

## Budget 2021–22: Some proposals

By **Senator Rehman Malik**

All factions of the society are eagerly looking forward to the incoming budget 2021-2022 as it is the most important policy document for a country affecting the lives of every Pakistani.

The government has agreed to bring down the current year's development programme to Rs1.169tr against the budgeted target of Rs1.324tr. The indirect taxes are committed to be increased from Rs1000 billion to Rs1300 billion; adding to dangerous levels of inequality. The government should avoid playing with the fudged figures and also should announce to withdraw the control of the Statistics Division from the Ministry of Planning Development and place it under The Council of Common Interests (CCI). The government has also made a commitment with the IMF to not consider any tax exemption or tax amnesty in gas tariffs in the future. All of these taxes and increased tariffs lead to the price hike. The present Finance Minister has to be a hard negotiator with the IMF to get the tax relief and we must renegotiate the repayment with the World Bank and try to have the payment deferred due to the ongoing pandemic.

Even the man that the PTI had presented as its financial wizard, Asad Umar stepped down from the cabinet when he returned from Washington after negotiating a deal with the IMF. The decision left many with a feeling of dismay, since immediately after taking over power, the PTI had pressed the panic button on the economy. The impression that PTI had given to Pakistan, as well as the rest of the world, that Asad Umar was the man to fix the economy, was tarnished badly. Under his only 9 months of tenure as Finance Minister (Finance Messiah), the growth rate had fallen by 2 percent, inflation had already hit almost ten percent, gas prices had jumped up by over 40 percent and the Pakistani currency was constantly depreciating.

If we want to get rid of the IMF and its stringent conditions, we need to follow the example set by Turkey as it stabilised its economy and got away with the IMF trap. Tayyip Erdoğan became prime minister when Turkey was a country that suffered from constant economic blows despite the fact that the rest of the world was doing fine economically. Now Turkey is thriving and its economy is still growing while the world is suffering from an economic crisis since 2008.

In Pakistan, with a 14 percent inflation rate, there is a 30 percent rise in the poverty rate, 80.5 million people are standing on the edge of the poverty line due to which 15 to 20 people are ending their lives by committing suicide daily. Renegotiations are needed to be done with the IMF; the Government should focus on revising the targets with them. There should be a target for a 1 percent decrease in the budget deficit. There should be

an increase in the capacity for the development budget by raising the development spending by 20 percent. The Finance Minister needs to do something on the expenditure side as money should not only be released rather it should be spent somewhere, which requires capacity building. There should be a visible focus of spending on the projects which actually generate revenue, just not on useless things like langar khana and tiger or panda forces. The Federal Government should not spend on provincial projects as they should be a provincial subject.

In the long term, a sharp focus should be on investment in human health and education which are the most ignored sectors. The crippled health sector has been fully exposed during the present Coronavirus pandemic.

I would like to suggest the following for this budget.

The salaries of the government servants should be increased by 75 percent. The government should announce a special package for the private and daily wages employees for enhancement of their salaries by their employers. It should allocate special funds for self-employment business opportunities enabling those who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, to get start their own small business. It should allocate at least Rs.150 billion for the construction of hospitals/medical centres for the treatment of COVID-19 patients and for the purchase of modern medical equipment, protective kits (PPEs) for doctors, paramedical staff, army, rangers, police and other law enforcement agencies who are on the frontline during COVID-19.

The salaries of the medical and Para-medical staff should be enhanced up to 75 percent. The salaries of the media workers shall be enhanced by 50 percent by their respective employers. The government has allocated only Rs100 billion under the corona stimulus package for fertiliser subsidy, loan remissions, and other relief to the farmers, which may be enhanced to Rs.100 billion. A special tax relief package should be given for agriculture i.e. wheat crops and livestock, dairy farming, etc. to provide relief to small farmers. Our future lies in agriculture and hence farmers should be supported with good economic packages as an incentive to increase the yield and to modernise agricultural farming. The government should allocate more funds for the management of rainwater reservoirs in every district as a national water conservation programme. Special funds should also be allocated for the construction of new small/mini dams in every district like China. The government should enhance the budgetary allocation for online education development programmes through IT/internet access, especially in remote areas. The budgetary allocation of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) should be enhanced to Rs100 billion. The government should allocate funds for improvement in the aviation sector and upgrade airports all over the country. The budget for LEAs must be doubled for their capacity building to ensure the rule of law. There should be a substantive increase in improving the investigation process by the provision of modern investigation tools and logistics to FIA and the Police. According to the Federal Ombudsman, the national

overcrowding rate in Pakistan's prisons is 134 percent so the government should allocate 5 billion for each province to improve jails standard and the food per jail manual. The government must finance easy loans for cheap housing schemes through house building corporations. Special enactment may be brought to save the people from defrauding from private house building finance companies if allowed in the private sector.

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## The population bomb

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By **Hassan Baig**

Pakistan is facing a huge problem of population explosion, destroying almost all sorts of economic planning. No government has taken this issue seriously despite the negative consequences.

This exponential population growth is multiplying our social woes and badly affecting our economy but the most worrisome factor is that literally there is no population planning at any level. In fact, people have been left to ponder on their own.

The Malthusian theory of exponential growth of population with arithmetic growth of food supply is working perfectly in Pakistan but what is not working here is adopting preventive measures to control population to achieve balanced growth and a comfortable food supply chain. The economy in Pakistan is always facing inflationary pressures, especially food inflation. The most disastrous concept of Malthus was that exponential population growth with scarcity of feeding resources or limited food supply or production is ultimately balanced by intervention by nature mostly in the form of floods, famine, earthquakes, disasters and pandemics like the one we are facing right now.

Population growth has a multiplier effect and it can make and break the country. The situation in Pakistan is fast transforming, taking a sharp turn from bad to worse and worse to worst. What is needed is an intervention by the government to control population growth, since our resources are scarce. There is an urgent need to put in place a population planning policy at the federal level instead of leaving it to the provinces.

It is ironic that after Ayub Khan's government, population planning has been missing in Pakistan. If we count down the reasons, General Zia was the worst regime for this; apparently, the thinking was that a large illiterate population would fuel the jihad against what was then the USSR. Since then, no government has taken the issue seriously, most of them worried any step may create a furore that would label population planning as un-Islamic by the clerics. Uneducated and unaware people have been misled by the religious right, especially clerics, in the name of Islam not to adopt birth control measures. Apparently, the leadership in Pakistan is scared of such clerics. To my mind, it is the failure of leadership to not take decisions in the best interest of the nation despite the fact that they do understand that population planning is absolutely necessary and is not un-Islamic.

Pakistan is the fifth largest country of the world and its population must be touching the figure of around 230 million people by now if calculated with birth rate of 2.2 percent. The population is almost doubling every thirty years as compared to other South Asian countries it doubles every sixty years. Pakistan's population would be touching around

403 million by the year 2050, which is a disastrous thought. The last census was conducted in 2017, showing a population of 208 million while the figures of the 1998 Census stood at 132 million.

The government of Sindh has its own point of view on the official results of Census 2017 and has been raising questions regarding it. But the point that remains is that, with such pace of population growth, can we achieve balanced socioeconomic development necessary for the welfare of the people. Is it possible for Pakistan to grow and develop with such an exponential population growth bomb ready to explode any time?

This is the time for the government to make decisions. Wisdom demands that it's never too late to take the right decision for the betterment and welfare of the people. Time and tide wait for none. If other Muslim countries like Malaysia, Turkey and Bangladesh could convince clerics and the religious right in their countries that adopting preventive measures to control population is not un-Islamic; the government of Pakistan can also do so through our religious scholars and convince people that such preventive measures are absolutely necessary to help avoid disasters and famine. The institution of mosque and madrassahs, besides other institutional mechanisms, should be utilised for this noble cause to convey an effective message regarding family planning to the people of Pakistan who are largely uneducated.

The government needs to – without any waste of time – focus on population planning and must put in place a policy immediately, as a delay in this regard would be a criminal act. A long-term birth control policy should be devised and effectively implemented by extending incentives for those who have one or two children while discouraging those who have more than three children. These incentives could be in the form of tax relief or concessional tickets through the Ehsaas programme. Empowerment of women and education is the first step to control the birth rate, as reproductive healthcare education for mothers is absolutely necessary for an effective population control policy.

There is a serious need of a large-scale awareness campaign through all sorts of media including but not limited to print, electronic and social media. The social media campaign would be very effective if utilised along with a campaign through traditional institutions like mosques and madaaris to control population. Pakistan needs it more than any other country in the world. Sooner, the better!!

The writer is an economist.

## 'Illusion of knowledge'

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By **Fayyazuddin**

EDUCATION serves, at the very least, a dual purpose. On the one hand, education creates a skilled and well-trained workforce essential to a thriving private and public sector. On the other, through offering at a single location — the university — a multiplicity of areas of study, a certain sensibility and culture is created that one might call social capital. By bringing together scholars in a variety of disciplines, the university cultivates a citizenry that appreciates the interconnectedness of disparate fields of study and the elements needed to create a vision for the future and to develop a sense of common purpose.

Moreover, in promoting higher education, a nation declares that it values learning for its own sake and welcomes the innovation and creativity that often results from it. Ideally, the university becomes a site that transcends the petty goals of individual careers and helps to elevate the needs of society as a collective body.

Our educational system fails to accomplish either of the goals outlined above. Although we have seen the proliferation of universities over the last few decades, most of them have inadequate academic standards and are run as businesses committed to the mass production of graduates with very little actual education. At a basic level, it is due to the lack of well-qualified faculty but it is also due to a lack of commitment to education as a goal in itself.

Concomitant with the inadequacy of the education provided by these institutions, a second negative development is undermining their purpose: the forced mass production of 'research' papers. This development is taking place due to the needs of a bureaucratized education system too lazy or incompetent to evaluate the quality of research output by itself. Instead, it has substituted quality control of research with simply counting the number of research papers produced as a metric for evaluating competence. By instituting this easily gamed system, they have set themselves up for widespread fraud. The majority of research papers produced at our institutions do not pass rigorous peer review. If they are published at all, it is in journals with low standards or through the occasional random one passing the filters of peer review despite their low quality. The emphasis in promoting research has thus shifted from quality to quantity and is being used to create what Daniel J. Boorstein has called the "illusion of knowledge" and as he states, it has become an obstacle to discovery and the production of actual knowledge.

The aforementioned imposition of quantitative metrics was introduced by the Higher Education Commission, which was formed during Gen Pervez Musharraf's reign as military dictator. The HEC replaced the University Grants Commission. Dr Atta-ur-Rahman was appointed as the chairperson of the HEC. While the commission did some good work, its

impact was overwhelmingly negative due to the policies formulated by the HEC in shifting the emphasis from quality to quantity with the adverse consequences that have been outlined above.

There is new turmoil in the system of higher education in Pakistan. In order to discuss it in proper perspective, it is helpful to revisit The Magna Charta of European universities, which was approved and adopted in 1988 in Bologna. While the entire document is of relevance to thinking about universities and higher education, a particularly relevant part for Pakistan states that the university's "research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power". That is, government and business interests must not interfere in the running of the university.

In the case of Pakistan, one may also add that the university should be free of any externally imposed ideological constraints. Recent changes made by the government in the structure of the HEC has put the system of higher education under government control and is causing turmoil among the educated of Pakistan.

These changes go against the Magna Charta referenced above and are undermining the open and free atmosphere of universities and other institutions of higher learning and research in the country. By constraining freedom of speech and thought, openness to intellectual influence, and by imposing ideological constraints, the government is depriving the university of the essential ingredients it needs to promote a culture of learning, innovation and creativity. Without these elements, it is undermining the very basis for a thriving national culture.

*The writer is a physicist who served as professor of physics, and dean of Natural Sciences at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.*

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# India's nuclear recklessness

## *Part I*

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By **Shireen M Mazari**

Within one month two stories of illegal possession and sale of uranium being caught by Indian police have surfaced. Of course, any attempt to smuggle radioactive material must be a cause for concern and Pakistan should report these to the IAEA and question why these incidents have not been recorded in the IAEA's Incident Trafficking DataBase (ITDB) – because the last one checked they were not there. However, it is not just these particular instances in themselves that should have aroused Pakistan's and, in fact, the international community's concern.

What should also be of concern is the fact that this incident is simply one more in a history of nuclear materials going missing or attempting to be smuggled out of India. Unfortunately, the international community has chosen to remain silent on India's nuclear transgressions, of which there have been many. The fast pace and largely indigenous inputs into its nuclear facilities created safety issues from the start.

According to an Indian parliamentary report, 147 mishaps or safety-related unusual occurrences were reported between 1995 and 1998 in Indian atomic energy plants. Of these, 28 were of an acute nature and 9 of these 28 occurred in the nuclear power installations. In a paper presented at the IDSA, New Delhi, on October 10, 1988, Leventhal and Chellaney pointed to structural design and operational problems that were troubling India at that time.

In the context of nuclear material theft, reports emerged of uranium theft on August 27, 2001 – when police in West Bengal revealed that they had arrested two men with more than 200 grams of semi-processed uranium. According to Indian press reports, Indian intelligence officials believed that a uranium smuggling gang was operating in West Bengal. While reports of Indian involvement in the theft of nuclear fissile material date back to the early 1970s, the magnitude of the threat increased manifold in the 1980s and 1990s. In the late 1980s, the CIA had concluded that India was trying to develop a sophisticated Hydrogen bomb. In 1994, on a tip-off, a shipment of beryllium was caught in Vilnius, worth \$24 million. The buyer was thought to be either from India or North Korea – though the shipment was caught before it could reach the buyer.

In July 1998, India's Central Bureau of Intelligence (CBI) unearthed a major racket in the theft of uranium in Tamil Nadu, with the seizure of over 8 kg of the nuclear material in granule form and the arrest of three men. The contents of this theft were sent to the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR) for preliminary analysis and the Centre

declared that there were two kinds of substances found in what they said was 6 kg of uranium – natural uranium (U237 and U238) and U 235, which is weapons grade uranium. The investigations also led to cases of further seizure of uranium on July 31, 1998 – of 31 grams in addition to 2 kg, caught from another accomplice of the two engineers. The approximate abundance of uranium U235 in the samples indicated a 1.40 percent and 2.20 percent of enrichment. This showed that the uranium was neither an ore of uranium nor depleted uranium, but had its existence in an atomic research centre. Meanwhile, the director of the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research denied the possibility that the uranium could have come from the Madras Atomic Power Station (MAPS) at Kalpakkam near Chennai. However, later, when the CBI vowed to go ahead with the investigation, MAPS stated that the substance caught was not uranium but limenite – a non-strategic substance with ordinary applications.

The shift in the stance of the research centre, from their initial report of a relatively high level of uranium enrichment to its total absence in the substance, caused a considerable problem for the prosecutors as they could not pursue charges against the persons. Later, as a result of this lead, the CBI seized 2 more kilograms of uranium and 31kg of platinum. However, due to the change of statement by the atomic research centre, the case was buried.

Again, on May 1, 2000, Mumbai police seized 8.3 kgs of uranium. The uranium was termed as depleted but radioactive uranium by the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). In this instance, the source of this uranium theft – as cited by the police – had been a local hospital, the Lilavati Hospital, in Bandra. The fissile material had been found in the custody of scrap dealers who were caught and charged under the Atomic Energy Act. However, the Lilavati Hospital authorities maintained that no fissile material/uranium was missing from the hospital. The consistent denial by the hospital authorities and the fact that no material was found missing from the hospital equipment indicated that the source of the material was not the hospital. All radioactive materials from the Indian hospitals are technically accounted for and are to be returned to the relevant nuclear research centre. So how could it have found its way to the scrap dealers?

When the stolen material was sent for further analysis to establish the exact nature of the radioactive substance, BARC stated that the material found was primarily a shielding material used as counterweight in aircrafts and had no relevance to nuclear weapons technology. Despite the fact that the material was radioactive and could pose health hazards, K S Parsatarathy, the secretary of the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) stated that the 8.3 kg material seized contained merely two percent of uranium U235, which made the material depleted, having a zero weapon value.

The incident might have been an exception, but on November 5, 2000, the CBI recovered 25 kg of radioactive uranium from a person in the Bibi Cancer Hospital – the material was to be returned back to BARC. The person singled out in this case of uranium seizure was

also a scrap dealer. According to the scrap dealer, he had bought a machine from the hospital as scrap and was, therefore, the natural owner of the radioactive substance found in the machine. Yet, according to the restrictions imposed on hospitals by BARC they are not allowed to sell radioactive materials to scrap dealers and the hospital had stated that the material was accounted for. The material once again, according to BARC, was depleted uranium. In this case, as in the earlier case, the Bibi Cancer Hospital in its initial statement denied the charges levelled against the hospital but later the hospital withdrew from its earlier stance and admitted that it had sold parts of the machine. Interestingly, the Bibi Cancer Hospital's record did not show the use of any such machine that used uranium as a radioactive substance.

On November 13, 2000, the IAEA reported that the Indian police seized three uranium rods and arrested eight persons on charges of illicit trafficking of nuclear material. The critical question here is: where did the rods come from? The suspicion was that the civil nuclear facilities were vulnerable to such thefts. Again, on November 7, 2000, according to the IAEA, the Indian police seized 57 pounds of uranium and arrested two men on charges of illicit trafficking of radioactive material. Once again, the radioactive material was traced back to a nearby hospital, which denied any reports of missing uranium from its stocks. The fact that the seized radioactive material had been found in the form of three uranium rods reflects the possibility that the origin of these rods may be from a civilian nuclear power plant, or from one of the rapidly expanding Indian nuclear research facilities – rather than from a hospital.

While reviewing the various cases of uranium theft in India, certain disturbing questions arise as to how and why, in most cases, the uranium was found in the hands of scrap dealers. Why were charges not leveled against those found in possession of the radioactive material? Why, in a number of cases, did the hospitals change their position on the thefts? Who are the potential buyers for the scrapped radioactive material in India, and is the material intended for internal or international buyers? In fact, one can legitimately wonder whether there is a nuclear mafia present in India. Equally of concern are the issues raised about the security of the Indian nuclear facilities, including their research facilities.

When one puts all the reported theft cases together, some patterns can be discerned. Most of the accused have been scrap dealers who are obviously used as front men, which may well indicate the prevalence of organised crime relating to nuclear materials. Again, in almost all the cases, the charges were dropped against those found in possession of the material, and in most of the cases the initial assessments of the material were later altered. The source of origin, in most cases, as stated by the police, have been cancer hospitals – although the nature and quality of the uranium found in the use of the hospitals has differed from case to case. But in all the cases involving hospitals, the latter have denied any material going missing or being stolen. In any case, the amounts

supposedly stolen from hospitals are far more than the normal requirements of these hospitals.

So, the focus has to shift to Indian nuclear facilities and the whole issue of their safety – especially in relation to theft and nuclear terrorism. This, in turn, raises concerns about the employees of these facilities and their links to possible mafias. Also, the whole issue of safety of transportation of nuclear materials from the mining stages to the spent fuel storage becomes critical in the dynamics of nuclear theft and technical safety of the facilities. While the rising incidents of nuclear theft create the possibility for a lucrative underground market for potential terrorists, unsafe nuclear facilities create risks for the surrounding populace – which has to live in constant terror of a nuclear accident.

### **To be continued**

*Data for some of this paper has been derived from a Monograph co-authored by Mazari & Sultan, entitled 'Nuclear Safety & Terrorism: A Case Study of India', for the ISSI. The views expressed are the writer's own.*

*The writer is the federal minister for human rights.*

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## Afghanistan and the region

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By **M Ashfaque Arain**

President Biden's announcement to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 has drawn extreme reactions ranging from surprise to dismay. While the US administration itself is against the withdrawal, many political and military analysts are also against the decision. They fear that the vacuum created by this withdrawal will lead to a struggle for power and control, seriously affecting the country's stability and wellbeing of the people. Additionally, it will also have serious implications for regional stability in general and for Pakistan in particular.

The US, along with its allies, failed to bring peace in the country despite staying there for almost two decades. Similarly, despite receiving huge sums of money, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) could not be trained and equipped to effectively handle the country's security requirements. During these two decades, the Taliban remained a force to be reckoned with and controlled large parts of Afghan territory. An assessment of the situation indicates that the US was forced to negotiate with her sworn enemy, the Taliban, and withdraw on their terms without being able to reach a comprehensive peace deal. After two decades of occupation by the strongest military coalition and with an expenditure of huge financial resources, the sole superpower along with its allies has faced defeat from the Taliban, a rag-tag fighting force with limited resources and no advanced weaponry.

US' decision of sudden withdrawal without achieving comprehensive peace or even conditions conducive for peace, is extremely irresponsible. The hurried departure also suggests that US is not likely to provide the promised financial support to run even routine government affairs, and reconstruction and rebuilding of the destroyed country. Like the past, the US will not accept its failure and for face saving, will blame others, the easiest being Pakistan. The Afghan ruling leadership has also failed to effectively use foreign financial and other support to create workable systems and build forces capable of effectively tackling security challenges. They however, are endeavouring to continue to hang on to power regardless of the cost it may entail for the Afghan people. The Afghan leadership, following in US footsteps, also finds it convenient to blame Pakistan for their internal failures and inability to effectively utilise the resources provided by the coalition. Afghan peace and stability faces multiple challenges. The Afghan leadership's endeavours to remain in power are possibly the biggest hurdle in reaching a consensus solution. The Taliban, emboldened by the US decision to withdraw forces, have hardened their stance and are unwilling to show flexibility to reach a peace agreement. Various other Afghan factions and war lords are also assessing the situation and would want their share in any

future arrangement. Neighbouring countries are also critical to success or failure of the peace process. While their positive attitude can help bring peace, working for vested interests would lead to failure of the process. India may find an unsettled Afghanistan to its advantage as it would adversely affect Pakistan's internal security as well as relations with Afghanistan, providing an opportunity to use terrorists based in Afghanistan against Pakistan. Lastly, the international community also has a huge responsibility in stabilising the country, as their funding is essential for running the government, paying the forces etc.

At the moment, situation appears quite grim. A sudden US exit, the Taliban's hardened stance, the government's lack of interest in participating in the peace process are all indicative of a likely chaotic situation in the country leading to loss of life and property. Many people are already seeking political asylum for fear of reprisal by the Taliban. However, some people are also trying to exploit the situation in order to settle in Western countries.

Increasing militancy and violence in Afghanistan will also affect all its neighbours. The violence will force a huge number of Afghans to take refuge in neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, which is already hosting a large Afghan refugee population. An influx of refugees will not only put an economic burden on the host countries, but will also create internal security problems. Additionally, refugees are also likely to bring a surge in COVID cases in Pakistan and other host countries. Predicting an upsurge in violence and lawlessness, Australia has decided to close its diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. Many more countries, especially Western ones are likely to follow suit. Incidentally, these are also the countries that maintained their military presence in Afghanistan for a very long time.

It is predicted that even if the present government in Kabul falls, the Taliban will face resistance from the war lords leading to a protracted civil war. Since militancy and instability in Afghanistan will affect the neighbouring countries as well as the world at large, all stake holders must make efforts for working out and implementation of a comprehensive peace plan. This cannot be achieved without sincerity and willingness of the Afghan leadership, neighbouring countries' positive role and financial support from major world powers for many years.

Neighbours, especially Pakistan, which gets affected the most by stability or instability, are already making all-out efforts to bring all parties to the negotiating table. Pakistan's political and military leadership has repeatedly reiterated their support for comprehensive peace in Afghanistan. The neighbouring countries can also help Afghan economy by taking steps to enhance trade and tourism. Distant neighbours must curb their temptations to exploit the situation and refrain from interfering in Afghan matters. The US at this time, must use its influence on the present Afghan government to work towards a negotiated peace process.

# US democracy is at risk

The basic ability to compromise may not be there

By **Dr James J Zogby**

## Washington Watch

Speaking at a Memorial Day observance last week, US President Joseph Biden noted, rather ominously, "Our democracy is in peril." Politics, if we can even call it that, has become so distorted and hyperpartisan that the shared values, comity, and compromise needed for democracy to function have become endangered concepts.

One clear indicator of this sorry state of affairs is the extent to which Republicans have embraced former President Donald Trump's claim that the 2020 vote was marred by fraud. A recent poll shows that 70 percent of Republican voters still believe that Trump's victory was "stolen" and, as a result, they do not accept Mr. Biden as the legitimate president.

Instead of pushing back on this dangerous idea, Republican leaders are insisting that their elected officials accept this new "official party dogma" and act accordingly. "Exhibit A" was the Senate Republican leadership's refusal to advance a House bill that would have created a bipartisan commission to investigate the January 6 violent takeover of the Capitol Building in an effort to stop the certification of the 2020 election. In doing so, it appears that the Republican Party has chosen to ignore the "wake up call" of the insurrection, choosing instead to press the "snooze" button and go back to sleep.

Equally disturbing have been samples of Republican behaviour on display on the national and state levels.

Immediately following the January 6 certification vote and the January 13 vote to convict President Trump of having incited the violence that occurred at the Capitol, several GOP state committees voted to censure those Republicans who voted either to ratify the election's outcome or to support the charge of incitement against Trump.

The Republican congressional caucus ousted Representative Liz Cheney from her leadership role because she continued to forcefully reject the former president's claim. Cheney has also been rebuked by her state party, and her reelection prospects are now in doubt.

Cheney is being punished because she has refused to accept Trump's claim and maintains that those who continue to advocate what she calls the "big lie" only perpetuate the very issue that incited the January insurrection and takeover of the Capitol.

Acceptance of the "big lie" is also on display in those states where Republicans control both the governorship and the legislature. In the name of "election integrity," they are passing new laws that will make voting more difficult for targeted groups of poor, elderly, and minority voters. Such measures have already passed in 14 states and are in process

in at least 18 more. A deeply troubling feature of some of these bills is a provision allowing the state legislature to overturn the decision of state election officials to certify election results. If permitted to stand, this provision could lead to chaos and undermine the integrity of future elections on the federal and state levels.

Putting an exclamation point on hyperpartisanship, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell recently made the frank admission that he is 100 percent committed to blocking President Biden's agenda, thus making Republican calls for bipartisanship more of a tactic and taunt than an honest appeal for constructive negotiations.

This crisis has been brewing for at least three decades. It began in 1995 when Republicans Newt Gingrich and Tom DeLay assumed leadership in the Congress bringing "slash and burn" politics to Washington. Throughout the remainder of Clinton's term in office and into the two Bush terms, Democrats continued to play by the old rules, supporting compromise with the GOP on what were, in my opinion, regressive pieces of legislation on a host of issues from welfare reform and border security, to tax cuts and education reform.

Republicans were loath to operate in the same way during Obama's terms in office— with only one or two of their members breaking ranks to support compromise bills. Instead, the GOP not only refused to cooperate with Obama, but also launched the Tea Party and encouraged the "birther movement" that denied Obama was a legitimate president. Fueled by right-wing talk radio and television, the poison of partisanship paved the way for the election of Donald Trump.

While many conservative Republicans opposed Trump and saw that he posed a danger to their party and democracy itself, they were hesitant to buck the mass movement they had created, fearing that it would turn against them. Some of these same conservatives assumed that with Trump's defeat, the horror of January 6, and the former president's banishment from social media, the time had come to restore sanity to their party. But the GOP leadership's continued cowering in the face of what they now call "Trump's base" has caused them to circle the wagons and purge their ranks of those who call for sanity. While the Republican Party is busy cannibalizing itself in order to appeal to the very base it created, the lack of comity and civility this has generated has made it impossible to reach compromise. With the Senate deadlocked at 50-50, it has become increasingly difficult to move the nation's agenda forward.