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Poor Man's Pakistan

1. Background:

Pakistanis have long lived in a state of make-belief that Pakistan was not a poor country. For the past six decades, Pakistanis proudly compared themselves with the state of people in India and, after 1971, also with Bangladesh. “Generations of people in India get

their cradle and coffin both on the roadside while there is prosperity and richness all across Pakistan; thank God Pakistan was made,” once said the Chief Editor of one of Pakistan’s leading center-right newspaper. The same personality also advocated that the solution of the Kashmir issue is in “fighting a war with India and then liberating it.” Notwithstanding are the realities on the ground which have now started to manifest themselves in various forms and shapes e.g. rural to urban migration, increased prostitution, human trafficking to rich gulf states, selling of children--and not to forget--increased robberies.

It appears as if “Pakistanis have had enough of all that and now they want a change in their social and economic circumstances,” Rubina Bhatti said¹. She added that the government now better take some positive action to help resolve the economic deprivation of the teeming millions or this very reason will further foment the social disorder that may lead to a widespread anarchy. This was never the state of the larger sections of the Pakistani society as they accepted poverty, just like the larger South Asian culture, as a natural process and lived along side it. But, in the post-cold War years, first came down the Berlin Wall and then the meteoric economic growth in China, consistent progress in India and increased socio-economic stability in Bangladesh. With so much happening in the neighborhood, are Pakistanis now estranged from the dreams of their past? They have certainly begun to question their both their state and their society.

The poor man’s Pakistan today is harder and far poorer than what once was believed.

2. Present Situation and Analysis:

On May 31, 2008, Asif Ali Zardari, the ruling party’s co-chairman, said that his government had plans of providing sustenance allowance to seven million poor people. Prior to his announcement, the Federal Minister

for Information, Ms. Sherry Rehman, had said that 70 percent of Pakistanis live under the daily income of two dollars a day. There are many questions that economists are asking about any “quick fix” that could at least help keeping the poor people of Pakistan alive. According to Anees Hamdani, an economist working for a public sector

“All the institutions, that a State should have, exist in Pakistan but the problem is they do not or do not want to work and the result usually is the creation of issues that directly affect the life of ordinary and poor people in Pakistan,” a senior civil servant said.

organization, the “government ought to take such steps where it not only can achieve political mileage but also provide some relief to the poor people. It is not a question of creating a nation of beggars; it’s rather about helping them live a life that may not be a luxurious one but would at least keep them alive,” he said.² He also emphasized that government must take action to help improve the economy so that job markets expand and these teeming millions start to get employment and engage in meaningful economic activity. The monthly sustenance allowance is not going to be a long term solution; he said and added that political stability is a must to help improve the economy.

At present, the prices of the daily commodities have soared so high that an someone making less than or equal to two dollars a day “cannot simply live².” According a World Food Program (WFP) report in April, nearly 50% of the Pakistani population was living on far less calories as compared to 2,300 daily required to maintaining a healthy life. A county that has nearly half of its population hungry cannot be a happy, progressive and a forward looking nation, a commoner said on 28th of May on Aaj TV while responding to a question on the importance of Pakistan’s nuclear capability. “Along with the bomb, the government should also work hard to provide us with wheat flour,” the respondent said.

The prevailing sentiment in arge sections of the general public is that Pakistan of yesteryears was a place where poor were still better off as compared to the other regional nations but now things having changed, “Pakistan is no more a place for a poor man³.”

Both the government and the country are caught up in a vicious cycle of compulsions that are “beyond immediate control.” Oil price hike being one of them that directly affects everything from, of course, the price of gasoline products to the wheat flour and medicine

¹ Secretary General of an NGO in South Punjab, Pakistan.

² Comment of an English Language journalist on TV.

³ An office bearer of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf, a political party.

and it is not in any control of the government. “Where would this eventually end; none knows for sure but one thing is sure that the poor man’s life in Pakistan is not going to be any easier in short term⁴.”

The loose control of the State’s apparatus on various situations over the past few weeks has cleared the fragility of the system that the government operates on. Despite many warnings and threats to the black-marketers, stockists and transporters, the wheat flour smuggling has not stopped.⁵” And the bad news is that it is not going to change in the short term.

3. Recommendations:

Keeping in view the rising poverty indicators, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. The government must form a policy to address the issue of poverty over the long term.
2. The civil society and non-government sector must enhance their outreach and capacity to assist the government in tackling the crushing poverty that people are living under.
3. Government must think “out of the box” solutions in collaboration with various philanthropic organizations to help address the issues of poverty.
4. The corporate conglomerates should realize their corporate social responsibilities and must ensure the uplift of various communities where they operate.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ A senior civil servant on condition of anonymity.

