**What does Daska denote?**

BY FA H D H U S A I N 2021-02-27

THERE is an audible sigh of relief from the PMLN. After being pummelled persistently by the ungloved hand of the PTI government, and bludgeoned by the mailed fist of the establishment, the party finally has a victory on its hands.

Hail to the chief.

The chief in question the election commission one has delivered a thunderbolt and the unsuspecting PTI is reeling from the impact. If the ECP had a multiple choice option for what to do with the NA-75 Daska election, it chose `All of the above`: repoll in the entire constituency, removal of key police and administration officials, charge-sheeting of its presiding officers, and summoning in person the IG police and chief secretary of Punjab.

NA-75 will now see, on March 18, the mostwatched, most-monitored, most-scrutinised, mostpoliced and most-at-stake election in recent memory. The intense controversy and protracted media coverage has already made stars of the two contestants, Nosheen Iftikhar of the PML-N and the PTI`s Ali Asjad Malhi.

For Daska, this means a good solid election leading to an undisputed winner. But what does it mean for Pakistan? We can try connect all the dots ECP verdict, the Supreme Court judgement, Senate polls, Hafeez Sheikh-Yousaf Raza Gilani contest, long march and this could weave a colorful political tapestry, but Daska denotes something deeper; something more substantive with an element of immediacy attached to it.

Done right, Daska or what it denotes can deliver the dividends for a disputed electoral system.

The most shocking thing that happened in Daska was, perhaps, the shock itself. After all, this is what electioneering was all about. The heavy hand of the administration followed by the light hand of the election commission all had seen it, done it, lived it and expected it. There was however a new twist to the shock, and the PTI should have expected it.

Twist 1: everyone expected such electoral gerrymandering under the previous governments, but this was PTI in power, fuelled to the top by its anti-rigging crusade in the previous term. Whatever happened in the 2018 elections, the PTI was not in power. In Daska, the PTI`s Usman Buzdar government was directly involved in ensuring everything went right. It did not. Hence, the shock.

Twist 2: everyone expected the election commission to take the path of least resistance, which in this case could have meant ordering a re-poll on the 20-odd disputed polling stations, and leaving it at that. Instead, it swung Mighty Thor`s hammer. What explains this? Perhaps the absolute brazenness of the act that led to the vanishing of the election commission staff; perhaps the devil-may-care attitude ofthe IG and chief secretary when the chief election commissioner tried to contact them; perhaps the insulting way in which the Punjab government took the ECP and its chief for granted; or perhaps all of the above whatever it was, it just smashed the ECP`s threshold of restraint. Hence, the shock.

What good is a shock, though, if it does not lead to corrective action? Daska has denoted the depth of electoral manipulation in our system. It is almost like a state-reflex, a muscle memory so ingrained inside the politicised of ficialdom that all it requires is one nod from the concerned quarter and the police and administrative machinery guns into life. The proverbial rot in the system? Yes ladies and gentlemen, this is it, right here, a system unhinged from rules, laws and values. The poison seeps deep inside, and goes way up, as evidenced clearly in the Daska debacle. PTI wanted to reform the system. This is the reform that was required, and this is the reform that has not been done will not be done because it requires surgery that no one has the spine, or the skill, to conduct.Is it too late? The deep systemic reform is off the table. But the essential, basic, fundamental reform that can enable us to make the next local bodies and general elections credible can still be done. The election commission has illustrated its intent to flex its constitutional muscles. Parliament however needs to take up the electoral reforms package and accord it the highest priority. It doesn`t matter at this stage who is responsible for the delay all are what matters is that treasury and opposition benchesin the National Assembly and Senate display the kind of cooperative working relationship they just practisedin the Punjab Assembly to get their senators elected unopposed.

With the consensus legislation, and an alert and muscular election commission, there are bright prospects that we can at least have the fundamentals of a free and fair election worked out. If the parties are unable to get this done, every election will run the risk of turning into a Daska and generating an instant crisis. But this would only be the start.

The real challenge is how to get electoral rigging out of our moral DNA. Only then will it seep out of our political and official DNA. This is why the chief election commissioner`s decisive action on Daska is so significant. It sends, af ter ages, a strong and decisive message that if someone tampers with the electoral process, there will be consequences. The election commission must now institutionalise this message instead of making it a one-off warning for a one-off constituency. The momentum of Daska must not be lost on the expedient streets of Islamabad.

It is the collective angst of the Pakistani citizenry that it gets excited with little/big things like the Daska verdict, knowing in our hearts of hearts that the system eats its own, churns on its own and reverts to default at the first opportunity. Even when resistance is strong, resistance to change is stronger. And yet, we pine for the impossible and hope for the improbable. Daska has shown that even this broken system can produce something of value.

Question is, can we hold on to it?  The writer is Dawn`s resident editor in Islamabad.

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