**A future that may plunge us back into the past**

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The Friday Column

By Raoof Hasan

The morning this piece appears in the paper, the people of Pakistan will have gone past the stage of casting their votes in the elections and may even have gauged the drift of results in a contest which pitted patrons’ favourite against Khan who is embedded in people’s hearts like no one else has in the chequered history of Pakistan’s politics. Will the stranglehold of diktat tighten, or will the people be able to put the one they trust in the seat of power?

The very fact that candidates supported by the PTI have taken part in the elections is nothing short of a miracle. It speaks volumes of their monumental passion and resilience in the face of grave adversity. The manner in which the brutal state machinery was unleashed upon the PTI and everyone associated with it surpassed every comparable phase when dictators held sway or when their anointed stooges were in command.

By all reckoning, this would be remembered as the most barbaric use of state apparatus to systematically decimate a political party and force its adherents to change their loyalties under the threat of bayonets. That the PTI survived is a miracle, and that it took part in the elections is stuff fables are made of. And if the party also fares well at the hustings, it will deal a death knell to the vile tradition of engineering elections in favour of the anointed individuals and parties.

The conduct of this election will be a subject of intense scrutiny, nationally and internationally, because one political party was systematically targeted to force it out of the election arena. Various world organizations and media houses have taken note of this and given out their candid opinion in the matter.

The interference in the pre-election phase has attracted some scathing comments. Aljazeera has questioned the legitimacy of the election because Khan is absent from the ballot sheet and Bloomberg has noted that the youth of Pakistan is disillusioned with the electoral system. The Council on Foreign Relations has said that “Pakistan’s upcoming election this week has already turned into a farce, one that is not free or fair” and the Financial Times has opined that “if one were to have free and fair elections, Imran Khan would win by an absolute majority”.

BBC warned that “it may look like Khan has been effectively neutralised but, instead, political divisions across the country look set to deepen” while The Guardian noted that “military has put its faith in [the] former prime minister for a fourth time, leading many to believe that [the] election outcome is already decided”. Gallup believed that “seven in ten Pakistanis lack confidence in the honesty of their elections” and Rusi has opined that “this election is already hopelessly compromised”.

In a statement, the United Nations Human Rights Office has urged Pakistan to ensure free and fair elections in the country on February 8: “We deplore all acts of violence against political parties and candidates and urge the authorities to uphold the fundamental freedoms necessary for an inclusive and meaningful democratic process”.

With the canvas of criticism on the elections emanating from divergent quarters, it would be well-nigh impossible to either evade it, or present a picture of all being right. Obviously, all has neither been right, nor was it meant to be. The election process has been extremely jaundiced with hate and venom for one party and its leader overflowing ceaselessly into the national milieu. Instead of controlling the madness, more fuel has been incessantly added to help the flames burn into embers every relevant facet meant to reflect a free, fair, and inclusive process to elect the future leaders of the country.

In addition to an explicitly flawed election process leading to lack of legitimacy for the new government, there are other grave issues that the country will have to confront immediately. In the last couple of years, through the PDM and caretaker governments, the economic and strategic outlook has haemorrhaged which is now being helped to survive on respirator. Forget about taking tough decisions to get things back on course, it will not even be able to continue breathing in this state.

A different kind of challenge is likely to emerge in the post-election scenario. With state patronage showered lavishly on one party and its leader, who has been washed clean of a myriad crime in a matter of days, the choice of the power-wielders is not a mystery any longer. But it is also no secret that the chosen one does not command the people’s trust and would be a burden on the forces which manoeuvre to bring him into power. In fact, such an exercise is bound to boomerang badly and inflict irreparable damage upon the state and its interests.

What is also worrisome is that such ramshackle concoction will come heavily loaded with an unbearable baggage of dependency on sustaining support from the US which, like in the past, will be conditional on Pakistan fulfilling the relevant conditionalities in the context of policy formulation and implementation including, but not limited to, its relations with China, India and, most likely, Israel. This would require a major shift from its current approach which could generate deadly consequences. While every sane ruler would outright banish such a thought from further speculation, the government we are talking about will be duty-bound to make the changes as dictated by our traditional master.

In the context of the current challenging circumstances, what is needed is a government that comes with a genuine people’s mandate secured through a free and fair election process. Only such a government will be laced with power, courage, and legitimacy to take tough decisions and only such a government will be able to pull through those decisions with overwhelming support of the people. There are no options that one can play around with as, with elections already over, time would assume critical relevance in the decision-making process.

While there will always be nay-sayers, it is an irrefutable fact that, at the current juncture, only Imran Khan commands the trust of the people. He is also the one who has the ability to pilot the country through turbulent times with assurance and foresight. It is time to bury the hatchet of hate. It is time to think of how precariously the country is perched on the brink.

Pakistan can be pulled back only with the power of sanity, not the venom of exclusion. Let it be a future that does not plunge us back into the past.

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