

Rebranding Pakistan

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Pakistan has an image problem in the global community nowadays. The country has, over the years, been identified with growing fundamentalism, extremism, militancy, terrorism, persecution of minorities, bad governance and rampant corruption, and a poor economy.

These labels have put Pakistan in an isolated position at the global level; the country has been called failed or failing or even predatory. As Europe has evolved into a third generation of human rights, here in Pakistan people are still yearning for the first generation of human rights such as civil liberties and the right to life.

The branding of Pakistan as a terrorist state stems from the narrative that has been built by the international community on the basis of Pakistan working as a sanctuary for different militant groups, despite the fact that Pakistan itself is and has been a victim of terrorism. It has lost more than 80,000 souls and suffered a loss of \$126 billion in 17 years, according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2017-18. The survey further notes that foreign investment up to \$1.23 billion could not be attracted due to the war on terrorism and the subsequent restive situation in the country. Therefore, due to the negative image, Pakistan has had reduced investment, lower growth rate and soaring flight of capital.

Economic crises always have social consequences in the form of human cost, and poor living standards, including health and education. A cursory look at the 2018 Human Development Index reveals a very disturbing picture. Pakistan is ranked at 150 out of 189 countries. Health and education indicators are very dismal. According to a Unesco study, 25 million children are out of school. We have schools without children and children without schools.

Christina Lamb, in her book, 'Waiting for Allah', observes that Pakistan is killing its future by denying children access to quality education. This runs counter to what Quaid-e-Azam envisioned about education. He sent a message to the first education conference, held in November 1947, shortly after independence, saying "the future of our state will and must greatly depend on the type of education we give to our children." But today sadly our public-sector educational institutions are imparting low quality education to our children.

This all is being attributed to bad governance. It is unfortunate that our governance is being driven by politics instead of law. When governance is driven by politics, it produces discrimination, favours and injustices. It is in this context that most of the experts on governance argue that it should be driven by the law since that will not discriminate between the rich and the poor.

Bad governance, which is deviation from the law, always produces negative results in the form of corruption which is

spreading like cancer in our society. Any society with a high volume of corruption does not progress as it kills merit and hinders new talent from coming forward. As such, the state loses vital human resource to bring any social transformation in society. According to the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International, Pakistan is the 117 least corrupt nation out of 175 countries.

Over all, the conditions portrayed above have created a negative image of Pakistan at the global level. Recently, SZABIST launched a project 'Rebranding Pakistan' as part of an academic activity. The main purpose of the project was to involve students in the debate focusing on issues ranging from terrorism to the degeneration of education, health, governance, social justice system, persecution of minorities, child abuse, asymmetric gender relationship, poor economy etc.

The project concluded that students are full of ideas, verve, and vigour and possess immense potential to promote the soft image of Pakistan and change the destiny of the nation, if harnessed properly for the socioeconomic transformation of society.

Currently, Pakistan has one of the largest numbers of young people, with some 25 million youth between the ages of 15 and 24. This constitutes a huge pool of productive workforce and can play a crucial role in the social, political and economic development of the country. And for this, the country needs a liberal, democratic and plural political system which was articulated by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah in his famous August 11 speech in 1947.

Unfortunately, those with vested interests have twisted the very progressive vision of the Quaid and turned Pakistan into very conservative society where freedom of expression is considered anti-state, opposition to the government is muted, minorities are persecuted, and the economy is rigged in favour of the elite.

Overall, we are living in a very suffocating environment, which breeds hopelessness and disenchantment in our youth. Because of such suffocation most students are looking abroad for their future instead of utilizing their potential for the country's development. Political instability, growing insecurity and lack of job opportunities are some of the factors forcing students to go overseas and settle there.

Unequivocally, poverty and violence are the big evils of our society, consuming our youth in different ways and forms. We need to address this issue on a war footing. In this regard, the state must act quickly to bring reforms in public-sector educational institutions, which at the moment are dens of corruption and bad management, failing to impart quality education and equip students with the skills demanded by the market. The public-private dichotomy of education is dividing society; those who are equipped with quality education and skills are growing richer and their counterparts with less education and fewer skills are getting poorer.

The economic inequalities in our society are responsible for the chaos we are facing today. In fact, any deterioration in education has not only internal consequences but external ones as well. Our international allies and donors are apprehensive about the precarious nature of our educational system and, according to them; this is one of the contributing factors in the proliferation of militancy.

In fact, globalization promotes economic integration amongst countries and brings so many benefits in terms of trade, investment and labour mobility. Pakistan is basically a labour surplus country, mainly exporting labour to the Middle East, Europe, Australia and the US – but due to the extremist image attached to it, our labour is facing problems. Some labour-importing countries are unwilling to receive labour from Pakistan and instead prefer workers from either India, Bangladesh or other countries in the region.

When Imran Khan saddled into power as prime minister of the country, it was widely believed that being a sports celebrity and winner of the 1992 Cricket World Cup, he would change Pakistan by building its soft image. He, in this regard, branded Pakistan as based on the Medina ki Riyasat (welfare state) or as a 'Naya Pakistan' based on social, economic, legal egalitarianism. But no investment is coming nor is the business community posing any trust in the government. Instead of basing the state on religious identity, he could have branded Pakistan as an economic entity in the age of economic globalism the way Malaysia branded itself 'Malaysia Truly Asia' or Singapore as 'Open to the World'.

It is high time Pakistan rebranded itself in the world by addressing the underlying causes, and changed its hard image into a softer one as a progressive, democratic and egalitarian state, focusing on the economic prosperity of every household, respecting and protecting the rights of everyone and building a congenial environment so that young men, women and children can fulfil their dreams.

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