

Saturday, October 6th 2018

Dear Mustafa,

The english language newspaper, Dawn, is delivered every morning to my room at the Sind Club. As I drink my first cup of tea alongside the paper, I am greeted on the masthead by a headshot of a bemonocled Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder. His gaze is intense, encouraging the reader to concentrate on the written material.

This newspaper was established, in 1941, by Jinnah to promote a sole voice for the Muslim community. It reported on topics such as proportional representation, minority rights, and central-provincial relations. Today's headlines are a bit less demanding.

On Tuesday I read about a roadside ice-cream seller who has 2.3 billion rupees in his current account. That is approximately £15m; that's an awful lot of ice-cream! Seeing as even the vendor did not know where it had come from I would suggest a less sweet source!

This morning I read that the new President is on a major austerity drive, and, to show the way, has sold off 62 presidential cars and 8 presidential buffalo. He has further reduced his staff in Government House, which is also slated for sale, from 528 to "5-to-4".

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Quite why there is an uncertainty on the number of remaining staff I do not know; maybe the gardener just does half-days?

These articles typify the country - it is a phantasm - an illusion that you cannot totally believe.

But 'Phantasmistan' the country is very real. Presidents have buffalos, ice cream vendors are billionaires, and in a country of 200 million people only 700,000 pay tax. But with the new government there is a sense that the illusion that has been operating for decades is diminishing - the fever of the phantasm is breaking.

This rehabilitation and its repercussions may not be palatable for everyone, especially the old political establishment, who have been the key beneficiaries of Phantasmistan. But as I return to the front page of the newspaper, Jinnah's glare, now looks more forlorn, his stare longing. Let's see what tomorrow's headlines bring.

See you next week - Chris