**Staring down the Barrel**

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Clint Eastwood has been the most successful actor of his generation, with a lot of accolades to his name. None more so than in the movie Dirty Harry, a phrase that is all the vogue in the vernacular media nowadays for different reasons! In the film, with an empty 44 magnum in his hand, he says to his opponent “You got to ask yourself one question, do I feel lucky? Do you punk?”

It got me thinking – considering recent turmoil if the same was asked of Pakistan, what would the answer be? “Not that much!” Why? Consider the following narrative.

The political landscape is littered with excessively partisan cliques. So much so that it has never been this acrimonious an atmosphere in the past. In one corner we have the PDM – a loosely cobbled group of people with different ideologies but the same hunger for power. In the other corner, we have the PTI – a hastily “shepherded” bunch where the majority want to be in power regardless of any principles they may or may not have to compromise. The PDM and PTI both are equally incensed at the establishment for leaving them high and dry during various trying times. In turn, the establishment is aghast at both for not toeing the line to the hilt. Three key events have exacerbated things further: the murder of Arshad Sharif, the assassination attempt on Imran Khan and the treatment of Azam Swati. All in all, politics in Pakistan is sitting on a powder keg waiting for the final spark!

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Furthermore, polarization is the only game in town when it comes to society in general and social media in particular. One cannot move an inch before encountering a heated argument between two proponents of different variations of the same truth! Alas, tolerance is very much in short supply. More and more it seems that in Pakistan it is just not enough to listen to others patiently. The order of the day is to not only agree with your counterpart but also admit that you are wrong! Where once general discourse tended to be civil and gracious, it has now become harsh and toxic – and none more so in the annals of social media! It has become a favourite pass time of many a thousand to spread half-baked ideas, semi-truths, conspiracy theories, vile accusations and unjustified gossip. This is what we have fallen to – a nation of narcissists and pseudo-intellectuals willing to malign and destroy all those who think differently from us! The media houses, given in to their notion of grandeur, haven’t fared much better. Instead of a truthful account of the ongoing situation in Pakistan, they wax lyrically about the political horse they are backing – without giving a single thought to any wrongdoings on part of their horse! The political lines are very clearly being drawn.

In addition, the economy is in a tailspin! Galloping inflation, squeezed middle and lower class, stagnant growth, meek job prospects, no developmental projects, increasing interest rates, decreasing foreign reserves – all sure shot signs of impending doom to come. On top of it, there seems to be inherent difficulty in meeting international financial obligations in the short term. One of the reasons why the IMF is dragging its heels on the next tranche of bailout money. Political instability is the other reason. The grapevine has moved on from prophesising fiscal issues to talking about default! Such a sorry state of affairs we have come to.

While we seem to think that events such as the Arab Spring or the Sri Lankan crisis have passed us by, we still may fall headlong into one or two or both scenarios if things continue in this trajectory. The question to ask is whether Sri Lanka or any of the Arab countries have been better off after the fact. The answer is not encouraging. Even after going through all the hardship, heartache and pain, these countries are yet to enjoy the fruits of the winds of change. That provides good guidance for Pakistan – removal of any system at the behest of a populist setup can promise elated aspirations but almost always never deliver!

Institutional animosity is at an all-time high. The pillars of democracy seem to be at loggerheads and open to confrontational agitation. Not a day goes by without a call for “all institutions to operate within the bounds of the constitution!” When a message has been shouted so many times from the podium, it is bound to be unheeded! Due to this chaotic nature of accountability and responsibility, the bureaucracy has restrained itself from any heavy lifting, not that it was aiming for the moon previously!

Thus, the hapless population of Pakistan is stuck between a rock and a hard place with nowhere to go. It is amazing (read: sad) that a country of 220 million is in such a predicament! Going back to our gun-related theme from the start, Pakistan is staring down the barrel!

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