

LAHORE

Women journalists in the age of online trolls



On July 13, 2018, journalist Asma Shirazi interviewed former

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif when he was coming back from London, along with his daughter Maryam Nawaz, to face a prison sentence. The interview was not telecast due to censorship, but trolls immediately started an online campaign targeting Ms. Shirazi. "It left a psychological impact on me. I wouldn't like to go in the details as I don't want my trolls to get any satisfaction from it. While it affected me for a short while – I took a break from Twitter, or became more cautious about what I wrote or said – I took it positively in the long run as I learned a lot from this episode."

Ms. Shirazi said she deals with such negative campaigns by not checking her mentions on Twitter.

This was not an isolated incident. Last month, several journalists critical of the government, including Marvi Sirmed, in picture, Mubashir Zaidi and Umar Cheema, were abused on Twitter with trending hashtags. Women are particularly targeted.

A report by Digital Rights Foundation noted that "55% respondents said they had been subjected to online abuse and/or harassment. Ninety-one percent women feel abuse is gendered and its nature is rarely professional but mostly personal."

Ms. Sirmed, a journalist and rights activist, said women are targeted because of the general lack of acceptance for them as opinion leaders or figures of authority on any subject other than household or the care role society expects them to be in. "Having a dissenting opinion or adopting a role divergent from the ages old image of 'good' and 'chaste', women are a perfect recipe for society's collective outrage and ridicule. This is why women journalists have to face far more violent speech, online attacks on their integrity and physical security, body-shaming, slut-shaming, etc."

On April 24, the campaign against Ms. Sirmed generated over 11,000 tweets within a span of two hours, according to a DAWN analysis. Many trolls were supporters of Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and the military establishment.

Soft targets

While online abuse has in any case increased in Pakistan, women in the media face this especially more, said Zebunnisa Burki, journalist at *The News*. "I think women are perceived as 'soft targets' online too, due to the immediate 'shaming' of women through sexualised



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A report by Digital Rights Foundation noted that 91% of women who are on social networks feel they are being abused personally

abuse, which is the most common way to threaten a woman online, and of course the inherent blind animosity against women in the public sphere is strong even now."

Marium Chaudhry, founder of digital news platform The Current PK, said women are easily trolled on social media because like in the real world, they are considered to be an easier target online. "A woman anchor, who was being badly trolled once, told me that she didn't read what people were saying; she just couldn't pick up her phone knowing that there were foul messages about her on the other end. It makes women reporters feel uncomfortable and gets under their skin – which is exactly what these trolls want."

Ms. Sirmed, the rights activist, explained how she feels when she's insulted online. "I keep ignoring such stuff but then it starts becoming a sore in my soul, it starts enraging me bit by bit and a time comes when I just want to yell at the person sending those tweets or posts, and throw back the most humiliating insults. I have done that in the past and I am not very proud of those unnecessary outbursts. So then, I started blocking everyone who sent insults, expletives, accusations or threats. But it doesn't stop hurting. The problem with online bullying is, it keeps coming back. There is no end to it."

There is certain legal framework for the redress of online threats, bullying and libel, but even that framework doesn't come for the rescue of the victims, Ms. Sirmed said.

"Unfortunately, it is quite actively followed and used by the state authorities when it comes to political, ideological and religious dissenters. But when these dissenters want to use it, the entire system appears to be absolutely paralysed... The state of Pakistan seems to have failed in meting out justice to dissenting voices," she added.

LONDON

The task of renovating Westminster Palace



On April 4, amid the political chaos in Westminster over Brexit,

a drama of a more tangible kind gripped the House of Commons chamber. During a brief respite from Brexit, as MPs debated tax collection strategies, water began to pour through the ceiling of the main chamber into the press gallery. With Brexit developments being leaked to newspapers on a regular basis, the incident provided almost too obvious a metaphor for political commentators, but it also provided a stark reminder of another crisis facing Westminster, which had been relegated to the back-burner.

Flooding – whether from rain or leaky pipes – has become fairly common at the Houses of Parliament. In fact, in another metaphorically apt incident, a storm the day before the Brexit referendum in 2016 wreaked havoc on the parliamentary estate. Such incidents have been one of the few visible signs that the grand Victorian construct, whose impressive façade and interiors attract thousands of visitors each year, is not in as good a condition as it appears to be.

Its aged infrastructure also manifests in other ways: there are frequent fire alarms, the ceiling has netting in many places to guard against "the risk of falling objects", and many MP offices are freezing during winter, as many windows fail to shut and open properly. Less visible are problems with its mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems. Patch-up work has been on for many decades but it has proved to be a bit of a hotchpotch.

Renovating Parliament is a massive task: to give a sense of the scale of the project, Westminster Palace has over 1,100 rooms, 4,000 windows, about seven km of pipework and 402 km of cabling. The depth of the crisis has gained recognition in recent years. In 2016, a committee of both Houses acknowledged that there is an impending crisis that could not be ignored, but the strategy for dealing with it proved divisive. Should the whole building be vacated during works or should workarounds be found to enable restoration work and parliamentary business to carry on together? Moving out of the chamber is a particularly emotional issue.

After the Fire of London in 1834, the only time that neither Houses sat in their chambers was after a particularly heavy bombing raid in 1941, which destroyed the House of Commons chamber. For much of the rest of the Second World War, and despite the threat to the city and the Houses, the Commons sat in the House of Lords, while the Lords moved to the ceremonial Robing Room.



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The depth of current feeling was signified as some politicians continued to lobby for the building to be used during the works despite reports that suggested this would vastly increase the costs of the renovation. Sense, and practicality have prevailed and in 2018, MPs and Lords agreed to temporarily shift their home while work begins in the middle of the next decade. But controversy has persisted.

Temporary chamber

Earlier this month, details of the temporary commons chamber were revealed – which will occupy Richmond House, part of the parliamentary estate in in nearby Whitehall. The House of Lords is set to occupy the grounds of a nearby conference centre. Images of a simplified chamber with the familiar green seats overlooked by a large public viewing gallery were released. "This approach is the quickest and most cost-effective way of tackling the significant work that needs to be done to protect the Palace of Westminster," said Tom Brake of the House of Commons Commission.

However, the plans have faced criticism: Richmond House itself requires extensive and costly revamping, on top of the billions that the restoration project of Westminster Palace will cost.

The government has pointed to the Notre Dame fire to highlight the need to act. Others have pointed to a missed opportunity. They argue the temporary structure could have attempted to provide the practical mechanism for a new kind of politics, through the use of a U-shaped or even circular chamber that has been taken up by many countries, attempting to get away from the traditional two-sided chamber, seen as encouraging confrontational behaviour. Given the heated nature of parliamentary debate, such a change, some believe, would be worth attempting.



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DJIBOUTI

Perils of a rail link built with Chinese funds



The train had crossed the frontier on Chinese-built rails between Ethiopia

and Djibouti. Barren escarpments and acacia trees were flowing past the windows. Behind lay Ethiopia and a disclaimer at the ticket booth warning passengers to travel at their own peril.

Funded by China's Exim Bank for \$4.2 billion, this is Africa's first electrified railway, except that it is not really. "Look at the electricity shortage: the train could be blocked for a whole day of operations," Djibouti's Finance Minister Ilyas Dawaleh told this writer in his office in Djibouti City.

In January, Mr. Dawaleh said, operations were halted for half a day when a train was blocked by protesters amid conflict on the border between Ethiopia's Afar and Somali States. Ethnic Afar feared Somali annexation of villages.

"Everyone's taking hostage of the infrastructure," Mr. Dawaleh said. Besides the Ethiopian unrest, nomadic people demanding compensation for run-over camels too were not factored into a feasibility study Exim Bank approved for the over 700-km Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway in 2013, before disbursing the loan (\$490 million) for Djibouti. In April, an Ethiopian freight train skidded off the tracks. Revenue forecasts for the railway, meant as a pivot for Ethiopia's export-oriented industrial development dream, have been cut to a third against the feasibility study. The track remains incomplete in both the nations and the railway transports only one commercial train a day, not three as planned, said Ahmed Osman, Governor of Djibouti's Central Bank.

During the railway's first year of operations, 90% of trains from Ethiopia arrived empty at a container terminal in Djibouti, only to collect imports from a nearby loading point, said its director-general, Abdillahi Adaweh Sigad. At one point, there's a railway station beside a mountain range abutting a fortified base for China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and linked to a Chinese-funded and part-Chinese managed port. Warehouses lie between and "some sensitive cargo" are imported, according to the port's commercial director.

Ethiopia and Djibouti are working on restructuring the rapid rise of debt, whose maturity has already been extended. In February, Mr. Dawaleh met Exim Bank's president in Beijing, saying Djibouti, like Ethiopia, wants partial railway privatisation. China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC), railway constructors who became



Africa's first electrified rail line is plagued by a host of issues, including electricity shortages, protests, compensation claims for run-over camels and debt

management contractors in December 2016, already want shares, the Finance Minister said. The plans may entail private operations of some wagons and segments of the 100-km track on Djibouti's side, Mr. Dawaleh said.

Oil and gas development

In April, CREC met Ethiopia's Prime Minister in Beijing, expressing interest in oil and gas development as State Grid Corporation of China signed a \$1.8-billion investment deal with Ethiopia, including to supply power to the railway.

The railway network is planned extended to Damerjog in eastern Djibouti, where a 735-km pipeline with China's Poly Group will transport natural gas from Ethiopia, said Djibouti's Minister of Energy, Younis Ali Guedi.

Djibouti's public and publicly-guaranteed debt was estimated to be at 104% of GDP at end-2018, according to the IMF. Djibouti disputed the forecast, saying it used outdated data from the IMF's last debt sustainability analysis, in 2016, and included debts of state enterprises, which the government doesn't compute as sovereign debts.

Djibouti, meanwhile, seeks new off-balance sheet commercial loans totalling \$448 million, including a \$56 million loan from Exim Bank, for an electricity transmission line. Shanghai Electric Group agreed in September to split the EximBank loan 50:50 with the state-owned Electricite de Djibouti (EDD).

Another line is planned, with finance expected from India's Exim Bank. Djibouti separately seeks a European-financed \$420-million loan for an airport that would be recorded on the balance sheet of Great Horn Investment Holding, a subsidiary of the Djibouti Ports and Free Zones Authority, and so, like the EDD loan, not accounted for as sovereign debt, said its chairman Aboubaker Omar Hadi.



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IBARAKI

In Japan, driverless tractors are on the move



While driverless cars may now be a question of 'when' rather than 'if', in

Japan, their countryside counterpart, the robot tractor, is already on the move. Demographic decline, coupled with urbanisation, means that the average number of farmers fell by 22% between 2005 and 2015, while their average age is currently a venerable 67. According to Agriculture Ministry statistics, 81% of the farming machine-related accidents in 2016 involved a farmer over the age of 65.

Consequently, a number of Japanese machinery manufacturers are betting big on the future of agriculture being 'smart' and automated. Iseki and Co. Ltd, one of the archipelago's largest players in the field, already manufactures driverless, smart rice transplanters that fertilize as they transplant, while simultaneously measuring soil depth and sending the relevant information to fertilizer dispensers.

Ibaraki prefecture, just north of Tokyo, is Japan's breadbasket. It is also home to Iseki and Co.'s optimistically named 'Dreamy Agricultural Research Institute', a space filled with tank-like machines, clad in sensors and cameras that look straight out of a 1980s sci-fi movie. Smart combine harvesters rub mechanical shoulders with smart hullers and graders. But, among all these machines, the pride of place belongs to Iseki's flagship offering: the Robot Tractor TJV655.

This driverless tractor came in the market in December 2018. It can sense any obstruction on the field and come to an automatic halt when needed. It can make U-turns using GPS technology to determine its location. The machine can also be used for tilling the ground and applying the optimal amount of fertilizer and pesticide. Katsushi Miwada, the general manager of Iseki's Agri-Business Solutions Department, says driverless tractors are likely to become popular faster than autonomous cars, given that they need to worry less about compensating for the behaviour of other vehicles and pedestrians. They can also be put to work 24 hours a day, exponentially increasing farming efficiency.

Cost factor

One of the main constraining factors, however, is cost. The TJV655 retails for 12 million yen (\$1,10,000) and has only sold 10 units so far, a drop in the ocean of the almost 40,000 units that Iseki sells of the same size tractor in a year. The latter are priced at 7.1 million yen (\$65,000).

Mr. Miwada hastens to explain that the company considers the next year or two to still be a pilot phase when the focus



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will be on training potential users and familiarising them with the technology, rather than on sales.

And, despite the hefty price tag, in the end farmers may simply have no other choice. Mr. Miwada cites the example of the northern island of Hokkaido where at the start of this century, a farmer worked an average of 18.9 ha of land. Today that number has risen to 30.1 ha. The trend of burgeoning farm size looks set to continue as long as Japan's population decline continues. "There are not enough tractor operators per hectare," he concludes.

This correspondent jumps at the opportunity to test drive a robot tractor and has to constantly beat down the desire to shout out, "look, no hands", as the tractor pivots and halts without any manual intervention. However, a human is still required to monitor the workings of the tractor in the field, until the safety measures have been fully established. The dream part of Iseki's 'Dreamy Agricultural Research Institute' is one that envisages a farmer in his 80s, sending his fleet of driverless tractors off to plough, sow and harvest his crops from the comfort of his living room sofa. Two other firms, Kubota Corporation and Yanmar, have also developed similar machines. For Japan, the possibility of regaining the high-tech leadership that it has ceded to China is urgent. China has already emerged as the frontrunner in autonomous cars. Beijing also recently announced a seven-year goal for developing fully automated machinery capable of planting, fertilizing and harvesting staple crops.

The production of Japan's traditional agricultural products – rice, wheat, beef, dairy and sugar – has dropped 32% in the past 50 years. Whether the deployment of artificial intelligence can stem this decline remains an open question. What is certain is that without it, Japanese agriculture is an endangered species.



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