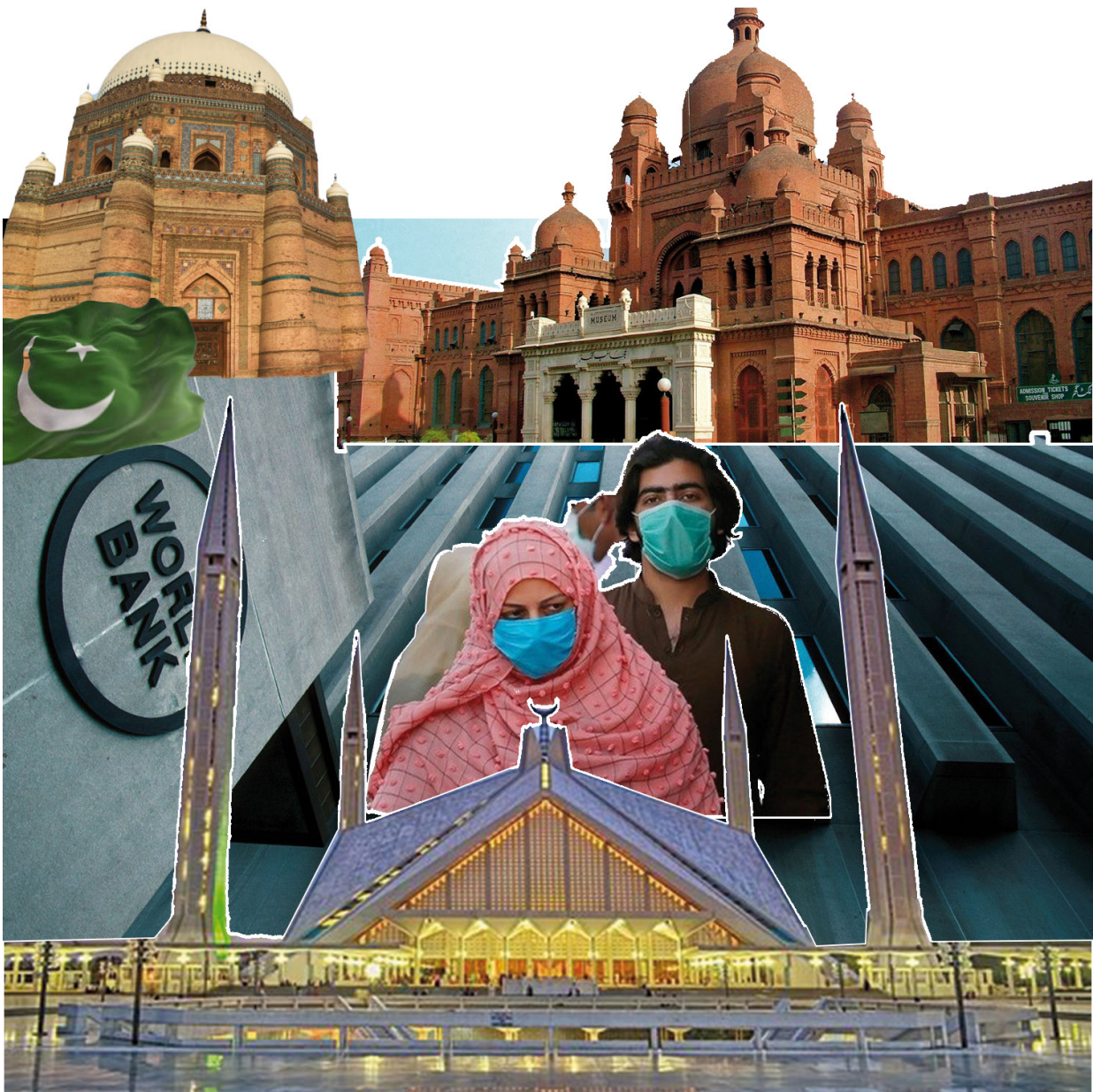


“Rethinking global politics in times of Covid” in South Asia





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Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world. After experiencing its fourth wave of COVID-19 infections, the implications that the pandemic has had at political, economic, and social dimensions have become evident. In the health sector, the government has seemed weak in providing care to the population affected by the coronavirus. The reliance on international governments and organizations' help and assistance such as grants from the World Bank, loans from the International Monetary Fund, and donations, especially from the West, has increased. The pandemic has caused an escalation of poverty, high unemployment rates, inflation, and increased the number of kids who had to drop out of school. At the same time, the pandemic has forced us to think that the government in Pakistan must depend on global institutions, other states, and organizations.

During the initial days of the pandemic, the national and provincial governments adopted lockdown as a measure to stop the spread of the virus across the country. However, on the one hand, the federal government considered that a complete lockdown would increase poverty and would escalate other social threats. On the other hand, the provincial governments believed that a lockdown was necessary to decrease the casualties due to the coronavirus, and decided to follow the World Health Organization protocols rather than the ones implemented by the national government. Nevertheless, local governments are not in a position to deliver effective public services due to the lack of financial and administrative resources that exist. This contest between the central and local governments has brought confusion within the Pakistani population; the debate about a smart and complete lockdown is still under discussion.

The Pakistani population faced various challenges in getting access to health services. There was a generalized shortage of ventilators, isolation centers, health kits and other precautionary health equipment. The people from Pakistan were looking for relief from COVID-19, however, our government was waiting for developed countries from the West to manufacture vaccines, and most importantly, to donate them to us. Hence, when vaccines were produced, China and the USA donated Sinopharm, Sinovac, and Moderna vaccines. In the same way, global charities, grants, and donations were bestowed to purchase ventilators, masks, sanitizers, health kits, etc.

Many private NGOs, including the Fast Rural Development Program (FRDP), helped public hospitals with provisions and maintenance of ambulances, masks, broadcasting campaigns on radio, constructing incinerators, implementing hand wash points and latrines, providing infrared thermometers, oxygen cylinders, gloves, sanitary kits and food distribution to poor masses. During the distribution, it was found that many people lost their daily wages and alarmingly, monthly salaries from the beneficiaries ranged around 1.25 USD per day.

The pandemic has doubled the poverty ratio in Pakistan, from 20 to 40 percent of the population earning less than 2 USD per day. Dawn Pakistan reported that 68 percent of the population cannot afford a healthy diet (Dawn Newspaper 2021). Due to the crisis, the Pakistani government received grants and loans from the IMF and the World Bank. For instance, in August 2021 the government received a 600 million USD grant to support poor people through social safety nets (World Bank 2021). Also, the IMF loaned 2.7 billion USD to Pakistan, which according to the IMF Managing Director is "the largest allocation in history... is a significant shot in the arm for the world (...). If used wisely, (this is) a unique opportunity to combat this unprecedented crisis" (Dawn 2021, n.p). However, the Pakistani public experiences an additional setback with every installment made by the IMF as the tax burden on the poor increases and, due to COVID-19, Pakistan has experienced an inflation of 11 percent from 2020 to 2021. Unemployment has also increased and there still are many people who cannot find an alternate livelihood.

On the other hand, according to UNICEF, Pakistan is the second country in the world with the highest rate of children who dropped out of school. Around 22.8 million children are not studying. Moreover, the girls' ratio is 12.16 million. The main reasons for this are the lack of infrastructure and a low-quality level of education in public schools due to the government only allocating 2.6 percent of the total GDP to education. This situation has been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has shown us that the world is more interconnected. However, the reliance of Pakistan on the global powerful and resourceful institutions has been copious. Moreover, the lack of infrastructure at the local level is also fragile. This debate makes us think about when will the Pakistani government have the capacity to respond well to the disaster, as well as when will the dependence on the global West decrease.

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