**How to lose your mandate**

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Mandate is a sort of an authorization, given by the electorate to its representatives, to act on public issues. In functioning democracies, mandate is held sacred and violating it is tantamount to breaking a pledge or promise.

In dysfunctional democracies, it is violated at various pretexts which range from compromising for the sake of democracy itself to protecting the national interest.

In outright manipulated democracies, a mandate can be held hostage by both state and non-state actors. At times, it is also not possible to determine who actually has the mandate. For example, in Afghanistan an electoral exercise is held, a president is declared elected but nobody can be sure whose mandate he actually has. With more than half of the country out of Kabul control, the mandate is highly questionable. In India, which claims to be a functional democracy, the last elections were highly contentious as the opposition raised serious concerns at electronic machines used for counting.

In Pakistan, the people’s mandate is not only violated by manipulated elections and rigged referendums, it is also ravaged by the vagaries of venal or weak politicians. Venal, because most politicians come from an elite class that is ready to sell itself at a good price. Weak, because many who are not under the hammer of auction, end up under the hammer of heft which come from the high and mighty. The hefts of accountability, of contempt, of law etc are all exerted in varying degrees depending on the context and situation.

In one of my previous columns ‘The art of capturing the mandate’ (July 28, 2018) on these pages, I had outlined seven tricks to capture the mandate. Here we discuss the art and craft of losing the mandate using another seven steps or rather missteps. These missteps were initiated in the very first decade of Pakistan’s existence and then repeated in the ensuing decades. When Pakistan came into being, the Muslim League did apparently have a mandate to rule as the creator and founder of Pakistan. Jinnah died early and the staff of leadership fell on the then prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan who took the first missteps that paved the way for the Muslim League to lose its mandate.

To lose your mandate, the first misstep you take is that you dillydally on vital issues. At that time, the most pressing issue for the constituent assembly was to make a constitution. The main difference between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League was that Congress managed to give its electorate a secular constitution within two years, whereas as the Muslim League dillydallied for almost a decade and lost its mandate. So, the more you linger on to tackle the imperatives of your time, the more quickly you fritter away your mandate and lose the people’s support.

General Ayub Khan never had a popular mandate, but whatever little support he had he should have used to solve the problem of bridging the gap between the two wings of Pakistan. But instead he took the misstep of the One Unit system. In fact, he took one misstep after another and ultimately lost any support among the people.

General Yahya commanded respect in the beginning for his clear promise to hand over power to elected representatives after fair and free elections. His missteps were uncountable; he lost half of the country and all of the respect he had.

Second, to lose your mandate you target your opponents. Right from Liaquat Ali Khan and Z A Bhutto to Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan, nearly all targeted their opponents and started losing their own mandate. Your electorate doesn’t like it when you don’t deliver on your promises and then try to compensate for it by maligning the opposition. The opposition is the loser and you are the winner by hook or by crook, so targeting the loser doesn’t enhance your prestige, rather it tarnishes your own image as being less than magnanimous in your victory.

Third, a quicker way to squander the mandate is to mix religion with politics. Be it the introduction of the Objectives Resolution by Liaquat Ali Khan or the tacit support of Yahya Khan to certain religious parties, be it the abject surrender of Z A Bhutto to the religious right or the introduction of more religiosity in the constitution by Nawaz Sharif, these are not measures for which the people have given you the mandate. Otherwise, they would have elected the JI or JUI-F. You use religion for political purposes and your mandate slides down for sure.

The fourth path to a reduced mandate is by surrendering to the civil and military bureaucracy. Initially, the bureaucracy led by the likes of Chaudhry Muhammad Ali, Ghulam Muhammad, Iskandar Mirza, Qudratullah Shahab, Altaf Gauhar, and others literally subjugated the political leadership, and then the likes of General Ayub Khan made politics subservient to power. Leaders such as Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Suhrawardy, Tameezuddin, G M Syed, Bizenjo, Fatima Jinnah, and later such as Mahmud Ali Kasuri, Meraj Muhammad Khan, Mengal, and many others stood their ground rather than bowing to power.

The fifth misstep to your declining mandate is that you don’t do your homework. If you surround yourself only with minions and those who fawn at your doorsteps, you lose any experts or intellectuals who should form your shadow cabinet. If you don’t have shadow ministers for at least four major ministries – defence, finance, foreign affairs and interior – you are bound to get lost in the maze of bureaucracies which are more well-prepared than you. Similarly, if you don’t have well chalked-out plans for health, water, power, infrastructure, governance, and even security issues, you are bound to lose your mandate.

Sixth, you dissipate and you dissolve your mandate. You promise a million things under the sun and end up messing up all. If you are a national-level leader you should not dissipate your energies and time in matters such as visiting a 20-bed shelter home or inaugurating an underpass. You do not embark on journeys that that are bound to abort, such as claiming to mediate between a superpower and its foes; or aspiring to become an Ummah leader and then end up toeing the line of your creditor. People have not given you a mandate to dissipate but to deliver on major issues.

And finally the seventh and perhaps the worst misstep that you can take and lose your mandate is to be motivated by short-term interests. You must have some principles that override all petty politics and immediate concerns. If you believe in the supremacy of the democratic political process and the people, you must be ready to prove yourself a better civilian leader and then willing to go to any extent to defend your principle. If you believe in democracy, you must uphold all democratic principles, even if you remain out of power for the rest of your life.

Repeated missteps to gain immediate benefits or minor reliefs are inimical to democracy and to your mandate. When the leaders surrender, they cannot blame the followers. Full stop.

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