[**The wrong war**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605774/the-wrong-war)

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ON [Kashmir solidarity day](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605609/pakistan-expresses-unshakable-support-for-kashmiris-on-solidarity-day) on Friday, Pakistan needed to speak with one voice. It did. But not exactly. The price of political dis-functionality is a steep one.

Imagine the symbolic power of an entire Pakistani leadership — from all sides of the political spectrum and from both sides of the parliamentary aisle — standing shoulder to shoulder, marching arm in arm, and declaring in unison our complete, comprehensive, loud and unequivocal support for the people of Jammu and Kashmir as they brave the rigours of India’s illegal occupation of their territory. Imagine the enormous impact of such unity. Imagine the force of such solidarity.

Today, it is unimaginable.

This week’s [proceedings](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605273/ruckus-in-na-as-government-presents-bill-for-open-balloting-in-senate-election) of the National Assembly reinforced the dismal reality that our political system — as framed by the integral working relationship between the government and the opposition — is broken. Parliamentary work has come to a grinding halt, except for a semblance of quasi-normalcy in the house committees. The highest elected forum of the land has been hollowed out from the inside. Debate, discourse and decency, all three have been sacrificed at the altar of political rivalry. Rivalry? No, ladies and gentlemen, this is no rivalry — this is war.

We have a just war on our hands, but we are fighting the wrong one. This couldn’t have come at a worse time.

It is a war we wage on ourselves as Narendra Modi’s India wages war on the Kashmiris. We have a just war on our hands, but we are fighting the wrong one. This couldn’t have come at a worse time.

India is in the middle of a meltdown. Strange things are happening in that vast land. Hindu majoritarianism is stampeding over minorities with deliberate abandon and Indians are getting a taste of what Kashmiris have been suffering under New Delhi’s occupation. The mainstreaming of bigotry and hate, the normalisation of lynch mobs and state persecution, and the degeneration of media into a venom-spewing state appendage is fast reducing Brand India to a totalitarian state.

A latest report in The New York Times quotes Gyan Prakash, a professor of history at Princeton University, as saying: “[T]he BJP onslaught is also very different [from Indira Gandhi’s emergency in the 1970s] and even more damaging to whatever remains of democracy in India.” The report says, “He cited what he called a creeping dismantling of the pillars of democracy under Mr Modi, from the coercion and control of the mainstream media to influencing the courts.” Mr Prakash is quoted: “Critics often call it an ‘undeclared emergency’ … [I]t is much worse and more damaging in the long term, because the arrests and the denial of bail to detainees is an assault on whatever remains of the institutions of the rule of law.”

Such words were rarely used in the West to describe India till very recently. With the ongoing farmers’ protest in India garnering international headlines and with celebrities like the singer Rihanna and climate activist Greta Thunberg tweeting in support of the farmers, global spotlight has gradually begun to cast dark shadows over India. The ‘world’s largest democracy’ is slowly but surely slipping into majoritarian totalitarianism. The traits determining this slide are unmistakable: persecution and demonisation of minorities at the state and societal level, state-supported, or accepted, violence against targeted communities, militarisation of public discourse, proliferation of hate-filled abuse wrapped in racist connotations, and a visible collapse of inter-institutional checks and balances that form the bedrock of a democratic system. India today is a deeply troubled polity lacerating its own back to test the strength of its arms.

It is also glowering at Pakistan in an attempt to fight off its internal demons. There is real danger that Modi may choose the path of aggression. His last such misadventure cost the Indian air force a bloody nose. The wound cuts deep.

The contrast could not be sharper. When India threatened war, Pakistan urged peace; when India launched sorties, Pakistan displayed confident restraint; when India sent in aircraft, Pakistan sent back the captured pilot. The world saw the spectacle. It was not a one-off episode, but a dangerous manifestation of the metamorphosis taking place inside India and transforming it into a fire-breathing, war-threatening belligerent entity.

This presents Pakistan with an opportunity. As India slides into representative fascism, Pakistan should strengthen its democratic credentials; as India slips into intolerance, Pakistan should emb­race plurality and multiculturalism; as India persecutes its minorities, Pakistan should hug its minorities tighter; as India threatens war, Pakistan should offer peace; and as India melts down into hate-generated political instability and social loathing, Pakistan should forge a stable political environment that cements the government and the opposition into a basic working relationship without compromising on the divisive plurality that is necessary for a representative system at competition with itself.

As Brand India self-destructs, Brand Pakistan can emerge to fill the vacuum.

But this requires vision. It requires political magnanimity and an approach that grows beyond personal and political one-upmanship. It also requires the current leadership to recognise that a moment is upon us, and a window of opportunity is creaking open. There are sweeping changes happening, or readying to happen, in our immediate neighbourhood and in the Middle East. A new administration in the United States is settling down for the next four years and China has emerged stronger in the post-Covid world. The enormity of the moment is matched by the expanse of possibilities.

And yet, here we are, trying to dig ourselves out of a hole. Kashmir solidarity day presented an opportunity for us to test our capacity to unite for a cause that has never divided us. We failed. But there are many other tests waiting for us down the road. If this week’s parliamentary proceedings are a reflection of how our politics will unfold in the next two years, then we run a serious risk of allowing the window of opportunity to slam shut. Then we too can lacerate our backs to test the strength of our arms.

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