**Trading electables**

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Political activities will heat up in the wake of the announcement of the national elections by the electoral watchdog. One of the ubiquitous activities in the run-up to every national election is change of loyalties, with the fortune-hunters leaving one party and joining another, depending on which way the wind is blowing. This change of political affiliations is a key, and often unmistakable, indicator of which party will triumph in the parliamentary polls.

“At present, the horses are free to graze”. That’s how the then president Ghulam Ishaq Khan, who had earlier fired the then PM Benazir Bhutto, played down the allegations that politicians were being forced to shift loyalties during the run-up to the 1990 national elections. In those elections, Bhutto’s PPP was swept aside by the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI), paving the way for Nawaz Sharif’s first stint as prime minister.

Three years later, in a reversal of fortunes, it was the PPP which became the destination for the bounty-seekers, and Benazir Bhutto went on to hold the country’s highest political office for the second and last time. While we may find fault with our politicians here and there, we at the very least need to give them the credit for their sagacity.

As a rule, every political party comprises three types of members. The first type comprises diehard members, who remain committed to it, come rain or shine. Even if they don’t see eye to eye with the leadership on some matters, or have some lingering personal grievances, they will not quit. They sink or swim with the party. Their commitment to the party is irrevocable.

The second category consists of politicians who had a long association with the party and didn’t leave it in the lurch when the chips were down for the top leadership. However, they may part ways with the party either when they feel they are being passed over or when they can’t agree with the party position on some ‘vital’ issues. Their decision to leave the party is principled.

The third type is an opportunist to the bone. They worm their way into a party when the cards are stacked in its favour, piggyback on the greener pastures that it promises, and make the leadership believe that their sincerity with the party is impeccable. However, the moment they feel the party is up the creek, they won’t hesitate one whit in abandoning it and jumping on the bandwagon of another.

It’s this category which is in the news before every election. Traditionally, this category has mainly comprised the electable: the politicians who have the proven ability to lure a big chunk of voters in their home constituencies, because of biradari, capital or land, or family loyalties.

In recent years, another breed of politicians has sprung up. Their core competence consists in the ability and the willingness to do a hatchet job for their political masters of the day. With a bad mouth or a sharp tongue, they can speak with a sense of no-holds barred, wade into the character of any lady or gentleman without mincing words, and demonstrate that politics can be a terribly squalid affair. While they may not matter much in constituency politics, they are extremely effective in TV talk shows and social media warfare. Hence, their utility is less local and more national.

For their part, the political parties have an open-door policy for both the electables and those we can call bad-mouths. Principles, ideologies and narratives aside, in an electoral battle its constituency politics that in the end tips the scales in favour of or against a party. Hence, a party that closes its doors on an influential politician will do so only at its own peril. As for the bad-mouths, it’s wiser to draw upon their skills than face their wrath in an era when perception is reality and toxicity is truth.

For both parties and individuals, indulging in a change of loyalties is rational behaviour, as the costs of remaining in a party whose fortune is seen to be going downhill, or for that matter refusing admission to an electable or a bad-mouth, outweigh any benefits that may be drawn from sticking to principles. It also ensures that the bulk of the scarce electoral resources are appropriated by the party that is better placed than others to win the electoral race, thus racking up its prospects.

Far from being a struggle between good and evil, politics is a scramble for power and a show of strength. If a political party is to capture power, it must finish first in the electoral race; and in order to do so, it needs to field the candidates who have a sizable vote bank – the electable. Elections, more than anything else, are a test of the political and mercenary prowess of the candidates to manipulate their outcome.

At the other end of the scale, such acts of gerrymandering leave the parties which face defections worse off. The resultant allegations of foul play cast a pall over the political horizon, and the system’s credibility comes under question. In a reversal of fortunes, today’s beneficiary may find itself at the receiving end at the end of the next election cycle.

In the run-up to the 2018 elections, the party for which most of the electables and bad-mouths in Punjab, the province where electoral fortunes are made or lost, made a beeline was the PTI. As the PML-N was fending off cases against its top leadership and the PPP was in disarray, the PTI seemed to be the promising land for the turncoats. And it actually went on to win the polls.

Five years down the road, the PTI is in shambles. Most of the electables who had joined the party with vows of unflinching commitment left as the sun began to descend over its horizon. Some of them have retired from politics – though by all accounts politics is not a concern in which one has to hang up one’s boots – while others have turned towards greener pastures. That is the downside of relying on the electable, whose support is at best ephemeral. As for the bad-mouths, they will continue to blaze their guns. Only the direction in which they spew their fire and fury will change.

In all, horse grazing will continue, as it makes a lot of sense for both the individual and political parties. The latter aren’t against this practice in principle. They oppose it when they stand to lose by it and encourage it when they stand to gain by it. The power of the opportunists, like that of wealth, is welcomed whenever it works to one’s advantage.

Coming to the current scenario, we all can feel which way the wind is blowing. So, in the coming weeks, we’ll see the electables joining one particular party in droves with the same old pledges of lifetime commitment. All the stakeholders know well that such promises aren’t meant to be kept. The important thing is that the horse grazing will set off a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the party which is presumed to win the elections will actually bag the largest number of seats. And that’s what really matters in the end. All else is wit and gossip.

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