**Democracy on ventilator**

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Imagine a plane descending precariously through exceedingly turbulent weather with every passenger on the edge of the seats. Imagine a ship caught in stormy waves, bending from one extreme to the other, struggling to navigate the way forward.

Imagine Shehbaz Sharif, lording over the outcome of a vile contrivance, feigning to be in command with no access to controls. Imagine Pakistan – a country on the verge in the hands of the Sicilian mafia and associates, fighting desperately hard to shrug off the deepening perception and effects of a conspiracy having altered its course.

In these times of imponderable eventualities, some people seem exceedingly determined to further bruise the painful gashes which have already been inflicted upon the country. Is it that seeing blood has become a favourite pastime of the orchestrators and compromised is their stock? Is it that the country has been condemned to breathe on the bloated egos of those entrenched in positions of power, in the maintenance and promotion of whose narrative the survival of the state rests?

Is there no breaking free of this stranglehold whose tentacles are digging in deeper with time, laced with ever increasing quotients of venom and spite? Is there no inhaling some whiffs of fresh air, no hearing some songs of hope? It appears that the thick layer of gloom that hangs over has blocked all remedial paths which should instead be kept open and functional.

What is this confusion about conspiracy and why is it disowned so often? Though there is no ambiguity, let’s walk the steps anyway to get some clarity. After the receipt of the cipher, a special meeting of the NSC was convened to discuss it which was attended by the top civil and military brass. The statement issued at the conclusion of this meeting read: “The Committee expressed grave concern at the communication (read: cipher), terming the language used by the foreign official (read: Donald Lu) as undiplomatic. The Committee concluded that the communication amounted to blatant interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan by the country in question (read: US) which was unacceptable under any circumstances”.

The statement went on to say that “the Committee (read: NSC) decided that Pakistan will issue a strong demarche to the country in question, both in Islamabad and in the country’s capital, through proper channel in keeping with diplomatic norms”.

The matter did not end there. In the 38th NSC meeting convened by Shehbaz Sharif on April 22, the matter (of the cipher) was deliberated again and it found a mention in the statement issued at its conclusion: “The NSC, after examining the contents of the communication (read cipher), reaffirmed the decisions of the last NSC meeting”. But, strangely, it goes on to mention that “there has been no conspiracy”.

When the 38th NSC meeting “reaffirmed the decisions of the 37th NSC meeting”, it, inter alia, also acknowledged that the communication amounted to “blatant interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan by the country in question (read: US) which was unacceptable under any circumstances”. It also owned up the decision of issuing the demarche to the US.

If there had been no conspiracy, how do we describe an act of “blatant interference” in the internal affairs of Pakistan? And what is the basis to justify issuing a “strong demarche” to the concerned country? Indeed, these are strong words followed up by robust action. What was the need for all this? Did the two NSC meetings go wrong in drawing the conclusions and then reaffirming them? Or is it that we are now trying to understate the importance of what the NSC meetings took appropriate note of?

Also, is it that while “blatant interference” had taken place (duly acknowledged in both NSC meetings), there had been no “conspiracy”? Let me raise a simple question here: how does ‘interference’ take place? Is it preceded by some discussion, some planning, formulating some strategy, and putting the dots together for proceeding further with the chartered plan? Or does ‘interference’ just drop out of the sky deserving a ‘strong demarche’ to be served to some offending country?

Let me put the matter in the right perspective. It is always ‘conspiracy’ which is hatched first that leads to ‘interference’ in the internal affairs of a country, or achieving any other objective that may be envisaged as part of the initial planning. No interference can take place without a plan or a conspiracy to do so. In that case, what is this fight about? If some egos feel bruised, or some feathers feel the heat by using the term ‘conspiracy’, even acknowledging “blatant interference in the internal affairs of the country" is no less condemnable. Merely omitting the use of the word ‘conspiracy’ does not, in any conceivable manner, lessen the gravity of the ultimate action which, in the existent parlance, has been acknowledged as “blatant interference” in Pakistan’s internal affairs by two succeeding meetings of the NSC.

The inability to recognize the real challenges is plunging us deeper into crises. We remain stuck in the past and its policies, and are reluctant to alter course to adjust to the constantly changing realities and secure a position that would insulate us from harm’s way. We remain enamoured with a romance that, if it ever were there, has been dead and buried for long, leaving behind a bitter taste which is accentuating the national malaise. This slide must stop. This frantic pursuit of phantoms, this peep into a bottomless abyss must be aborted. The past is to learn from, not to repeat its rabid mistakes.

No state can prosper without strong, credible and accountable institutions. Simultaneously, if they begin trespassing their constitutional redlines, the state would be rendered weak and wobbly. Somehow, this is what Pakistan is faced with at this juncture and all pretensions of things being right are false and fabricated. Its constitution has been consigned to the racks, its democracy is on a ventilator, its judiciary delivers no justice, and its institutions are gravely infected. The state is in dire need of an urgent course correction. The unfortunate part is that, instead of facing the stark realities, we are again espousing contrived narratives. Having failed us often in the past, the results are not likely to be any different this time around either. Gradually, the signs of a state tearing apart are becoming visible. One only lives in utter bewilderment of this grave penchant.

It is in situations like one smelling of conspiracy that Shakespeare would always come to one’s rescue. Lady Macbeth’s words are an apt reminder of the deepening paralysis around us: “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash the blood/Clean from my hand?”

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