

## Opinion – Is the Coronavirus War Narrative Helping Pakistan?

Written by Saeed Ahmed Rid

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# Opinion – Is the Coronavirus War Narrative Helping Pakistan?

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SAEED AHMED RID, APR 28 2020

Since the spread of Covid-19 heads of states are declaring their response as 'war' against coronavirus. In early February 2020, Xi Jinping, the President and general-secretary of the Communist Party of China declared China's response as 'people's war'. Then in mid-March the US President Trump termed himself 'a wartime president' and compared the response required to combat coronavirus with World War II. Following the same trend, on March 24, declaring 21 days lockdown in India, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi compared it to the 18-day long historic Mahabharata battle. Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan terms Pakistan's response as the war against coronavirus. The catchy words *corona se darna nahi larna hai* (not to be frightened of the coronavirus, but to fight it) have become the slogan and narrative of the government as it appears in TV ads, songs, pamphlets and media campaigns. Yet, the war-narrative against coronavirus is proving to be counterproductive and rather harmful in Pakistan.

Is it necessary to use the war metaphor in official statements on coronavirus? How does it help and what does it exactly mean by *Corona se larna hai* (to fight with corona)? How do people fight with coronavirus? The slogan *Corona se bachna hai* (Save yourself from Corona) which is used by the Jazz mobile network in their TV ads in Pakistan is more appropriate because so far, the only remedy against Coronavirus is social-distancing and self-isolation for which you need to keep away from it, not fight with it.

In Pakistani cultural settings people enjoy hug greetings, shaking hands and partying with friends and families. In Pakistan eating outside in *dhabbas* (small makeshift restaurants) and gossiping with friends is widely enjoyed. Therefore, it is not easy for people to shut themselves in their homes and observe the level of 'social distancing' which is required during these difficult times. It becomes even more difficult when your culture believes that the time of death is fixed by God, therefore it cannot be changed even by a second whether they observe the safety guidelines of the government for novel coronavirus or not. It requires a Herculean effort to convince them to observe health department guidelines. In such an environment, *darna nahi hai, larna hai* mantra rather than convincing them to undertake self-isolation helped them to take the threat lightly and continue with their routine life.

For undertaking health related precautions, it is necessary for the people of Pakistan to take the coronavirus threat seriously and for that they perhaps should get scared (*darna*) of it a little. Yet, people in Pakistan did not get scared, which is why they took it lightly and marriage parties, picnic parties, congregation- prayers, family gatherings continued at a certain level despite all the warnings.

The Pakistani President, Dr. Arif Alvi, who is a professional doctor has taken the war-narrative against Corona to the next level. In one of his video messages on twitter on March 15, he said, 'The war against Coronavirus is my own and personal. I have to battle it in my house and recruit every family member, relation and friend as a soldier.' In same message, he further requested the people of Pakistan to fight with him together against Corona and post 'What you did today' (everyday) on any social media forum using the hashtag #iFightCorona.

The emphasis on word, '*larna*' or 'fight' should be noted as this word is repeatedly uttered for response to coronavirus by government officials, media persons and even by the young kids in their velfies on YouTube and in

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24/7 TV news headlines. Pakistan's popular news channel Geo News has even made a song featuring famous Pakistani animated movie character Donkey King on *darna nahi hai, larna hai*.

In Pakistan, the coronavirus is being symbolised as a traditional enemy against whom all Pakistanis need to wage a war as soldiers of Pakistan in their homes and streets and defeat it. This war symbolism is used to raise the spirit of the nation, but it is hard to see how useful this can be against a non-traditional human security threat like coronavirus. Rather than raising the masculine military spirits of the nation, sensitizing the nation about the easy person-to-person spread of the virus could have been more helpful in convincing people to stay at home and follow health department advisories.

Ayaz Qureshi, the author of the book, *AIDS in Pakistan: Bureaucracy, Public Goods and NGOs*, in response to a post on social media wrote, 'Long history of war narratives in our troubled relationship with micro-organisms is part of the masculine, colonial, and developmentalist narrative of overpowering the 'other'.' The traditional militaristic national security narratives are all about dealing with the traditional enemy states where 'overpowering the other' has been a key element. They are not only insufficient but counterproductive as well in dealing with coronavirus type non-traditional security threats. Raising national spirits during a national war against enemy state is quite different from enabling the nation to deal with a non-traditional human security threat like coronavirus pandemic or floods and famine.

Both require a completely different strategy, hence a different diction and a different narrative. More humane, compassionate, sympathetic and technologically nuanced narratives would be required to deal with non-traditional human security threats, like the coronavirus threat. In such cases empathy and compassion in language is more important especially when one must enforce the extreme steps like lockdowns and curfews. For example, understanding the hardship of imposing a lockdown on people, the Sindh government asked people to take 15 days lockdown in Sindh not as curfew, but as 'Care for You'. When the Sindh government was criticised for starting the lockdown of the province in haste the Chief Minister, Murad Ali Shah replied, 'I agree that our economy has suffered the most due to the pandemic, but nothing is more important than human lives at the end of the day'. That humanistic narrative helped the Sindh government to convince the people in Sindh that the lockdown was necessary, and it was enforced for their own safety.

Hence, the coronavirus Pakistani narrative can be divided into two categories. On the one hand is the official war-narrative of the federal government led by the Prime Minister Imran Khan and on the other hand is empathy and compassion based narrative of the Sindh provincial Government. The high level of approval for the Sindh government's narrative on coronavirus shows that rather than using the war-narrative against the coronavirus, there is evidence that people may accept difficult steps if they are coupled with a more humane and sympathetic narrative.

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### About the author:

**Saeed Ahmed Rid** is an Assistant Professor at National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. He completed a PhD in Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, UK and was a Commonwealth Academic Scholar (2017-18) at South Asian Studies, School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, University of Oxford, UK. His most recent article is "Aman ki Asha (a desire for peace): A case study of a people-to-people contacts peacebuilding initiative between India and Pakistan" (2020), in *Contemporary South Asia*.