**[Too grand a dialogue](https://www.dawn.com/news/1597163/too-grand-a-dialogue)**

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The writer is a journalist.

FOR the world, the coronavirus vaccine is the solution for 2021 but, in Pakistan, the panacea we are looking for is a grand national dialogue. It’s the flavour of the month, not just in politics but also for those who like talking about it. Indeed, the webinars, which have taken over our Covid-bound lives, have found a topic more important than the economy or the new world order, post-Covid, which until recently were all the rage.

As it is a topic more easily comprehensible than the economy, I too found myself listening to one such seminar, held by Pildat, for its star cast. Surely getting retired Gen Ehsan and Fawad Hassan Fawad is a casting coup for the seminar world. Adding even more heft was Mushahid Hussain Syed, a serving senator of the PML-N.

Interestingly, all three — a retired bureaucrat and general, and a working politician — agreed to the need for such a dialogue and that it needed to adhere to the Constitution. For example, Mushahid Hussain Syed said that any dialogue could not be supra-constitutional while Fawad Hassan said that course correction would come from the Constitution. But there ended the commonalities, illustrating the vagueness of the term and idea.

No one is clear about what it will focus on or what it aims to achieve. The politician suggested free and fair elections as one possible objective or the transformation of Pakistan into a welfare state, while the former military man argued that the aim would determine the participants and how to proceed.

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More telling was the fact that for the retired general, this dialogue could take place in an NSC of sorts while for the senator only parliament could be the forum where such an initiative could begin. But it was Fawad Hassan Fawad who made the most perceptive remarks, as he focused less on the shape of this dialogue and more on how we got to the point where the state has become so dysfunctional that a dialogue is needed (his comments about the Mustafa Impex case and the 1975 presidential order should be mandatory listening even when this dialogue saga is over). In doing so, he didn’t simply moan about the imbalance in the civil-military relationship, which has become like Camilla Parker-Bowles the only villain of Diana’s fairytale, but offered a more nuanced picture. As he correctly pointed out, those showing an interest in dialogue are the ones on the receiving end and not those in power.

In the story he told, the judiciary also had some questions to answer — about its judgements but also its perceived aversion to its own accountability, eg by refusing to let its accounts be audited.

But equally importantly, he told a story of a parliament that deserves to be heard more often than it is; according to him, the relationship of the executive with the legislature is one which is more dysfunctional than the one with the military — perhaps this is what we should be focusing on rather than civil-military. The government didn’t take the legislature along and neither did the latter play the role it was supposed to, he argued.

The debate highlighted a few important points, the foremost being our obsession with finding political solutions through legal means. This why we continue to take political issues to the court and also why judges continue to give judgements on political matters. The military may have used this avenue to its advantage but politicians and to some extent even civil society have added to this trend.

These days, when it is argued that a political dialogue is needed under the constitutional framework, the same mistake is being made and a naïve solution being offered. Those asking for it are not really interested in the principles but the fact that the Constitution allows them a primacy which is denied to them in politics. To assume the other side will promise to adhere to the Constitution and we will all live happily ever after is a fairytale.

After all, if the great democrats within political parties cannot even give parliament — from where they, theoretically, draw their strength and legitimacy — its constitutional due, why do they expect an institution such as the military to do so? The references to the Constitution are political expediency, and little else. This does not mean that the law and Constitution are irrelevant; just that the parameters of dialogue need far more definition and detail than simply saying that we need to talk to ensure the Constitution is adhered to. After all, every act by the three pillars of state and others should follow the Constitution, not just a one-time ‘grand dialogue’.

Second, it is also important to note, as did Fawad Hassan Fawad, those calling for this dialogue. He says it is those who are out of favour — but even here there is a caveat. Those calling for a dialogue are the second tier of politicians. Shortly after the PPP term ended, Farhatullah Babar and Raza Rabbani asked for one and now it is Shahid Khaqan or Khawaja Asif or Fawad Chaudhry. Party heads such as Asif Ali Zardari, Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan couldn’t care less; they are only interested in an election victory (which is what they politely call a fair election) so they can ride roughshod over parliament, perhaps because it is the legislature that is at the receiving end and the constituency politicians within it. Those calling the shots in the parties are as disinterested as perhaps the Pindi wallahs.

This is why it may help to discard grand notions of a grand dialogue and focus on smaller, clearer goals, which may lead to the loftier objective of stronger institutions. Electoral reforms could be one, as could reforming the bureaucracy or addressing some pressing economic issues. Here, it may be relatively easier to get the buy-in missing in the idea of a grand dialogue. For any such dialogue has to offer a result in the interest of the participants; and an adherence to the Constitution suits few of the ‘giants’ calling the shots in our political arena.

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