**The party of money**

BY K H U R R A M H US A I N 2021-02-11

WATCHING the video of those politicians caught on camera raking large bundles of cash into a duffel bag larger than an overnight carry-on allegedly in return for switching their loyalties before the Senate elections of March 2018 reminded me of something I had heard somebody say in the midst of the last sugar price scandal of the early 2010s. `Money has no party` that person had said on a T V show. I wish I could remember his name, because he was so spot on.

In that context, sugar barons from all parties had abandoned their respective political parties and congregated on the same page: preserve a high price for sugar despite falling international prices. Then as now, the sugar barons dodged every bullet and kept their rackets alive and kicking. And then as now, there were surely rooms where sacks of money were being exchanged in bundles so large people had to open their hands wide to wrap their fingers around them, probably in the run-up to other political events as well, whether Senate elections or something else.

The Sugar Inquiry Commission Report released last year showed that the sugar rackets were as much with us as the use of money to buy political loyalties. And the aftermath showed us that little can be done by any sitting government to shut these down. What the video shows is that it is hard to trust politicians to be alone with their conscience, which is the foundation of secret balloting in the Senate, to allow senators to vote according to their conscience without pressure. But the fact is there is little this government will be able to do to shut down the culture of horse-trading, with or without their ordinance. Money may not have a party, but it sure has a flavour! After all, if it wasn`t for the kind of horse-trading they are seeking to shut down today, they would probably not have been able to escape the no-confidence attempt on their own Senate chairman, Sadiq Sanjrani back in August 2019.

Remember that? Sixty-four senators had voted for the resolution calling for a no-confidence vote on Sanjrani. The opposition needed 53 of these to vote against the chairman, but when the final tally came in, only 50 voted to support the no-confidence move. Thatmove was held by secret ballot, and nobody from the ruling party thought it the right moment to demand an open vote, where senators cast `identifiable` ballots. Instead, they celebrated their victory, with SAPM on Information Firdous Ashig Awan, calling it `the victory of Pakistan`s narrative`.

Today, when they are trying to advance `open and identifiable` ballots in the Senate election via a presidential ordinance, it is worth asking what has changed between then and now. Ordinarilyyou would think that the Senate, being the upper house of thelegislature,is the rightplace to bring amendments to legislation passed by the legislature itself to be debated. Why would a government seek its power from unelected forums such as the Supreme Court and the presidency to advance rules for the legislature, the very forum from where it draws its own power to rule? Whether Senate elections are held `under the Constitution` or under the Elections Act 2017 is a matter of interpreting the will of parliament when it passed the latter law. It is more than a little odd for a government to be asking the courts to interpret the will of parliament, when it can just ask parliament to do the same.

A parliamentary resolution ought to have been enough for this purpose, but they have little chance of seeing that through. The desperation behind the move first taking it to the Supreme Court then issuing the ordinance with a caveat that it is subject to the court`s decision betrays lack of confidence that the ruling party will beable to navigate the cracks in its own coalition to get the votes it needs to prevail in this contest.

Little surprise there, because where the Punjab government has officially supported open balloting before the Supreme Court, the government had to look to Chief Minister Usman Buzdar, Governor Chaudhry Sarwar and provincial assembly speaker Pervaiz Elahi to hustle up the votes from among their MPAs. The former two are hardly heavyweights of the sort required to ensure such an exercise, and Elahi`s camp has been emitting noises of discontent against the government for a while now. Can he be trusted to deliver honestly once he and his cohorts are left alone with their conscience? Seems the government lacks the confidence on this point.

Money has no party and ultimately all parties are the party of money. This is true in their political conduct, discharge of legislative duties, execution of economic policy or any other matter that needs to be greased along its way. Money drives politics the same way it drives the policies that protect rents and rackets in this country. From Senate elections to sugar rackets, from cartels to rent seeking, the role of money is inextricably tied into how the political machine articulates itself. The government isn`t seeking to exactly shut this machine down. After all, they have used it to their own advantage in countless other places, most importantly to procure the approval and applause of the country`s billionaire elite. Witness the move to distribute Rs500 million to their legislators in the run-up to the Senate elections.

Fact of the matter is if you shut down horse-trading in this country it wouldn`t be possible to assemble another king`s party of the sort that routinely pops up every other decade. So yes, let`s bring more transparency into our legislative domain, let`s remove money from the political equation, but let`s do it all the way. The present gambit is little more than an opportunistic move though, designed to help carry the moment and nothing more.  The writer is a business and economy journalist.

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