

## The Critical Junctures

There is a rich body of scholarship in the fields of economics and public policy around the idea of *path dependency*, which seeks to explain how policies maintain a secure equilibrium, until the point that they are disrupted by an unusually powerful exogenous force. This force creates a “critical juncture,” where a fork in the road allows for new paths to open, and the old mores, paradigms, and policy trajectories can be foreclosed. Critical junctures occur because of a massive shock to society, throwing it off its equilibrium by shaking its extant paradigms and roiling its sensibilities. Today, Pakistani society is at a critical juncture in the wake of the immense tragedy that befell Noor Mukaddam and her bereaving family.

The sheer depravity of the violence exacted upon a defenceless soul, whose full account is yet to be determined by police investigation and by the courts, has heaved society into a moral turmoil. The cries for #JusticeForNoor now roar in the public sphere and on social media, demanding justice for the bereaved and for a systematic reconsideration of violent misogyny in society. It is in that context that a critical juncture has arrived: either the path dependency of misogynistic violence is disrupted for the better, or it is not. Such is the fork in the road that we confront, and to see its urgency, there are parallels to be drawn with two other critical junctures that we have witnessed in recent times: the Army Public School (APS) tragedy in Peshawar (2014), and the George Floyd tragedy in Minneapolis (2020).

For the APS tragedy, one must recall that, as of 2014, Pakistani society felt an ambiguity towards the post-9/11 resurgence of extremism which was the fallout of warfare in neighboring Afghanistan. An increasing polarization was fed by a multiplicity of social narratives, some of which were sympathetic towards radical notions. Yet in the tragedy of December, 2014, where an unspeakably horrific act of violence occurred against children at the APS, a critical juncture was ushered as the blood of innocent children weighed on the collective conscience. In the wake of that critical juncture, there was a paradigmatic shift that was ultimately beneficial for the country, since society coalesced around the common cause of combating extremism with force.

Meanwhile, the George Floyd tragedy involved the murder of an unarmed African-American man by a white policeman, Derek Chauvin, which was broadcast across social media by bystanders who watched him die over a 9-minute suffocation. As a critical juncture, there are three important points to consider: (1) its unusual salience for the American psyche, (2) the important role of civil society, and (3) the importance of closure by trial. The unusual salience of George Floyd’s tragic murder speaks to the fact that he was an ordinary man, in the specific sense that state violence against African-Americans occurs on a daily basis in America. George Floyd would have been, in theory, just another black fatality in America, where cops are 6 times more likely to shoot blacks than whites. Noor’s death is, in a specific and similar sense, not unusual in the context of systemic violence against women in the public and private spheres. Yet, as with Floyd, Noor’s pain has become what policy scholars call the “focusing event,” far more salient than other equally atrocious and atrociously equal events.

Civil society’s mobilization was also crucial in responding to Floyd’s murder, particularly under the banner of #Blacklivesmatter, which put sustained pressure on the status quo and forced the structures of power to alter their behavior, whether through reforms (municipal policing changes) or at least through rhetoric (corporate America’s lip-service of sympathy for African-Americans). In Noor’s case, civil society must maintain a sustained pressure, and urge for reforms rather than mere rhetoric. Justice delayed is justice denied, and there is a pressing need for civil society to maintain its momentum in seeking whatever redress is possible for a life unjustly lost.

Additionally, the battle in memoriam of George Floyd only ended in June, 2021, which was 13 months after he was killed by Derek Chauvin in May, 2020. Throughout that time, the American public was navigating a critical juncture without the guarantee of closure through a trial. There was immense pressure put on the system by the Biden administration to ensure that this trial was seen through to its end, barring which there would be much more violence on the streets going forward. Yet once Chauvin was sentenced to more than 22 years in prison, America breathed with some sigh of relief, assured that at least some justice was done, although the war had hardly been won. The same absolutely must happen in our context - closure through due process with a punishment that fits the crime - because only then will we begin to tackle the long road ahead towards a more secure and compassionate society.

This critical juncture has far larger impacts than just the brutality of one person against another. It is in fact the worst form of a society's demoralization when it is confronted with news that is so beyond the pale, knowing that the monsters live among us and can bare their fangs at any instant. To note: there is no enemy of ours that can demoralize our society as badly as the enemy that hides in plain sight. Social relations are being tested or ruptured by the fear that this tragedy has instilled, particularly (but not exclusively) in young women. Many people have lost nights of sleep because of the distress that this news has caused, myself included.

Therefore, by providing justice to the bereaved, and standing with them during this hour of grief, we are building a bulwark to protect our own people against attacks not just on their individual persons, but also attacks on our collective psyche. In fact, it is this damage to our collective psyche that further requires us, more than ever, to militate against business-as-usual physical violence of misogyny . The path forward from this critical juncture depends on a collective stand against such brutalization of the defenceless, and the tragedy of the Mukaddams is our shared tragedy,

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