**Cometh the day, cometh the hour**

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As time crawls to February 8, the date the ECP has designated for holding the next general elections in the country, the related uncertainties are multiplying at an excruciating pace.

This is also reflected by the delay in allotting an election symbol to the PTI – decidedly the largest political party of the country with federal standing. Instead of facilitating the process within the ambit of the law, hurdles are being deliberately created to delay, even block it.

This approach fits in with the overall strategy of the incumbent power wielders to ensure the PTI’s ouster from the forthcoming elections. This is not just confined to the circus which is taking place. It goes well beyond that and encompasses blatant denial of space to the party, even abducting its potential candidates for the purpose of forcibly changing their political loyalties. Despite grant of bails multiple times, hundreds of its leaders and workers remain incarcerated throughout the country, thus creating even further uncertainties whether the party will be allowed to participate in the electoral race.

The tradition of banning or forcibly sidelining parties is not new in the political culture of a country which has forever been on the brink of becoming a democratic polity, but never quite realized the dream. This back-and-forth movement has inflicted immeasurable damage upon it, keeping it away from realizing its full potential and becoming a vibrant and progressive country with a standing in the international comity of nations. Instead, over time, it has become a target of caustic jokes, provoking laughter, and derision. Even worse, we have been given up by most as a hopeless symptom of a deep-set malfunction.

The inevitable cannot be put off. In the end, what will be will be. But there is one thing we can do: as a country with pretensions of being independent and a population of 250 million people, we can conduct a transparent democratic process for garnering unity and homogeneity to replace the existing gloom that hangs over every facet of life. This is not without reason. It can be traced back to a long history of how the rights of the people have been usurped, how their dreams have been shattered, and how the potential of the state irremediably haemorrhaged by a criminal tribe of plunderers who went about their demolition job mercilessly.

The tragedy is that the same people are being brought back to hoist them in seats of power to set up their criminal enterprise again. And the path that is being levelled for the purpose is by either rigging the elections wholesomely, or not holding them altogether. The sinister argument that is finding increasing currency is that if unconstitutional and illegal governments can survive for over eighteen months without as much as a whimper from state institutions, they can go on into an indefinite future. In other words, the entire constitutional and legal edifice of the state is being pulled down to make space for the tribe of criminals to take over. The dastardly manner they ravaged the country through their past tenures at the top and where they are likely to take it if inducted into power again is a matter that does not concern the power wielders.

To make the insidious exercise palatable, dacoits and plunderers are being presented covered in decent attire to hide their spots and convicts and absconders put before people sheathed in lion skin. Will this hideous exercise succeed? Given the past criminal record of these tribes and the massive awareness that Khan has generated among the people, there is not the remotest possibility. The Sharifs, Zardaris, and their allied interests are perceived as deadly ulcers for the country and its people, and, by all projections, they stand no chance at the hustings.

What baffles me personally is that, keeping the utter unconstitutionality and illegality of the exercise aside for the moment, if a compulsive need was felt for bringing in fresh leadership, couldn’t the power wielders locate some decent prospects among the 250 million people who live here? Why were they not able to look beyond the gang of criminals who have ravaged the country multiple times in the past? An answer to this riddle would make for a perfect plot of an intriguing fictional undertaking in the future.

But, for now, the project comes with damning consequences for the state. On the one hand, it is teetering on the verge of economic collapse with little to no prospect of any improvement in the near future and, on the other hand, the political crisis is intensifying further in the context of uncertainty surrounding the holding of a free, fair and inclusive election process which must be preceded by provision of a level playing field to all contestants including the PTI. Going by the happenings of the past few months, that does not appear to be the plan as all the state guns are pointed in the direction of the party’s leaders and workers who are being picked up with alarming regularity.

As a nation, we are quick to point fingers at others, but never quite inward at our own conduct. This has given rise to creating a false victim syndrome. But those incensed with power are least concerned about something being right or wrong since, for them, the two merge when it comes to securing their myopic interests. Even a prolonged unconstitutional and illegal governance structure does not cause a ripple for them to think afresh and contemplate a change in their strategy and approach. Pakistan looks like a humongous juggernaut hurtling downhill at an alarming speed with no one concerned about the massive destruction that it has already caused and whether it would ever come to rest at some stage.

Irrespective of our projections and plans, time will not stop. It moves on at its own pace with little concern about who it is affecting and how. It has no gender, colour, creed, or caste. It has no favourites or adversaries. It operates with clinical precision. One is reminded of King Lear: “I’ th’ last night’s storm, I such a fellow saw,/ Which made me think a man a worm.”

Or Faiz Sahib’s eternal longing: “How long the expectant eye/ Shall carve images,/ That somewhere in the desert of pain/ May appear the silhouette of my enchantress.”

Cometh the day, cometh the hour, a lot will be at stake. One will see how the nation’s fate is dealt with and how a future is carved for it to tread. In this age and time, it makes for a sorry spectacle.

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