**Fear looms as time crawls**

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By Raoof Hasan

“Fear is static that prevents me from hearing myself” – Samuel Butler. Through decades, a general perception had taken roots that we were but insignificant specks caught up in the whirlwind of times. It appeared that, amidst a feeling of fear that was always looming, time barely crawled. There was an intensity of challenges hovering above which could descend without warning, enveloping us in their enormity without leaving any space to move away.

One’s existence in the universe is, indeed, a phenomenon over which one has little control, but there are aspects of life we can influence substantially to be moulded in a certain way and guided in a certain direction. What possibly happened is that, owing to the way various factors impacting our lives had been manipulated, we had forfeited that right and allowed ourselves to adrift the cruel currents of time and circumstances. Where they would have carried us is a factor that influenced us little as we were resigned to accepting whatever may befall us as a token of fate.

With a close nexus having been nurtured between brutal dictatorships, fabricated and controlled democracies and a vast web of corruption and crime, an environment of fear had been generated to keep people subdued lest they start clamouring for their rights. This was fully aided and abetted by a process of liquidation of state institutions leading to, among scores of other handicaps, complete absence of accountability and provision of justice. Then, sell-outs were also instrumental in spreading the germs of despondency through societal echelons to further perpetuate a feeling of helplessness. This environment was completely denuded of morality and gravely impacted by rapid spread of crime. This is what the people of the country have been subjected to for most of their lives.

But the debate raged on: is this the state that we should accept as our fate or, despite numerous constraints, should we still raise our voice for grant of our rights as envisioned and guaranteed in the statue book so that we could climb out of this den of servility, restore our dignity and start living a life that would provision opportunities for moving towards better times? As conflicts and societal contradictions multiplied, this debate continued becoming intense, pulling in people from multifarious backgrounds who suffered from a variety of impairments which needed remedy.

First, it was a muted call for justice which, when sparked, turned into a crescendo as the demons of fear were buried and people found the power of their voice to speak out. They gathered in the hundreds of thousands to chant the hymns of freedom and break the chains of slavery. Then more people came in, raising the intensity of protest further as the mighty and the powerful began taking notice of what they had never experienced before. They started fearing the spectacle that was out day after day, gaining ever more power and resonance with the passage of time.

This is when they thought of putting their hidden weapons to use. Rights activists, fearless journalists, media outlets, political adversaries and discordant voices from within were all targeted. Some suffered the humiliation of being stripped and punished, some were incarcerated, some were subjected to brutal and barbaric custodial torture, while some had to pay with their lives for speaking the truth. The pretensions of democracy lay in tatters as countless fake cases were registered with abandon.

There is a phrase that I used in one of my previous articles: being on perpetual crossroads. Well, that is exactly what Pakistan has experienced without interruption and that is where it has been placed through this latest spate of controlled democratic interventions – 2008 to the present. Despite mammoth crowds and vociferous chants for freedom and restoration of dignity, the shadows lurking in the dark are unwilling to give up on their steps. There is little willingness to let people define their fate and their future through exercise of their free will. This is primarily because they are afraid lest honest people with character are inducted into the corridors of power and correct the direction the state should take. They see a depletion of a political role in such a case and are, therefore, reluctant to let go. So, the crisis intensifies.

This is not just about holding early elections. It is about holding free and fair elections which the people who are patronised stand no chance of winning. Consequently, the need for managing the next elections, whenever they are held, does not subside. In fact, with the crowds surging to the support of their nemesis, the likelihood of manipulation of the outcome becomes increasingly probable. This would not only plunge the country into an electoral chaos, but it may also bring mammoth crowds on the roads in protest against the denial of their will and their right to elect leaders of their choice.

Someone asked me a few days ago how this stalemate could be resolved. My response was that there comes a time in the history of nations when some battles must be fought. Pakistan and its people are faced with such a battle at this juncture – a battle that would redraw the line between right and wrong, establish the supremacy of law and ensure that, notwithstanding the pelf they may have accumulated or the power they may wield, everyone is held equal before it. This is a herculean challenge which may precipitate the crisis of being perpetually at the crossroads, but this battle has to be fought and won.

With fear looming and time crawling, we should move quickly towards holding free and fair elections in the country with no interference from any quarters, no matter how powerful. The people deserve a break and there could be no better way than affording them an opportunity to decide their fate through casting their vote.

The writer is a political and security strategist and the founder of the Regional Peace Institute in Islamabad. He tweets @RaoofHasan