**A shameful chapter indeed**

Friday, Aug 11, 2023

By Raoof Hasan

By the time this piece appears in the press, the most dishonourable bunch ever in the history of Pakistan, led by that inveterate pretender to the top office, would have packed their bags and retreated in the hope that they would soon be back to replicate their shameful performance.

They think so because the country’s history is replete with such craven instances when leaders kicked out once have been solicited and accepted by virtue of a cleverly contrived mechanism.

Imran Khan is an exception to the rule as he will neither leave the country to safer sojourns and facilitate his return or compromise the enshrining principles of his ideology that he is convinced would bring relief to the state and the people who, for an eternity, have languished in the dungeons of darkness with no trace of light showing through. Their personal lot has continued to deteriorate as circumstances have become harder to endure and life a backbreaking burden to carry.

Countless are the reasons for which my head is bowed in utter shame. The manner the criminal conglomerate made a mockery of parliament has no parallel even in the chequered history of this beleaguered country. Its floor was used wantonly to adopt legislation and enact, amend and alter laws, rules and regulations for two principal reasons: to secure themselves reprieve from countless brazen robberies they have committed over time, and deprive the weak and enfeebled people of their constitutional and legal rights through draconian indulgences.

In the process, they muzzled the media to ensure that no contrarian view is broadcast, and no one given space to critique the government. This has gravely dented the democratic identity of the country and created doubts whether it would ever regain a moral and constitutional base, or henceforth remain at the mercy of powerful forces to deal with it as may please their fanciful whims. So immense is the grossness of the past sixteen months that it would be impossible to encapsulate it in a few lines. Volumes would be required to capture the salient contours of the tragedy that has befallen Pakistan.

For example, lowest ever GDP growth rate of -0.5 per cent, down from 6.1 per cent when the PTI government was removed. Negative growth in manufacturing and agriculture. Record unemployment in 75 years: 8.5 per cent against 6.2 per cent during the PTI government with over two million people unemployed. Annual inflation recorded at its highest ever: 38 per cent against 12.2 per cent during the PTI government.

More contours include: highest ever interest rate at 22 per cent. Lowest credit rating since 1994. One of the worst rupee depreciation phases ever recorded: over Rs105 lost against the dollar during their 460 days in government. Additional debt of over Rs20 trillion accumulated during a span of 16 months against Rs18.3 trillion by the PTI in 40 months. Highest fiscal deficit in absolute term of Rs6,400 billion posted by any government.

Further: tax targets for 2022-23 missed by a massive margin despite 40 per cent devaluation in a single year. Remittances decreased to $27 billion from $31.3 billion during the PTI government. Exports dipped to $27.7 billion against $31.7 billion during the PTI government. Despite major increases in electricity tariffs, circular debt increased – as did loadshedding.

In terms of policy formulation, a few harrowing failures, some of which were also identified by the IMF, include the following: undue intervention and manipulation of official exchange rate, thus increasing the difference between the interbank and the kerb rate. Ban on imports to manage balance of payment, triggering smuggling of goods and foreign currency. Policy reversal on major tax initiatives such as broadening of tax base and track and trace system. Crony appointments on key government positions and a huge cabinet with no control over expenditures. Reversal of targeted digital services, withdrawal of Sehat Card, Kamyab and Naya Pakistan Housing schemes. Closure of Langar Khanas and Ehsaas Rashan programmes.

This is just a brief narration of the deadly carnage the government inflicted upon a hapless people. Each day that this bunch stayed in power increased their suffering and brought more misery in their lives. Their very existence stands jeopardized. With the government not able to generate any direction, the future looks bleak and completely devoid of hope.

That takes one back to April 2022 and the reason why the PTI government was removed, though it had steered the country successfully through one of the deadliest pandemics that ever struck the world, putting it well on course to progress having achieved a GDP growth rate exceeding 6.0 per cent. All projections promised better days ahead.

Even more importantly, Pakistan was beginning to be recognized, regionally and internationally, for its potential, promise and a leader who was steering it ably with a conviction to ameliorate the sufferings of the weak and the enfeebled sections of society through policies which would be to the advantage of national interests.

It is not really a mystery why the country was stripped of that promise and brought down from a pedestal marked by a stellar performance and brutally subjected to a spate of unprecedented repression. There has not been a day since when people could heave a sigh of relief. On top of that, they have been cruelly deprived of their legitimate constitutional right to raise their voice against the degrading treatment meted out to them, thus pushing them to the fringe of life. Their survival and that of their families has been rendered impossible. The slide has been monumental.

Here we stand at the crossroads again. As this criminal chapter draws to a close, the priority for the caretaker government should be to hold elections within the constitutionally stipulated period of 90 days. But, mortally afraid of the prospect of a thrashing at the hustings at the hands of Imran Khan and the PTI, deceitful webs are being woven to have them postponed indefinitely under one plea or the other, be it the economy, or census, or some other concoction.

The sinister plan is to let the caretaker government continue till such time they are assured that the Imran Khan factor has been taken care of. True to his prediction, Khan has become an even bigger threat from prison as is evidenced by the recent local bodies results from Peshawar and Havelian.

It is time for the perpetrators to break this deadly mental logjam and face reality. Elections must be held without any delay, and people allowed to bring in a government of their choice. Tampering with their cardinal right or the results of the elections would spell disaster for the country and plunge it into an irremediable crisis. It is time to pay heed. Let reason and sanity dictate the future.

The writer is the information secretary of the PTI, and a

fellow at King’s College London. He tweets @RaoofHasan