debt. In February 2022, Sri Lanka also borrowed USD 500 million from India. Then in March 2022, India provided a line of credit of USD 1 billion to purchase food, medicine, and essentials. The central bank increased interest rates by 700 basis points to control inflation. For a long time, the Sri Lankan government has been reluctant to take loans from the IMF. Now it has turned to the IMF for a bailout.

However, such measures without redressing the governance and institutional issues will not see any success given the nature and depth of the economic downturn.

Should Bangladesh be worried?

Bangladesh is doing well compared to its South Asian neighbours. However, some of the key economic indicators are showing worrying signs. Its trade deficit is growing as imports have become costlier due to rising international prices. Export

growth during July-March of FY2021-22 was 33.4 percent, while import grew by 46.7 percent during July-February. Remittance growth during July-March of FY2021-22 was negative (-) 17.8 percent, resulting in a current account deficit.

The debt-GDP ratio is 38 percent, which is still comfortable. But foreign loan is increasing at a fast pace. Some large projects are being implemented using

huge loans at high commercial rates. Cost escalation due to delay in implementation as well as corruption also reduces the profitability and delays the economic returns from these infrastructures. Once the repayment starts, there will be pressure on our foreign exchange reserve.

Is there any message for South Asian countries?

Sri Lanka's economic catastrophe is rooted in the very nature of its politics. Once much better placed compared to its South Asian neighbours, the country has been brought down by dictatorial power, extreme populism, and a total lack of understanding of reality. As it grapples with its unprecedented economic downturn, other South Asian countries are also facing economic vulnerabilities, especially in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Though the extent of their challenges varies, there is a need to be cautious. Some are also dealing with political crises.

Lack of competence, economic mismanagement, poor governance, lack of accountability, intolerance towards difference in opinion, and lack of inclusiveness in the democratic process are common in the region. The region is also characterised by a unique culture of being ruled by political dynasties—sometimes in feudal style. This destroys the institutions that are the pillars of democracy. In the end, it leads to disasters—like the one Sri Lanka is experiencing now.

The 'honest' captain myth



Pervez Hoodbhoy is an Islamabad-based physicist and writer.

PERVEZ HOODBHOY

CULTS—political and religious—can be long-lived and deadly dangerous. Building on his cricketing success and cancer hospital, Imran Khan worked relentlessly for decades at self-promotion. His growing cult swallowed story after story: corruption would end in 90 days; the national treasury would overflow once “looted dollars” stashed by political rivals in secret overseas accounts were brought back.

Naya Pakistan would overflow with milk and honey—Khan would “commit suicide but never return to the IMF”; foreign policy would be based upon principle rather than expediency; the world's most sought-after passport would become the green one; and Pakistan would turn into a tourist haven. Jobs would be aplenty, the justice system would be overhauled, civil service officers appointed purely on merit, and the police system revamped. But the reality turned out starkly different.

Just months after winning a bitterly disputed election, Khan's government requested the IMF for a loan. Critical dependency on the United States was traded for equal dependency upon China. Today, the Pakistani passport is no more desirable than before and the only foreign tourists are intrepid mountain climbers. In January 2022, Transparency International announced that perceptions of corruption had taken a quantum leap.

Horse-trading politics got a boost

Anthropologists have related the degree of cultic affiliation to the perceived uncertainty within an environment. For example, they find that rougher seas make fishermen engage in more elaborate magic rituals. Correspondingly, Pakistan's lack of a shared national purpose creates space for putschists and captains who promise to steer the ship of state out of stormy waters. Military interventions that debilitated democracy paved the way for fix-all miracle magic men like Imran Khan. The broken idols of other wannabe messiahs with fanatical followings litter the political landscape. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, Altaf Husain, and Maulana Fazlullah also had sophisticated urbanites among their followers. This happened even before the invention of social media, but technology has created virtually impenetrable silos of political groupthink.

once Khan decided that “electable” candidates would be preferred over principled candidates. Although he now admits “mistakes”, the future may be no different. In a desperate move, the Punjab chief minister—apparently chosen by his first lady and praised sky-high by Khan until two weeks ago—has just been thrown under the bus. His replacement, handpicked by Khan himself, was once derided by Khan as a scumbag.

To save his sinking ship, Captain Khan has invented the cock-and-bull story of an American conspiracy to oust him. This, he said, owes to his independent stand on Ukraine. So why hasn't Narendra Modi—also ambivalent on Russia's aggression—alleged the same?

What makes cults so attractive and cultists so impervious to factual evidence and reason? Why do so many people set aside good sense and worship leaders?

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Today, one particular belief sits securely in a nuclear-protected bunker and may

survive even the no-confidence vote. Common wisdom is that all opposition leaders are money-hungry cheats and Khan, even with his shortcomings, is clean as a whistle. Correct? After all, it is commonly held that all opposition politicians are venal, even if there is disagreement on which is the more corrupt one.

Imran Khan wins out on this. Chasing money is not his first priority. Of course, opponents do point to his magnificent Banigala palace, high-style living, minimal payment of personal taxes, and the doubts raised by the ECP regarding PIT's foreign funding. These are minor sins. But it is Khan's insatiable lust for power that makes him truly dangerous for this country. While money fattens individuals, absolute power brings catastrophe. Donald Trump wanted both money and power but Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot craved only the latter.

How will Khan rally his followers again? He has already revealed his strategy for the forthcoming elections: whip up xenophobic nationalism; mobilise the religious sentiment that he helped generate through encouraging TLP's anti-France anti-blasphemy agitations. Pro-Khan people are patriots, those against him are traitors, and fence sitters are, in his words, mere animals.

With Imran Khan voted out, Pakistan has won a temporary victory. However, its larger interest demands that all political parties obey rules and the Constitution. They must embrace democracy and pluralism, and cease pursuing narrow interests. Aggression and hate propagation, use of foul language, and denigration of women and religious minorities should have no role to play in politics.

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