**A national dialogue**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2020-10-28

IT seems as if Prime Minister Imran Khan`s container speeches are coming back to haunt him as he confronts the opposition`s onslaught. The difference is that he has little with which to defend his government`s pitiable performance. Blaming the previous administrations for everything that has gone wrong in this country doesn`t sound convincing halfway through his term.

Now he speaks of a `foreign conspiracy` the last refuge of a flailing dispensation. `It is unfortunate that all the enemies of Pakistan, including India and Israel, are with them,` the prime minister said in a recent TV interview referring to the opposition alliance. This is the typical response of a leader who is not willing to face reality.

Obstinacy is reflected in the statement that he would get Nawaz Sharif deported from the UK even if it meant talking to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. We are constantly reminded by the prime minister that he has spent a large part of his life in Britain and knows the West better than anyone else. He should then be able to display more knowledge about the British legal system. The situation will not be salvaged by making such remarks.

It is evident that the opposition`s anti-government campaign has gained momentum. The alliance seems to have capitalised on the government`s ineptitude and blunders that are never in short supply. What happened in Karachi where the entire provincial police command threatened to go on leave in protest against the alleged treatment meted out to their chief by a security agency has exposed the federal government`s transgressions.

The prime minister nonchalantly dismissed the incident as a `comedy`, when, in fact, such episodes have serious ramifications for the federation.

It`s not just about the prime minister; the crisis has also exposed the basic flaw in the existing hybrid power structure that seems to have developed cracks. The security establishment is directly under fire, with the government hiding behind it.

The Karachi saga that allegedly involved the Rangers and the top intelligence agency has also put the military leadership in a defensive position.

The army chief`s intercession may have defusedthe situation but the issue is not going to go away.

The comments made by the top leadership of the ruling party has further inflamed matters.

It remains to be seen if the army leadership takes any action against those responsible for the incident. The clash between state institutions is a serious matter and cannot be dismissed as a `comedy`. The perpetual state of tension between Sindh and the federal government is disastrous for the wholesystem.Predictably,thePakistanDemocratic Movement has upped the ante sensing the government`s ineptness. There has been a tangible escalation in the criticism against both the PTI government and the military leadership with each opposition rally. Never before has an opposition alliance brought together such a large spectrum of political forces.

There may be some variance in tone but not the broad objective of the movement. The Quetta rally presented a unique array of forces ranging from mainstream parties to regional and nationalist groups. Branding them anti-state is self-defeating.

Together, the opposition parties represent the much larger majority.

In fact, it is the government for whom the space is fast shrinking. The opposition coalition not only appears to be dominating the public space, it also has a significant presence in the provincial and federal legislatures. The government`s confrontational policy and relentless persecution of the opposition in the name of accountability have cemented that unity. The one-sided accountability exercise is nothing but a farce. The prime minister`s mantra of coalition parties being anti-state has further isolated him.

It is apparent that the survival of the hybrid dispensation is entirely dependent on the support of the security establishment. The crisis has pushed the security leadership into the storm. It is becoming increasingly clear that not only has the establishment`s project failed to deliver but that a manipulated system has also distorted the entire political system that will be extremely difficult to correct.

Given the leadership`s obstinacy and incapacity to take a rational approach, the onus flatly lies onthe alleged sponsors. It is an untenable situation. A domino effect could start from Punjab where the PTI government`s life is hanging by a thread. A more serious effort by the PML-N and the alliance partners could easily bring down the Usman Buzdar government. That may also bring a weak coalition government at the centre to an extremely precarious point.

All that could push the country towards further chaos. To stop the f all, there is a need for a national dialogue among the political forces and other institutions as suggested by many opposition leaders.

There is a growing understanding that this is the only way to prevent further instability and correct course. The country has seldom faced such serious internal and external challenges. There is a need for a new political charter and a framework for institutional democracy.

No government can deal with this situation when institutions and political forces are in a perpetual state of confrontation. The prime minister needs to climb down from his high horse and realise the gravity of the situation. His obsession with putting opposition leaders in jail makes him more vulnerable. His government has made the accountability process controversial thus weakening the legal process.

The real question is: who will take the initiative in arranging a national dialogue in such an atmosphere of hostility? Parliament has virtually become redundant with reluctance by both sides to engage in serious debate on critical issues in the country.

The prime minister has already rejected the idea of making contact with opposition leaders, let alone engaging in any serious dialogue with them.

It leaves us with very few options. Directly involving the security establishment in any political process too has its consequences. The cost of this continuing political stand-off will be huge.

What is most depressing is the lack of rational thinking that is needed to take the country out of the current crisis. The writer is an author and journalist.

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