**Masters of Can-Kicking**

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Elections have come and gone but their remnants can still be felt like aftershocks of a 7.5 magnitude earthquake. Amidst it all – the high and mighty of Pakistani politics fight it out, sitting in an arena which mostly resembles a WWE ring, with all its fakery and downright lunacy. And what about the ever-burdened population? They are as dumbfounded as generations before them – the power of their vote seemingly eroding under the heavy influence of the power of the note! But not to worry dear reader, time teaches everyone and heals all wounds. The voters in this election cycle – particularly of the younger variety – will also learn that a Pakistani election is like a Pakistani wedding. A disordered and chaotic affair that leaves some happy, some sad, and some angry but almost everyone is truly exhausted and several unsatisfied. They will also realise, slowly and grudgingly, that their problems once in vogue before the elections are now resigned to the dustbin of history just as a fading starlet is ignored by the paparazzi. The lovable election candidate from their constituency who could talk to them for hours is now nowhere to be seen just as natural gas is nowhere to be seen in the dead of winter. Above all – the following reality will slowly dawn upon this idealistic set of voters: in the grand farce that is Pakistani politics, the art of kicking the can down the road reigns supreme! Whether it is the seasoned politician or the novice legislator, both are adept at the art of the perpetual punt, the mischievous manoeuvring, the decadent delaying. They do this with the grace of an operatic ballerina that will leave even the most graceful of operatic ballerinas dumbstruck!

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Winners – by which imagination I wonder? – are not interested in electoral reforms or the sanctity of the vote. The losers are not interested in the winners but only in the reams and reams of form 45s which they claim lays bare their case of victory. The shoe is on the other foot this election cycle! Yesterday’s winners are today’s losers and just like them, today’s winners want to first sit down, accept the results and only then talk about processual changes in electoral politics in the future. The proverbial can get a good kicking from the get-go!

Necessities don’t fare that well either.

The energy crisis is an ever-pleasing election slogan. All politicians thunder about curtailing the energy crisis and reigning in the ‘jinn’ of electricity and gas but fall flat on their faces in their first outing as elected leaders. No electricity in summers and no gas in winters allows the blame game to start. Previous administrations are held responsible, years of neglect and mismanagement are mentioned and the evil of circular debt is whispered. So desperate is the situation that these erstwhile leaders start backing wild theories such as cars driven by water! Remember that anyone? On the election trail the skyrocketing cost of fuel is ridiculed but when in power the cost of the same fuel is pushed further up with a shrug of the shoulders and a nod & wink to the IMF. “Give us ten more years and we will turn this country around!”, that is the common refrain. The can dented a bit more and pushed further down the road.

Another domain where can-kicking takes the plaudits is education. While in opposition, everyone cries about the failure of the current system and the dichotomy between the syllabus for the rich and the syllabus for the poor. “Do something about it”, they clamour! When in government, the same geniuses pass around educational reform like a hot potato – there is no funding, the school mafia is all-powerful, the curriculum can’t be regularised, and the private sector is to be blamed. All the while, the burgeoning can of an illiterate youth waits as a landmine for the next administration.

Visit any service hospital in the country and one can see humans and diseases co-existing peacefully. Nay, lying in the same bed! Why? because the number of beds is as in abundance as the number of hair on a balding politician looking for his umpteenth entry into parliament. The state of such government-run institutions is so erratic that even Corona fears to tread these hallow halls. Equipment is either non-existent or keeps on malfunctioning, just like a diva’s wardrobe at that critical juncture. The older doctors are as old as the Great Pyramid of Giza and the younger ones as overworked and as stepped over as the Mall in Murree! The politicians keep up with their partisan bile – the facilities are obsolete, the coffers are bare, why do people get sick in the first place, and why are there so many people anyway, who mistook my order for a grande latte? You know, the important stuff in life! Meanwhile, the can – along with the hopes of the sick and the downtrodden – gets an even mightier kick down the road.

Next, infrastructure – that darling of political promises but never the darling of a smooth delivery. If potholes, broken tarmac and stolen rail tracks deserved monuments, we would have thousands. Any amount of rain, any natural event for that matter, exposes the poor infrastructure just as low tide exposes the garbage, empty bottles and hazardous material on Clifton Beach! Ignoring all this, the perennial politician still holds groundbreaking with great fanfare. Not for one or two but for many such extravagant projects that fit the incoming government’s ‘vision’ (read: vision). All the time, knowing that many an excuse lies in wait when these works will not come to fruition. Incomplete funding, inept bureaucracy, powerful interests at play, and the previous regime at fault. At the same time, the can awaits the next budget cycle and the commuters await a miracle!

For us, it seems there are a lot of cans kicked down the road. The logical question is, where do they all end up? I envision something like this. A wily old politician with a handle-bar moustache lamenting about how he was not allowed to perform in his last six terms in parliament and that’s why all the cans had to be kicked down the road. One interested youth shouts “Where do they all end up?”. The shrewd legislator steps to the side and opens a small cupboard “This is where we hold all these cans for you. These are your hopes and dreams but you are too innocent to worry about these for now. Trust us, we will make sure that they are left under lock and key until you grow up and when you are ready, we will give them to you”.

One can’t help but marvel at the political contortionists and their permanent inertia on display. If this were to become an Olympic event, our leaders would bring home gold every time! Yet, the people are filled with optimism that one day all these cans will be dealt with. But until we bathe in the light from that magnificent day, the rhythmic can-kicking ballet will continue, the never-ending nuisance will endure, the amusement will linger and Pakistanis will keep their front-row seat to this political pantomime.

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