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Disaster politics

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

When I was compiling survivor's accounts for my book on the 2005 earthquake up North, I was wary of becoming a disaster tourist. While I travelled around Balakot, Abbotabad and Mansehra I made sure not to gawp and gape at the many survivors I came across. I didn't want to be a voyeur getting off on calamity, but it's hard I tell you. Two weeks ago when I was in the interior of Sindh I was gripped by the same paranoia. While looking for the truth and trying to uncover the reality on the ground after the devastating rains and flooding of the past month, I caught myself being a bit of a disaster tourist. At Kacho, in Dadu, I spoke with residents whose land had been flooded. Their land was in a katcha area and the inflow of water was a boon, not a tragedy. They didn't seem too put out. 'So you're not upset about the flooding of your land?' I asked, making sure I wasn't getting it wrong. No, a village elder replied, we're quite ok with that. I'm ashamed to admit that I was a little disappointed. 'So, what's the problem then?' I inquired, trying to dig into the disaster more deeply. The man replied that communication had been cut and their roads submerged. His main complaint was that there weren't enough boats around and that mobility had been hampered. You understand of course that I did not want the residents of Kacho to be wrought with pain and anguish, but the disaster tourist in me, while relieved, was imagining that I'd find something more dire.

We are all disaster tourists, all of us, by virtue of living in Pakistan. Every stop sign brings us beggars, young boys and girls selling tissues or flowers for a pittance while we rev about in our fast cars. Every neighbourhood is crammed with katchi abadis and slum dwellers living just yards away from our cemented, comfortable houses. There are men sleeping on the streets of Karachi late at night, using their elbows as pillows and whatever they can pick up from the ubiquitous piles of garbage around them as cover. The income gap in this country alone is a disaster. More aptly, we're disaster citizens – we don't vote, we don't protest, and we're wholly complacent about the status quo. It doesn't matter what the resident baddie in power is wearing on his or her shoulders, epaulettes or shoulder pads, we comply. We silently go along for the ride.

The biggest disaster then, and the largest sponsor of this disaster mind frame, has to be the politics. There is nothing redemptive or meaningful about the politics practiced by the majority in Pakistan. There is no art to its form, no mastery to its application, and no soul to its foundations. It is a dreamless endeavour and it is quickly sucking the life out of this country and its people, consigning them to perpetual disaster citizens. Here's a look at the three major types of disastrous Pakistani politics.

Disaster number one: the politics of distraction. Aunty Shamim, Chinese acupuncturists, corporate sponsored development projects, and worse of all the politics of personal destruction are the mainstays of this group. It is a complete farce. First, Imran Khan decides to press charges against Altaf Hussain in a foreign country and through foreign courts. I know what you're thinking -- you're applauding Mr Khan for taking what you consider to be a 'brave' step, you're applauding the fact that someone is trying to take Altaf Hussain to task for his dirty role in street politics, you're applauding Mr Khan who you think has made the transition from the man at the top to man of the people. Your thinking all these things is the entire purpose. It's a distraction. First of all, Altaf Hussain should face the courts here, in Pakistan. In the country where his politics left a dent on the people. This isn't the Raj anymore. Sorry to break it to you, but we're not a colony. This Uncle Tom like behaviour is unacceptable. We want justice, but we want it given by our own people. A genuine triumph would be if the Pakistani police force was capable of investigating the matter and a Pakistani court was summoned to give answers to its victims. But hold on, you're not distracted enough. Second, the MQM files a reference seeking Mr Khan's disqualification from parliament on moral grounds. Oooh. You're listening now, aren't you? They bring up his dirty laundry and claim that his un-halal past is a blot on the honour of the assembly. They call him a playboy and a jock. And you're still watching. It's a ping-pong game and it will go nowhere, but at least you're not worried with KESC. Or water shortages. Or the disappeared. It's Khan vs Hussain that matters.

Disaster number two: the politics of victimisation. Let's talk about Pakistan's very own Joan of Arc for a moment. The Big B. Reading press releases from Ms Bhutto's Dubai office, you'd be hard pressed to find one act of violence or discrimination that is not directed at her person. She has long claimed that her brother, my father -- an elected member of parliament -- was killed to bring down her government, thereby sidestepping her complicity in the assassination and the major cover up in its aftermath. According to her, his cold-blooded assassination at the hands of the Pakistani police force was an elaborate ploy to hurt her. Modest, much? The military coup of 1999 was enacted to prevent her from returning to power. The rise of sugar prices was induced to affect her vote bank. On Fox News, after 9/11, I saw her talking to one of their right wing reporters. "If I was prime minister, 9/11 wouldn't have happened" I swear she said this. It goes on. The Taliban wouldn't have been strengthened if she were left in power (they were created during her regime, however). The May 12 massacre was an attack on her party as was this week's suicide bombing in Islamabad. There is one major problem with this kind of politics -- it has nothing to do with the people. It is fuelled by ego and ambition, not by concern for the masses. They are just pathways to the PM house.

Disaster number three: the politics of suicidal violence. Writing on Adolph Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, the political theorist Hannah Arendt suggested that the Nazis were not radical in their use of violence but banal. They committed mass brutality because they were following orders; they were unthinking and uncritical about their actions. This is how violence is best propagated. Drones caught up in some fervour or another don't stop to question the consequences of their orders. I don't have to go very far back in time to illustrate just how popular this brand of politics is in Pakistan, especially amongst the fundamentalists and armed forces. The siege at Lal Masjid, the suicide bombing in Islamabad on Tuesday, the mosque bombing in Kohat, the ambush at Hub, the three suicide attacks in Waziristan over the past weekend -- hundreds of Pakistanis

killed by senseless violence in the span of a week. It's like a race against the clock: how many of our own people can we kill in the shortest amount of time?

I'd like to conclude with a relevant anecdote. In the 1950s the leader of free Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser, was trying to negotiate an arms deal with the Soviets. He would be the first Arab leader to successfully do so and the very idea was unsettling for Egypt's former colonizers. The British tried to intercede and tempt Nasser away from securing arms for his country. They wanted to whet his appetite but not leave him sated so they offered him weapons not for his army, but for his police force. Nasser refused their offer. 'I don't want to arm the police force' he replied 'I don't want to kill my own people'.