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HORIZON

**PAKISTAN AND SAUDI ARABIA
REFRESH HISTORIC TIES**



RESEARCH AND POLICY PLANNING UNIT
PAKISTAN MUSLIM LEAGUE - NAWAZ

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Dear Readers,

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's inaugural foreign visit to Saudi Arabia marks a significant milestone in the burgeoning relationship between the two nations. Amidst grand receptions and high-level meetings, the visit underscored Pakistan's strategic pivot towards strengthening ties with Riyadh. The cordial exchanges between Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, coupled with the subsequent visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister to Islamabad, signal a mutual commitment to bolster bilateral cooperation across various sectors.

Saudi Arabia's pledge of substantial investments in Pakistan further solidifies the economic partnership between the two nations. The recent visit of the Saudi Defence Minister to Islamabad, coinciding with Pakistan Day celebrations, underscores the strategic alignment in security interests, reaffirming the enduring bond between the two Muslim-majority countries.

However, amidst these diplomatic manoeuvres, the international arena witnesses escalating tensions in the Middle East. The relentless onslaught by Israel on Gaza continues unabated, escalating tensions in the region. Israel's brazen airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Syria, resulting in casualties including high-ranking military officials, has exacerbated an already volatile situation. Despite calls for restraint from global leaders, including Pakistan, Israel's retaliatory strikes on Iranian targets risk plunging the region into further chaos. Major powers must work to de-escalate the situation.

Closer to home, the Punjab government, under the leadership of Maryam Nawaz, has embarked on a commendable initiative to alleviate the plight of the underprivileged. After the successful implementation of the Ramzan Package, providing essential commodities to the impoverished at their doorsteps, the Punjab government is working to regulate the prices of essential commodities. Recently, the government has issued a notification to reduce the price of roti and wheat flour, to provide relief to the masses.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's diplomatic balancing act amidst regional turmoil underscores the challenges and opportunities facing Pakistan on the global stage. As the nation navigates through complex geopolitical dynamics, fostering robust partnerships while addressing domestic concerns remains paramount. With Saudi-Pakistan relations poised for further consolidation, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's stewardship will be crucial in steering the country towards stability.

Sincerely,

Saira Bano
Editor-in-Chief

EDITORIAL BOARD

Rana Mashhood Ahmad Khan, Saira Bano, Attaullah Tarar, Badar Shahbaz



TACKLING THE NEW WAVE OF TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN

ABU HADI BIN MUHAMMAD

Terrorism has plagued Pakistan, resulting in significant loss of human lives, political instability, social unrest, and economic turmoil. Over seventy thousand lives, including security personnel, have been lost, and the economic toll amounts to \$123 billion during the last two decades in the war against terrorism. Despite military operations against terrorism, challenges persist due to the involvement of hostile neighbours and internal sympathies for religious fundamentalists and non-state actors. Pakistan, once poised for democracy and development, became a frontline ally in the global war on terror, engaging in a proxy war for the US and its allies. It continues to endure the burden, grappling with recurrent attacks targeting its security forces, civilians, developmental projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and institutions.

The recent terrorist attacks across Pakistan, including the assault on the PAF Mianwali Training Air Base, suicide attacks on Chinese nationals at Besham, and a foiled terror plot at Gwadar port, indicate the persistent threat posed by terrorism. These incidents, occurring in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

provinces were driven by ethnic, sectarian, and religious motives.

Despite extensive counter-insurgency efforts, including infrastructure expansion and border fencing with Afghanistan and Iran, surprise attacks on security forces and civilians continue. In 2023, terror incidents spiked by 43 per cent, resulting in significant casualties. This trend continued in 2024, with over 148 attacks so far.

Aggressive counter-insurgency measures by Pakistan pushed militant groups into Afghanistan, worsening regional security concerns. Pakistan's hopes for support from the Afghan Taliban have been dashed, as elements within the Afghan government allegedly back groups hostile to Pakistan, fuelled by proxy assistance from India.

In response, Pakistan has taken a firmer stance towards Iran and Afghanistan, while adopting more assertive measures against groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) within its borders. Notably, Pakistan conducted

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a retaliatory strike against Baloch militants inside Iran on 18 January 2024 and has carried out multiple operations inside Afghanistan, including a recent one on 18 March 2024 targeting TTP commanders. These actions were prompted by an attack on a border post that resulted in the loss of seven Pakistani soldiers, including a lieutenant colonel and a captain. The sacrifices of these brave soldiers further strengthen the nation's resolve to combat terrorism and ensure the safety and security of its people.

Targeting Chinese nationals poses a significant obstacle, threatening the progress of the multi-billion-dollar CPEC and creating a severe economic crisis in Pakistan. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has responded decisively, personally overseeing heightened security measures for Chinese nationals. These incidents occur at a critical juncture as Islamabad's newly elected government seeks Beijing's support to boost investments in the country. During his visit to Dasu following the Besham attack, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif reassured Chinese workers of the government's unwavering commitment to their security. He has directed counter-terrorism agencies to provide regular security updates regarding Chinese nationals, reaffirming the government's commitment to safeguard crucial partnerships and investments.

The economic toll of terrorism in Pakistan is massive. Over the past two decades, the nation has suffered immense losses amounting to billions of dollars. The direct costs include damaged infrastructure, loss of productivity, and increased security expenditures. Indirect costs, such as loss of investors' confidence, decreased tourism, and disruption of business activities, further exacerbate the economic impact. One of the most significant economic repercussions of terrorism in Pakistan is the erosion of investor confidence and the reluctance of foreign businesses to

invest in the country. The uncertainty and instability created by frequent terrorist attacks deter both domestic and foreign investors, hampering economic growth and job creation.

The tourism industry, once a thriving sector with immense potential, has been particularly hard hit by terrorism. The perception of Pakistan as an unsafe destination has deterred tourists from visiting the country, depriving the economy of much-needed revenue and employment opportunities.

Moreover, the government's efforts to combat terrorism entail substantial financial costs. Investments in security infrastructure, intelligence gathering, and counter-terrorism operations divert resources away from critical social and economic development initiatives, perpetuating a cycle of underinvestment and underdevelopment.

The economic impact of terrorism extends beyond direct financial losses. It also affects human capital development, as resources that could have been allocated to education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation are redirected to security-related expenses. This hampers the long-term socio-economic progress of the nation, promoting poverty and inequality.

Despite these challenges, Pakistan remains steadfast in its fight against terrorism. The government has implemented various measures to enhance security, strengthen law enforcement agencies, and improve intelligence coordination. Additionally, efforts to address underlying socio-economic grievances and promote inclusive development are underway to mitigate the root causes of terrorism.

The current political leadership and security forces are united in their resolve to eradicate the menace of terrorism from our soil, ensuring peace and economic stability. International cooperation and support are crucial in addressing the new wave of terrorism in Pakistan and its economic impact. The global community must stand in solidarity with Pakistan, providing assistance in terms of intelligence sharing, capacity building, and counter-terrorism financing. Furthermore, diplomatic efforts to address regional conflicts and address cross-border terrorism are essential for long-term stability and prosperity ■



PROGRESS AMID ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

MUHAMMAD ALI BHALLI

Within ten days of the cabinet formation by the new government led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan reached a staff-level agreement with the IMF on the second and final review of the \$3 billion bailout on 20 March 2024. As a result of this agreement, the country will receive \$1.1 billion after approval from the Fund's executive board.

Pakistan's economic and financial position has improved in the months since the first review, with growth and confidence continuing to recover on the back of prudent policy management and the resumption of inflows from multilateral and bilateral partners.

Last year in June 2023, the IMF executive board approved a nine-month arrangement with Pakistan's government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to support its economic stabilisation programme. The approval had allowed for an immediate disbursement of \$1.2 billion, with the rest to be phased over the

programme's duration subject to two quarterly reviews. The final review for the last tranche of \$1.1 billion follows the disbursement of \$700 million in January 2024 during the interim government.

IMPENDING DEFAULT SITUATION

In FY-2022, the current account deficit left by the outgoing Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government reached \$17.481 billion, driving the country to the brink of default. An overheated economy allowed unimpeded imports of \$84.485 billion in FY-2022 with a historic high trade gap of \$44.890 billion. At the time, foreign exchange reserves held by the State Bank of Pakistan were just \$9.814 billion, barely enough to cover five weeks' worth of imports.

The coalition government led by Mian Shehbaz Sharif took up one of the toughest jobs at the height of the economic crisis, and spearheaded efforts to save Pakistan from default. Under his stewardship, the

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**THE FRUITS OF THE HARD
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 TAKEN BY SHEHBAZ SHARIF'S
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 WERE ACKNOWLEDGED BY
 THE IMF WHILE EXECUTING
 THE STAFF-LEVEL AGREEMENT
 IN JUNE 2023.**
 ”

government managed to secure the IMF programme in 2022 and service foreign debt liabilities of \$22 billion in FY-2022. The consequences of this economic crisis were dire: hyperinflation, a significant devaluation of the rupee, a near-halt in imports, and the potential for social and political unrest.

In the span of 16 months, Shehbaz Sharif's coalition government undertook major structural reforms, like tightening monetary policy to control inflation, broadening the tax base, reducing subsidies pressure on the exchequer, maintaining flexible foreign exchange market rates, and curbing dollar smuggling.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The fruits of the hard economic decisions taken by Shehbaz Sharif's government started appearing in FY-2023 and were acknowledged by the IMF while executing the staff-level agreement in June 2023.

As of June 2023, the country's trade gap narrowed by 44.5 per cent to \$24.924 billion from \$44.890 billion in FY-2022, bolstering the government's efforts to substantially reduce the current account deficit by 87 per cent to \$2.235 billion from \$17.481 billion in FY-2022.

Furthermore, the July 2023-February 2024 trade deficit dropped by 18.7 per cent (\$15.433 billion) and the current account deficit to just \$999 million.

Pakistan's inflation pace eased in March 2024 for the third month consecutively to the lowest in almost two years, 20.68 per cent, after facing an all-time high inflation of 37.97 in May 2023.



In April 2024, Pakistan's real interest rate turned positive on a spot basis after 37 months, potentially paving the way for the central bank to implement the first cut in its policy rate during the upcoming late April 2024 monetary policy session.

Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) demonstrated exceptional performance and surged to a record high above 67,000 points during March 2024. The positive atmosphere stemmed from the recent record-breaking performance of the PSX and FTSE Russell's decision to retain Pakistan in "secondary emerging markets" for the next six months. The stock market's performance is the barometer of government policies, and the current government is playing its role in turning the PSX into a real engine of capital growth and viable investment.

The Pakistani rupee has remained largely stable and cumulatively increased 10.49 per cent in value in the past six and a half months, continuously building confidence in the Pakistan market. Constructive measures taken by the federal government and the State Bank of Pakistan to curb currency smuggling, stifle the black market and local hoarding are stabilising the currency rate.

Maintaining moderate economic growth with the enforcement of structural reforms has contributed to averting sovereign default and stabilising the economic macro indicators of Pakistan ■

The writer is a corporate financial specialist.



PAKISTAN AND SAUDI ARABIA REFRESH HISTORIC TIES

RESEARCH AND POLICY PLANNING UNIT

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia enjoy a long-standing friendship based on a shared religious identity, trade ties, and security cooperation. After assuming office, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif went on his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia. This came shortly after the Saudi Defence Minister had visited Pakistan to witness the Pakistan Day Parade on 23 March.

The recent flurry of diplomatic activity between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has sparked optimism for both nations, particularly in light of Pakistan's pressing economic challenges. A series of high-level meetings underscores a renewed commitment to strengthen bilateral ties and boost economic cooperation.

This renewed emphasis comes after a high-level visit by Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud to Islamabad in mid-April. The visit follows a meeting earlier in April between Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The joint statement, released following their meeting at Al-Safa Palace in Makkah Al-Mukarramah on April 7, emphasised the historical fraternal relations between the two countries and outlined plans for enhanced collaboration across various sectors. Both leaders discussed expediting a \$5 billion Saudi investment package for Pakistan.

Editorials in Pakistani newspapers highlighted the

“productive” visit by Prince Faisal, where discussions centred on Saudi investments in various sectors like agriculture, energy, and minerals. Pakistan's Information Ministry expressed hope that the Saudi investment would “increase export capacity” and create “joint ventures.” News reports also suggest Saudi Arabia might invest in the multi-billion dollar Reko Diq gold and copper mining project in Balochistan.

The significance of Saudi investment in Pakistan cannot be overstated, especially against the backdrop of Pakistan's recent economic woes. The country has been grappling with inflation, a widening fiscal deficit, and external debt challenges, exacerbated by the global economic downturn. The infusion of capital from Saudi Arabia holds the potential to stimulate economic growth, create job opportunities, and alleviate poverty.

Saudi Arabia has long been a key source of financial assistance and oil imports for Pakistan. The Sharif family, currently leading Pakistan's government, has historically had strong ties with the Saudi royal family.

However, the relationship has seen some strain in recent years. Pakistan's parliament's decision to stay neutral in the Yemen conflict and former Prime Minister Imran Khan's efforts to organise an Islamic summit outside the umbrella of the Saudi-backed

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DURING THE VISIT TO ISLAMABAD, THE SAUDI DELEGATION LED BY FOREIGN MINISTER PRINCE FAISAL BIN FARHAN AL-SAUD VISITED THE SPECIAL INVESTMENT FACILITATION COUNCIL (SIFC) AND RECEIVED A DETAILED BRIEFING ON POTENTIAL INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN KEY SECTORS OF PAKISTAN'S ECONOMY.

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Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) caused friction.

Despite past disagreements, both countries seem eager to move forward.

During the visit to Islamabad, the Saudi delegation led by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud visited the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) and received a detailed briefing on potential investment opportunities in key sectors of Pakistan's economy. The SIFC platform aims to streamline investment processes and ensure rapid decision-making. According to Pakistan's Foreign Office, “both sides held exhaustive deliberative sessions at a functional level to crystallise investment opportunities in Pakistan.”

While the Saudi investment package offers a much-needed financial boost, Pakistan's government needs to ensure political continuity and transparency in economic policies to attract and retain foreign investment.

The Saudi visit was overshadowed by escalating tensions in the Middle East, with Israel and Iran launching an attack and counterattack on each other in the backdrop of the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza, systematically making the strip uninhabitable. In a press conference with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud called for an immediate ceasefire. “The situation is unacceptable. This is a complete failure of the international system. We must

have a ceasefire now,” Al-Saud said, adding, “The reality is the international community is not living up to its responsibility. We must do more to end the killing.”

Pakistan agrees with the Saudi position on Gaza and issued a press release urging “all parties to exercise utmost restraint and move towards de-escalation” in the Middle East, in reference to the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Iran.

The evolving dynamics of Pakistan's relations with regional actors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, present both opportunities and challenges. While Pakistan seeks to deepen economic ties with Riyadh, it must also navigate its relations with Tehran delicately. Pakistan walks a diplomatic tightrope, as it is scheduled to host Iran's president later in April and is keen to maintain good relations with its neighbour despite US disapproval of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project.

Pakistan faces a serious energy shortage, and Iranian gas could be a reliable and affordable source. However, the US has imposed sanctions on Iran and disapproves of the pipeline project, fearing it could benefit Iran's economy. The situation has become even more complex following Iran's retaliatory strike on Israel.

In the current scenario, Pakistan can navigate its relationship with the US, Iran, and Saudi Arabia by emphasising its need for energy security and maintaining neutrality in regional conflicts. Open communication with all allies about Pakistan's energy situation and its chosen course of action can be helpful.

The recent developments signal a renewed commitment between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. While the personal ties between the Sharif family and the Saudi leadership might play a role, strong economic ties are key to a sustainable and mutually beneficial partnership. The success of these endeavours will depend on Pakistan's ability to create a stable investment environment and navigate its complex regional relationships ■



PUNJAB'S EDUCATION ODYSSEY: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

MUHAMMAD MUGHEES ARIF

As the newly formed Punjab government springs into action, many ponder whether it will deliver exceptional performance or fall short of expectations. Such speculation is commonplace for any new government, but this time, it's not just the opposition; even supporters are anticipating a return to the golden decade of Punjab under the leadership of Shehbaz Sharif. During his tenure, Punjab exhibited exemplary growth across various sectors. However, this optimism is juxtaposed with memories of the dark age experienced under Usman Buzdar, the former chief minister of PTI. Under Buzdar's leadership, Punjab endured significant challenges on both administrative and developmental fronts.

Now, with the appointment of Maryam Nawaz as Pakistan's first female chief minister, the people of Punjab are hopeful for a resurgence akin to the achievements witnessed during her uncle's tenure. As her cabinet takes its oath and initiates its work, it is imperative to reflect on past performances and records.

It may be remembered that until 2010, education was a federal subject, which was devolved to the

provinces in 2010 as a result of the 18th amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, which inserted a new article, 25A, into the constitution titled 'Right to Education.' "The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 5 to 16 years in such manner as may be determined by law," it states.

The Government of Punjab used the legislative and financial autonomy granted by the 18th Amendment to introduce wide-ranging reforms. In April 2011, Punjab announced the School Education Reforms Roadmap to ensure quality education for all and 100 per cent enrolment and retention of all school-going children. To implement the roadmap, a comprehensive Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme was initiated with the assistance of international donors.

In 2013, then Chief Minister Mian Shehbaz Sharif handpicked Rana Mashhood Ahmad Khan to lead the Ministry of School Education to implement his vision of quality education for all in Punjab. By the year 2018, the province had 52,000 active public sector schools. This monumental achievement, accompanied

“ THE MONUMENTAL LEGACY LEFT BEHIND BY RANA MASHHOOD AHMAD KHAN POSES A DAUNTING CHALLENGE, AS THE PUBLIC’S EXPECTATIONS FROM THE NEW MINISTER TO REPLICATE HIS PREDECESSOR’S ACHIEVEMENTS LOOM LARGE. ”

by a surge in enrolment figures, catapulted the province into the forefront of educational excellence, with a staggering 15.5 million students traversing the corridors of learning institutions within a decade.

Here is a bird’s eye view of the key achievements of the education ministry under Rana Mashhood’s stewardship, guided by Shehbaz Sharif, per the vision of party founder Mian Nawaz Sharif.

POLICY REFORMS

Central to this remarkable feat were the meticulously crafted policies, designed and implemented to ensure equitable access to quality education. These policies, underpinned by a robust framework of checks and balances, ensured that resources were judiciously allocated and utilised, minimising wastage and maximising impact.

CREATION OF DISTRICT EDUCATION AUTHORITIES

One of the most significant reforms introduced in 2013 was the establishment of District Education Authorities. These committees were created to enhance capacity and centralise governance at the district level. They were instrumental in implementing and monitoring reforms at the ground level.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The breakthrough was the engagement of the private sector through public-private partnership (PPP). Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) was launched to facilitate those areas where public schools were not enough to fulfil the needs. The Education Voucher Scheme was initiated with partnered private schools, according to which underprivileged students got a chance to enrol in their nearest private schools with their fees and other expenses covered by the government. Books were also provided by the government free of



cost. This initiative helped thousands of poor families get access to education where there were no public schools. As a result, 7,135 private schools partnered and enrolled a total of three million students.

STAR TEACHER BADGE

Education Minister Rana Mashhood Ahmad Khan introduced the Star Teacher Badge initiative, igniting a fervent pursuit of excellence among educators across the region. These badges, symbolising dedication and innovation, transformed teaching from a mere occupation to a noble vocation, inspiring faculty members to reimagine their instructional approaches and embrace modern pedagogical techniques. Teachers worked on self-improvement, seeking opportunities for professional development and collaboration to enhance their craft. The programme not only honoured exemplary educators but also promoted healthy competition.

NEW HIRINGS

Teachers are soldiers against the war of ignorance and our frontlines were vacated. The shortage of teachers and Assistant Education Officers (AEO) was a major deterrent in the delivery of quality education. To fill the gap, a record number of 250,000 teachers and 3,000 AEOs were recruited on a priority basis. The ministry decided to recruit this number every



in 2017. Solar panels in 20,000 off-grid schools through the Khadim-e-Punjab Ujaala Programme at the cost of Rs8.23 billion were installed. A total of 36,000 additional classrooms were being constructed through the Khadim-e-Punjab Schools Programme. 6,519 classrooms were completed in primary schools at the cost of Rs13.14 billion by February 2018.

GIRLS' STIPEND PROGRAMME

Rana Mashhood Ahmad pledged to target the fragile segments of society to bring their children to schools. Girls from struggling families were awarded scholarships to join the education system under the Zewar-e-Taleem Program (ZTP). Through this programme, all female students of classes 6 to 10 were given Rs1000 per month upon achieving 80 per cent attendance in the 16 most vulnerable districts (mainly in south Punjab). A total of 500,000 girls benefitted from this programme at the cost of Rs6 billion.

EDUCATION FOR BRICK KILN WORKERS

Similarly, the education of children working in slums and brick kilns was a challenging task to accomplish. The government announced a Rs2,000 incentive per child for enrolment in schools, resulting in the enrolment of 87,013 children. To ensure regular attendance, a monthly stipend of Rs1,000 upon 75 per cent attendance was promised.

Other notable initiatives undertaken by the government include the Khadim-e-Punjab School Sawari Programme, the restructuring of the Directorate of Staff Development (DSD), MoU signed with Pakistan Kidney & Liver Institute (PKLI) for the provision of free treatment and vaccination of hepatitis of teachers and students of School Education Department, and interest-free loans for teachers through Punjab Teaching Faculty Welfare Foundation, etc.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The School Education Department under the PML-N government had a zero-tolerance policy against corruption and inefficiency. Through the implementation of the School Reforms Roadmap,

year to lighten the burden on the system and tackle unemployment.

BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

In 2008, Punjab's allocation for education was just Rs63.1 billion for education. At the end of the PML-N tenure in 2018, this budget had increased to Rs345.6 billion, an increase of 450 per cent. This budget was used to arrange the missing facilities, rehabilitation of risky school buildings, providing free textbooks, etc. Many schools were upgraded from secondary to high schools in areas lacking such facilities.

DAANISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

During the decade 2008 to 2018, the education department developed worthy assets which were merely a dream before. About 14 Daanish Schools were established including one boys' and girls' campus each at Attock, Mianwali, D.G. Khan, Rajanpur, Rahim Yar Khan, Bahawalpur, and Bahawalnagar, with a further eight Daanish Schools under construction. Children from the poorest backgrounds were given quality education purely on a merit basis. Daanish School System remains the largest equity-based system.

EQUIPPING THE SCHOOLS

Around 6,825 IT labs were established in schools at a total cost of Rs8.379 billion. Each lab contained 16 computers, one server, printer, scanner, UPS, air conditioner, network with internet facility, furniture etc. The School Education Department (SED) established technical and vocational education (TVE) workshops in 1,109 schools by October 2017. SED established a state-of-the-art Technical Training Institute in Government High School, Gagan Hatta, Lodhran

RESEARCH

districts were ranked based on monitoring indicators, ensuring transparency, and driving continuous improvement.

RECOGNITION

The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) lauded the efforts of the PML-N Government of Punjab for its remarkable strides in education, particularly evidenced by a notable increase in primary student enrolment by 0.7 million, from 7.4 million to 8.1 million.

Independent surveys conducted by ASER and Socio Engineering Consultants revealed a significant migration of 750,000 students from private to public schools, as confirmed by the School Information System (SIS) tagging. Notably, 154 public schools in Punjab were honoured with the prestigious British Council's International School Awards.

In the Alif Ailaan 2017 rankings, Punjab districts outperformed those of other provinces. In January 2018, The Economist hailed Punjab's education reforms as exemplary, attributing the remarkable progress to merit-based and transparent management. This multifaceted approach, characterised by rigorous oversight and a commitment to meritocracy, has yielded unprecedented results, cementing Punjab's reputation as a trailblazer in educational reform on the global stage.

FROM INCLINE TO DECLINE

Unfortunately, the subsequent PTI tenure, marred by incompetence and outright corruption, saw a halt in crucial reforms -- including the recruitment of new teachers, leading to crippling shortages in educational staff. The once-promising Daanish School program, designed to provide quality education to underprivileged children, was left in shambles due to neglect and ineptitude. Scholarships, vital lifelines for countless aspiring students, were callously suspended, while the much-needed rehabilitation and construction of new schools ground to a halt, leaving communities bereft of essential educational infrastructure.

CM Buzdar's utter negligence inflicted immeasurable damage, particularly evident in the degradation of Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) partner schools, depriving vulnerable students of their right to education. Critical initiatives such as the distribution of solar lamps and efforts to enrol kiln children were abruptly terminated, exacerbating the plight of marginalised communities. In summary, the tenure of the Buzdar government was marked by a total descent into chaos, betraying the trust of the people.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

As the PML-N once again assumes leadership in Punjab, the formidable task of undoing the damage inflicted by the Buzdar government falls upon the shoulders of Rana Sikandar Hayat, the newly appointed education minister. The monumental legacy left behind by Rana Mashhood Ahmad Khan poses a daunting challenge, as the public's expectations from the new minister to replicate his predecessor's achievements loom large. Yet, in the face of these challenges, there lie opportunities for transformative change.

To navigate this complex terrain, Rana Sikandar Hayat must embark on a comprehensive stocktaking of all previous PML-N initiatives till 2018, leveraging their proven history of success to chart a path forward. Furthermore, he must pioneer policies that reflect the evolving needs of society, such as establishing schools for transgender students to empower marginalised communities and embracing advanced technology, including AI, to enhance teaching and learning experiences. Moreover, a strategic overhaul of the examination system and the introduction of a revised curriculum incorporating contemporary subjects are imperative. Facilitating collaboration between local and international education boards will foster educational excellence. In essence, Rana Sikandar must undertake this journey with utmost dedication and commitment, recognising that the future of Punjab's education system hinges upon his ability to innovate, adapt, and lead with vision and resolve. We wish him the best of luck!■

The writer is a political activist and works in youth development.



THEN-PM NAWAZ SHARIF GIVES A HEALTH CARD TO AN UNDERPRIVILEGED PATIENT ON THE LAUNCH OF PRIME MINISTER'S NATIONAL HEALTH PROGRAMME, 31 DECEMBER 2015

SEHAT INSAF CARD: A FLAWED ENDEAVOUR

ISHRAT ANSARI

The Sehat Insaf Card was introduced in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2016 with the aim of ‘revolutionising’ the healthcare system across the province. The scheme was later expanded to other parts of the country, including Punjab, Balochistan, merged districts, Gilgit Baltistan, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. However, after eight years, there remains uncertainty about whether investing in this health insurance scheme provided the optimal value for public funds.

The introduction of the Sehat Insaf Card by the PTI government in September 2016 wasn't a novel concept. Before that, then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had already implemented a state-run health insurance initiative known as the ‘PM's National Health Programme’ on 31 December 2015, in line with the World Health Organisation's (WHO's) recommendations on universal health coverage. This programme aimed to provide quality healthcare services to the underprivileged, initially focusing on Islamabad, with plans for expansion to all provinces

and the then-Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). However, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh governments did not join the federal initiative, with KP introducing its own Sehat Sahulat programme in selected districts of the province.

However noble its objectives, the Sehat Insaf Card has been criticised for lavishing state money on the already rich, for neglecting government hospitals, and for allowing free rein to private hospitals to make money at the government's expense.

IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

Launched on 1 September 2016, the Sehat Insaf Card initially covered 50 per cent of KP's population for a two-year programme at the cost of Rs5362.2 million, providing free medical treatment facilities through designated private and public sector hospitals. By 2020, the Sehat Card Plus was initiated to cover the entire population of the province. However,

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GOVERNMENT-RUN FACILITIES USE PUBLIC FUNDS MOST OPTIMALLY, AS THEY CATER TO A LARGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE. THE EQUATION CHANGES WHEN IT COMES TO PRIVATE HOSPITALS, WHOSE PRIMARY MOTIVE IS TO MAKE PROFIT INSTEAD OF SERVING THE PEOPLE

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independent experts question the effectiveness of this scheme in providing good healthcare sustainably.

Dr Mohammad Shahjehan, Emergency Registrar at the University of Lahore Teaching Hospital, Lahore, pointed out several flaws in this insurance scheme. In his opinion, Khan's decision to launch the card just one-and-a-half-year before the elections in 2018 appeared to be motivated by electoral politics and was meant to appease the people in KP.

Dr Farid Midhet, Senior Professor of Community Health Sciences at Bahria University, Karachi, said that most of the projects launched by political governments have a political dimension. "Without a doubt, PTI gained popularity in KP due to the Sehat Insaf Card," he said.

THE REST OF PAKISTAN

This programme was later replicated in Punjab in 2021, starting with seven districts. By 2022, the programme had been expanded to Islamabad, Balochistan, merged districts, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit Baltistan through the Federal Sehat Sahulat Programme.

Currently, 43,517,712 families are enrolled in this programme according to the Sehat Sahulat Programme website.

PRIVATE HOSPITALS MINT MONEY

Dr Shahjehan said that treatment at private hospitals costs much more than receiving the same treatment at a government facility. The Sehat Sahulat scheme was launched without giving proper thought to sustainability. According to a Dawn report published in December 2021, more than 80 per cent of the hospitals registered under this programme, belong to the private sector, making them the main beneficiaries.

In Punjab, Sehat Sahulat Card was launched at a cost of Rs440 billion initially for three years. Instead of upgrading infrastructure, equipment, and human resources at government hospitals to provide quality healthcare on a sustainable basis, the PTI government recklessly allowed private hospitals to mint money from this scheme without proper monitoring. "We received data which showed that 90 per cent of gynaecology cases treated under the Sehat Sahulat Programme were C-sections, suggesting potential misuse. Additionally, individuals were provided with stents without genuine medical necessity."

Dr Midhet seconded Dr Shahjehan and said that private hospitals are exploitative because the government does not have a monitoring system like in other developed countries. "Our aim should be to strengthen our government health facilities so that the poorest of the poor also avail this facility," he said.

Dr Midhet added that at the time of Pakistan's founding, around 90 per cent of the people used to avail of government hospitals' facilities. "We have an elaborate network of government hospitals and the government owns tertiary hospitals. Some tertiary hospitals like Indus Hospital in Karachi are being run on charity. When the system of the government hospitals weakened, we should have fixed the system instead of bringing in a parallel system. In the 1960s and 1970s people used to rely on government health facilities."

INEQUITABLE COVERAGE

Dr Midhet said that the objective of a government-funded health insurance card is always to help the poor but, unfortunately, it did not happen in Pakistan. "Poor people can be divided into three categories: mildly poor, poor, and the poorest of the poor. In such cases, the poorest of the poor are unable to have access to these facilities, for which there are several reasons. For instance, they may not have computerised national identity cards (CNICs) required for registration in the scheme, they may be unaware of the facility, and may also be exploited by other people. Only those who have some knowledge about the programme can avail the facility," he said.

Dr Shahjehan agreed that the scheme did not provide equitable access to healthcare, "One of the biggest shortcomings of this project was that it was open to all. Individuals who owned a land cruiser were allocated the same Rs1 million for inpatient treatment as a person living below the poverty line." This led to a waste of public funds on people who could afford excellent healthcare from their own pockets.

SKEWED HEALTH BUDGETS

A major chunk of the health budget went into this scheme, putting immense financial strain on the government and public health infrastructure. "It turned out to be a disaster as the government ran out of money to fund government hospitals because most of the money was going to the Sehat Sahulat Card," Dr Shahjehan said.

As per Dr Shahjehan, Mayo Hospital Lahore operates on an annual budget of Rs9 billion, serving the medical needs of 65 per cent of the city's population. However, the government was unable to allocate sufficient funds to support the hospital. Consequently, there was a shortage of funds to pay employees and procure medicines, as the majority of the health budget was directed towards the Sehat Sahulat Programme. Regrettably, a significant portion of these funds ended up in the coffers of private hospitals.

MISUSING THE SCHEME

Dr Shahjehan believes that government-run facilities use public funds most optimally, as they cater to a large number of people. The equation changes when it comes to private hospitals whose primary motive is to make profit instead of serving the people. In some cases, private hospitals misused the scheme to charge the health insurance company higher bills than the amount incurred. "We found that sometimes hospitals charged the insurance company for an expensive medicine while using a cheaper alternative under a different brand name." In other instances, private hospitals used registered persons' CNIC numbers to charge the insurance company for treatment that was never really required or offered.

FOR FUTURE

Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz has said that her government would review the scheme and remove its flaws to ensure the sustainability of this initiative. Dr Shahjehan said that the health project needs to be scrutinised and restructured, with proper checks and balances introduced. He proposed that the scheme should be divided into various categories, providing free-of-cost healthcare to the poor, while charging a percentage of the expenses from others, according to their financial status. "First and foremost we need to collect data for the people who live below the poverty line and provide them free of cost treatment," he said.

He also advocated for bringing more government hospitals on the panel of the insurance company. "In this way, we will get money and we will be able to fund more public hospitals and medical institutions." ■



REVITALISING PAKISTAN'S TRADE MISSIONS ABROAD

DR RANA KHALID MEHMOOD

Dubai Expo 2020 is a shining example of what Pakistan's diplomatic missions abroad are capable of for the projection of a positive image of the nation and its soft power on the global stage. However, concerns loom over the performance of Pakistan's trade missions abroad falling short of their potential in showcasing Pakistani products, promoting tourism, and attracting international investors.

Despite the existence of key performance objectives (KPOs) and key performance indicators (KPIs) set by the Ministry of Trade and Commerce Pakistan, a wave of dissatisfaction reverberates among Pakistani exporters, the Pakistan Business Council, the overseas Pakistani community, and foreign investors regarding the lacklustre performance of Pakistan's overseas trade missions.

Instances of trade promotion failures underscore the disconnect between expectations and reality. For instance, inquiries by prominent Pakistan-based businessmen in China regarding regional exhibitions

met with a disheartening lack of information from Trade and Investment Counsellor Muhammad Irfan in Guangzhou, China. This failure raises significant questions about the efficacy of the Trade Officers Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (TOMEK) of the Ministry of Trade and Commerce Pakistan.

In April 2024, the Pakistan Business Council addressed a letter to Federal Minister of Commerce Jam Kamal, urging the exploration of new export markets and an increase in quality exhibitions for Pakistani products. This communication serves as an indictment of both the overseas trade missions and the TOMEK's adherence to their outlined KPOs and KPIs.

Similarly, the inadequacy of market intelligence efforts is evident, with no discernible promotional activities by Pakistan's Ministry of Trade and Commerce in Riyadh ahead of The Saudi Food Show in May 2024 to facilitate Pakistani exporters. The Saudi Food Show is a major global food and beverage



event where Pakistan can showcase its products and attract potential buyers from the region. Complaints from various sectors, including rice processing mills, pink salt processing units, and citrus processing units, underscore the tangible repercussions of such oversights.

Furthermore, subpar performance in networking between overseas tour operators, service providers, and potential business partners in Pakistan has hindered the realisation of Pakistan’s tourism potential.

Moving forward, a robust strategy is imperative to rectify these shortcomings:

- Trade promotion of Pakistani products: Quarterly exhibitions of Pakistani products, in collaboration with local stakeholders, can rebuild credibility and garner support from Pakistani business entities.
- Investment promotion in Pakistan: Organising investment promotion events, participating in international forums, and facilitating visits of investor delegations to Pakistan are vital steps in attracting foreign investment.
- Role in tourism promotion: Establishing effective communication channels, such as active websites and mobile apps, to disseminate tourism information and foster connectivity between stakeholders, which can bolster tourism promotion efforts.

Ultimately, governmental accountability is paramount. A systematic evaluation of the TOMEC’s performance, coupled with active engagement with the Pakistani overseas community and the Pakistan Business Council, is essential to ensure the effective functioning of trade missions abroad ■



EVENT: SOUTH AFRICA

PML-N South Africa Chief Patron Ashfaq Anwar organised a grand ceremony to commemorate Eid, focusing on uplifting the spirits of orphans and the elderly.

A multitude of children and their guardians joined the festivities, engrossed in entertainment and receiving thoughtful gifts. The atmosphere was one of jubilation as attendees relished the sumptuous food and cherished their tokens of affection.

The overwhelming gratitude expressed towards Ashfaq Anwar for his impeccable hospitality resonated throughout the gathering. Head of Youth for PML-N South Africa Malik Asim Ali and Chief Editor of Universal Times Rana Faheem Shehba lent their support to Ashfaq Anwar in overseeing the event’s administrative tasks.

Such events serve to develop stronger ties with Pakistan and promote the values of Islam within the community.

PICTURE GALLERY



PML-N FOUNDER MUHAMMAD NAWAZ SHARIF, ALONG WITH PUNJAB CHIEF MINISTER MARYAM NAWAZ OUT IN PUBLIC TO FIND OUT THE PRICE OF BREAD. LAHORE. 16 APRIL 2024



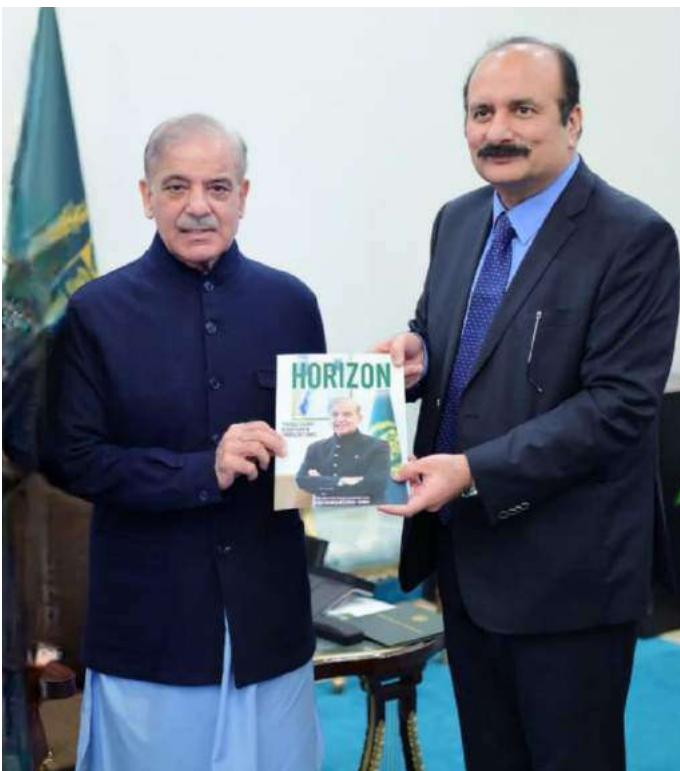
SAUDI FOREIGN MINISTER FAISAL BIN FARHAN AL-SAUD MEETS WITH PAKISTANI COUNTERPART ISHAQ DAR IN ISLAMABAD, APRIL 16, 2024.



PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF MEETS A STUDENT OF DANISH SCHOOL FROM JAND, ATTOCK AT A CEREMONY AT THE PROPOSED SITE OF A NEW DANISH SCHOOL. ISLAMABAD. 09 APRIL 2024



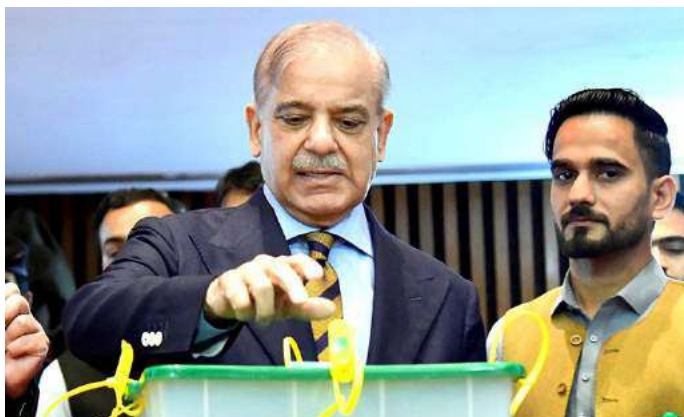
PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF OFFERS EID-UL-FITR PRAYER. LAHORE. 10 APRIL 2024



CHAIRMAN PRIME MINISTER YOUTH PROGRAM PAKISTAN RANA MASHHOOD AHMAD KHAN PRESENTED HORIZON MAGAZINE TO THE PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF AND GAVE A BRIEFING ON THE PERFORMANCE OF RESEARCH WING.



SAUDI MINISTER OF DEFENSE PRINCE KHALID BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD CALLS ON PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF. ISLAMABAD. 23 MARCH 2024



PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF CASTING HIS VOTE AT THE SENATE ELECTIONS AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, ISLAMABAD. 02 APRIL 2024



CHIEF MINISTER OF PUNJAB MARYAM NAWAZ SHARIF SHARES EASTER CELEBRATIONS IN MARYAMABAD. 31 MARCH 2024



PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF VISITS THE CHINESE EMBASSY TO OFFER CONDOLENCE OVER THE DEATH OF CHINESE NATIONALS IN A SUICIDE ATTACK IN DISTRICT SHANGLA. ISLAMABAD. 26 MARCH 2024



PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF CHAIRS A HIGH LEVEL SECURITY MEETING. ISLAMABAD. 27 MARCH 2024



PRESIDENT OF PAKISTAN ASIF ALI ZARDARI, PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF AND CHAIRMAN JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF COMMITTEE ALONG WITH TRI-SERVICES CHIEFS AT PAKISTAN DAY PARADE. ISLAMABAD. 23 MARCH 2024



A DELEGATION OF SAUDI FUND FOR DEVELOPMENT, LED BY ITS CEO SULTAN BIN ABDUL REHMAN AL MARSHAD CALL ON PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF. ISLAMABAD. 22 MARCH 2024



CM MARYAM NAWAZ SHARIF VISITED CTD HEADQUARTER AND ALSO SPENT TIME WITH CHILDREN AT THE DAY CARE CENTRE THERE. LAHORE. 20 MARCH 2024



PRIME MINISTER MUHAMMAD SHEHBAZ SHARIF OFFERS CONDOLENCES TO THE FAMILY OF LT COLONEL SYED KASHIF ALI, MARTYRED IN NORTH WAZIRISTAN, AT THEIR RESIDENCE IN CHAKLALA. RAWALPINDI. 18 MARCH 2024



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