[Shahrukh Nawaz Raja](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/shahrukh-nawaz-raja)

March 30, 2021

**Morality vs expediency**

Since ancient times, philosophers, theorists, and political scientists have pondered over the interplay between politics and morality.

What complicates the debate are diverse notions of fundamental concepts: the right and the good; justice and equality; individual liberty and public interest. Divisions also abound about whether politics should be held to a higher moral standard or if pragmatic considerations and realpolitik reign supreme. Perhaps the two poles are represented most distinctly by Aristotle and Machiavelli.

For Aristotle, the most appropriate aim of politics is moral virtue: “politics takes the greatest care in making citizens to be of a certain sort; namely good and capable of noble actions”. According to this line of reasoning, the politician’s task is not just to draft legislation and maintain institutions, but also to create a system of moral education for its citizenry.

In marked contrast, Machiavelli exalted pragmatism over morality; according primacy to the maintenance of power over the pursuit of justice. He believed that in order to maintain the state, a prince cannot uphold all the virtues of men. The prince would be obliged “to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion” to ensure that the interests of the state remain supreme.

Our political and extra-political classes are littered with examples of Machiavellis masquerading as Aristotles. Many in government carry the additional honour of selectively feigning moral outrage. For four years, the PTI held the country hostage as it decried the results of the 2013 general elections, without providing indictable proof. After the 2018 elections – which many, including independent EU observers, consider as being among are alleged to be supremely tainted – the PTI’s government in-waiting brushed all accusations aside.

The recent by-polls in Daska provided another glimpse of electoral malfeasance, with polling agents vanishing into the foggy plains of Punjab, only to reappear the following morning with ballot boxes stuffed with an alarmingly high percentage of votes for the ruling party. The Election Commission, which until this point had been lauded by the PTI for its putative neutrality, began to be vilified by the same party for daring to declare the results void and calling for a re-poll in the constituency.

Hafeez Sheikh’s loss in the Senate elections further inflamed the government, PM Imran Khan making a rare appearance in the National Assembly only to disparage the ECP. Subsequently, in an unprecedented move, his cabinet members demanded the entire Commission’s resignation in a press conference. For all its tall claims about being a democratic party that allows all state institutions to function independently, the PTI is unabashedly authoritarian.

Under the present government, institutions are only considered to be neutral and independent as long as they work in its favour. The moment they begin to exercise their constitutionally defined authority, they are denigrated for being in cahoots with a villainous and corrupt opposition. The ECP was only considered impartial as long as electoral results favoured the PTI and proceedings on its protracted foreign funding case progressed at a snail’s pace. Its recent acts are deemed to be too defiant for a party grown used to having things done its way.

This ire is not just reserved for state institutions. It extends to members of parliament too, who are acclaimed for voting according to their conscience when Sadiq Sanjrani wins a vote of no-confidence in a Senate dominated by the Opposition, and then denounced for indulging in vote-selling when the finance minister loses a swing election by seven votes. Following this tirade, one expected such unscrupulous individuals to be exposed and made an example of, but then that would have precluded any chances of Khan winning his vote of confidence from parliament.

Pleas for introducing transparency were also set aside once voting for the Senate chair and vice-chair came around, as Sanjrani managed to retain his seat despite not possessing the requisite numerical strength. Paraphrasing Moira Rose, it’s a good thing the PTI doesn’t suffer from vertigo, given the dizzying heights of the moral high ground it claims on every issue.

The opposition too, has not been immune from burnishing its moral credentials only to falter in testing times. For all its bluster about eliminating the influence of extra-constitutional forces from politics, the PPP was at the forefront of ensuring Sanjrani’s win in 2018. Both the PPP and PML-N were also quick to assist the government in passing some other legislation. Through all these examples, Lenin’s timeless maxim stands true: there are no morals in politics; there is only expedience.

Beyond this moral posturing, it is the people who continue to suffer under the burgeoning weight of inflation and unemployment. Precious state resources are exhausted on flamboyant parades featuring the soundtrack and costumed-characters from a Turkish drama, while millions wonder when they will be able to avail vaccinations to save themselves from a life-threatening pandemic.

Ardent devotees of the current PM might be forgiven for thinking the virus is merely a hoax, especially after having seen him hold a meeting with his media team only days after testing positive. But among the people, there is simmering discontent with the government’s directionless policies and flippant attitude. If only those perched on their moral high ground would fly down and listen.

The writer works as a development practitioner for a local consultancy.

Twitter: @ShahrukhNR