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**Not playing by the book**

Pakistan, in a collective sense, needs therapy. It is almost losing its mind, being under great emotional stress. The deviant behaviour of its leaders is just one aspect of the overall condition of our society. Tempers are running high at every level, though politics remains at the centre of the stage.

For the moment, all attention is devoted to what happened during Friday’s election for the offices of the chairman and deputy chairman of the Senate. What a great political thriller it turned out to be. However, Sadiq Sanjrani’s re-election as Senate chairman is being challenged by the opposition and this controversy is bound to generate more heat and political uncertainty.

Friday became a day of high drama after ‘spy’ cameras were discovered by members of the opposition, triggering another exchange of harsh statements from both sides. This issue did provide some relief with some funny comments on social media.

Still, it is not a laughing matter and underlines some serious concerns about how these elections are conducted. In any case, the political logic of numbers that underpins a democratic dispensation is often defied in Pakistan. A secret ballot does validate a surprising outcome when electors are believed to have voted according to their conscience. But Pakistan’s experience in this respect is rather dubious.

Anyhow, what has happened in the Senate on Friday, March 12, has its roots in what had happened in the National Assembly on Wednesday March 3. Yousaf Raza Gilani had won his Senate seat with 169 votes while his rival, Finance Minister Hafeez Sheikh, got 164 votes. Seven votes were rejected. Apart from being a major upset, it amounted, figuratively, to a vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Take a good look at how Imran Khan responded to his loss of face and you will understand why Pakistan’s politics is so utterly devoid of established principles of democracy and morality. The PTI was on a slope for some time, as its strivings for a win in the Daska by-election had certified, but now it has landed at the bottom, so to say. What a fall this has been, my countrymen.

This observation would appear to be unfair, even malicious. One problem is that when political opinion is so viciously divided, objectivity becomes a hazardous enterprise – and I admit to being partisan in some respects. However, I have always been mindful of the great hope that Imran Khan had awakened and would happily applaud his performance if it were in tandem with the promises he had made.

Honestly, this country is desperately seeking a leader who can set things right. Imran personified that ideal before he came to power. Perhaps the Faustian bargain that he had to make to win power in 2018 has effectively dented his spirit and his commitment to the values he had championed in the early years of his campaign.

As for Imran’s strategy to control the damage his government had suffered on March 3, the moves that have been made are manifestly expedient. The political environment is now so much more polluted. There were hints in the prime minister’s address to the nation on March 4 and the manner in which a vote of confidence was organised on March 6 that it is now a no-holds-barred clash with the opposition.

One telling sign of this was Information Minister Shibli Faraz’s breathless declaration in Geo’s flagship talk show, ‘Aaj Shahzeb Khanzada Kay Saath’ on Tuesday. With reference to Friday’s contest, he said: “We are ready this time. It can’t happen that we play ‘sharif, sharif’ and do everything according to law. We will do everything necessary for winning”.

It seemed to most that the point Shibli Faraz was making was that they would not now play by the book. It was a forthright statement by the official spokesman of the government. You could not say that it was a slip of tongue or a Freudian slip because he elaborated his case in some detail. One should not expect a man in his position to be flippant or careless about what he was stating to a national audience.

Some features of the PTI’s triumph – and the combined opposition’s debacle – in the Senate where the opposition has a slight majority deserve a proper analysis. Again, the rejected votes played a decisive role. There were intimations of buying and selling of votes. Interior Minister Shaikh Rasheed had said that Sadiq Sanjrani was the candidate of the government and of the ‘riyasat’.

The choice of Mirza Mohammad Afridi for the office of deputy chairman, Senate, was intriguing. He defeated Maulana Abdul Ghaffar Haideri by ten votes. However, there is no explanation as to why Imran Khan did not nominate any member of his party for either of the two prestigious positions in the Senate. After all, it is the largest party in the Senate, with some very able and loyal members.

Given the controversies that are gaining momentum, tensions in politics are bound to grow. But this is not the only reason why the country is in a heightened state of disquiet and distress. We have lived through a year of Covid-19 and its impact on our lives, including in the context of mental health, has not adequately been explored by our rulers.

The truth is that very little attention is being paid to the problems that have continued to simmer and have exacerbated in recent months. One worry is that the third wave of the pandemic is beginning to rise. Anywhere you look – and education is one area of this wilderness – you find challenges that are not being met.

If Pakistan needs therapy, who should be held responsible for taking measures to soothe its nerves and ensure that things gradually calm down? Who can inject some cheer and hope into the lives of the common citizens, who are assailed by multiple insecurities and anxieties?

One hopes that there are some among our rulers, including politicians in power, who can look beyond the dirty tricks that have subverted our democratic and moral values. Are there any vaccines for our epidemic of despair?

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