**Poverty of political discourse**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-03-15

IN Pakistan`s deeply polarised and fraught environment the tone and content of political discourse has plunged to a level not witnessed before. Political conduct may not have been polite in the past but what is being evidenced now is unprecedented.

Daily press conferences by government and opposition representatives involve bitter verbal clashes between them that increasingly assume the form of personal attacks and in language that was the exception rather than norm in the past. Today these verbal duels often involve the use of words hardly appropriate for members of parliament to exchange.

Words matter and harsh words have consequences for how politicians are perceived by the public.

Irrespective of who started this resort to intemperate language or contributed more to what has become an unedifying part of the country`s political culture, both sides government and opposition are now speaking in a manner that is unseemly and unbecoming. Political leaders are supposed to set an example by their conduct and their willingness to engage in reasoned debate. But what is on display are bitter polemics, aggressive rhetoric and unceasing efforts by political leaders to demonise their opponents. Some leaders have resisted doing this but they are notable exceptions.

Spokespersons of major parties have tried to outmatch the other in the use of invective and offensive words against political rivals. Government spokesmen have set a new record in the slurs directed virtually daily at the opposition and critics. For example, an official spokeswoman is only known for her undignified utterances.

A consequence of this unfortunate tendency is the lack of attention given to issues that are of concern to the public at large, and that af fect the country`s future. Take the example of the recent Senate elections and earlier by-elections. On closely contested seats candidates or their party leaders and representatives had little to say on public issues or how they aim to serve the public interest. Instead, the accent was on vilifying their opponent and their rival party. An entitlement mentality was also on display; an `only-we-deserve-to-be-elected` attitude without conveying what the candidatesstood for. There were few ef forts, if any, by competing parties to explain what their candidate will bring to public office. This was also evident in the election of the Senate chairman and deputy chairman. Before the poll, aspirants said little about how they saw their role in strengthening parliament or fulfilling the obligations of the office they sought.

Their sponsoring parties didn`t either. Increasingly then elections have become little more than personalised contests.

All this has generated or contributed to a form of issue-less politics, where instead of the country`s challenges and policies being debated, politics and political narratives are reduced to deriding opponents. The political discourse mostly involves an exchange of incendiary rhetoric. Shallow and provocative narratives dominate the political conversation and are heard ad nauseam in television talk shows in a wearingly repetitive manner. All too frequently parliament becomes a vehicle for such attacks rather than an arena for debate on important national issues a forum to express opinion on policy and shape opinion. This ends up devaluing parliament`s role.

The public impact of this is predictable. People -beyondloyalparty supporters-see present-day politics as just a power struggle more and more divorced from the public`s interests and concerns.

The perception that the political elite is only engaged in power games erodes respect for public representatives as well as faith in their ability to address people`s problems. Squabbling among politicalleadersisof coursenotuniquetoPakistan.

But if squabbles are all that define the discourse, with all else appearing secondary, that becomes cause for public cynicism.

Lack of attention paid to issues that people care about has another effect. People tend to switch of f from worn-out polemics so that the discourse political leaders engage in is increasingly heard just by themselves and aims only at their political base.

Audiences shrink when the same old message is repeated time and again the dakoo and chor mantra for example. But that doesn`t seem to deter leaders or spokespersons from sounding like bro-ken records and unable to understand that what the public really wants to know is how their aspirations will be met and national challenges tackled.

Public representatives have a responsibility to raise the level of discourse, and to articulate people`s concerns and how they propose to deal with them. With multiple challenges confronting the country inflation, income erosion and jobs being at the top of the public`s priorities it is these, among others, that should be the subject of political debate. The government should take the lead in this regard and try to engage the opposition especially in parliament in discussion of key issues and policy responses to the challenges Pakistan faces.

But the PTI leadership continues to demonstrate an inability to accept the notion of opposition as legitimate, casting those who oppose the government as venal, corrupt and unpatriotic. That rules out any debate and is hardly a way to raise the political game by informed and reasoned discussion of substantive issues.

Trust is a crucial element in building or maintaining public support. But uncivil exchanges between political leaders in the virtual absence of any rational debate on policy issues undermines trust in political leaders in general. Spokespersons may be pleasing their leadership and securing air time by immoderate broadsides directed against opponents but their principal emphasis on this undermines public respect for them. An IPSOS survey in December found that 77 per cent of Pakistanis felt the country was headed in the wrong direction. This is a reflection of the public`s view of the country`s leadership.

It is not just the political discourse that is degraded by excessively negative politicking and messaging. It has wider implications for the legitimacy of the political system in public eyes. If those working the system are seen to lack focus on national issues and are constantly attacking each other it also erodes faith in the country`s democracy. It is not just the political discourse that is debased. Democracy too is debased.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.