**The challenge of make-believe**

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We live in a world of make-believe. All elements are there to present a wholesome picture but all are fake.

There is a prime minister but everyone, including him, knows that he has no mandate to sit on that high-backed chair in the PM House. There is a National Assembly with all the right images – speaker, deputy speaker, leaders of house and opposition, and soon standing committees, with chairpersons spread around all parties. The image of a legitimate parliament is complete. Yet everyone knows, including those taking part in the charade, that this picture-perfect arrangement is a total fake.

Yet, kudos to those who put it all together. It does not matter to them whether it is real or fake. What is important is the image of business-as-usual. What is important is all elements of the constitution are visibly intact. Whether they are a true reflection of reality does not matter. Like the election tribunals that take forever to decide the truth, let those questioning the arrangement go to the appropriate forum and wait for their turn. It may be another world before the truth comes out – and by then who cares.

So, the game goes on. The without-mandate PM is running around the Middle East being PM. His reception may be somewhat diminished as the hosts know the reality too. His engagements may generally be of a level lower than his august perch. And, there may not be much to show for all the rhetoric being pumped. But this is not important. There are still enough salutes to beam an image of the right protocol back home. PM being PM at a minimum requires some pomp and show even if reduced. This is what these unnecessary jaunts provide.

Parliament is happy playing its designated role as a masquerader of appearance for reality. Much vociferous speechifying is done on trivialities. Even walk-outs are tolerated and the opposition lured back in by the traditional false promises. All this being the normal to and fro of functioning parliaments and the right image. But the stark reality peeps through whenever a rubber stamp is required. The matters that really matter are rushed through without debate. Even the lack of quorum is no deterrence. What is to be done is done, paying no heed to those shouting foul.

Parliament thus creates the perfect cover; appearance of constitutional propriety over the harshness of brutal reality. Again, kudos to those who thought this through. If anyone wants a perfect demonstration of an iron hand in a velvet glove, our legislatures are there for all to see. The government also does its part but its fakeness is too visible. Parliament has enough pots and pans banging around for the volume of truth to be muted. Parliament is a splash of colour in a bland grey landscape that flatters to deceive.

This picture-perfect arrangement was supposed to be complete by the judgments of those wearing the moral cloak, however tattered. As in the past, they were to wrap the unpalatable in a megabyte of legalese. The pyrotechnics of Kelsen’s theory and the doctrine of necessity being their stellar contributions to Pakistani jurisprudence and its dismemberment. No one thought it would be different this time. And for a while that is the way it was. Denial of the election symbol to the PTI required much obscure reasoning and brazen disregard of evidentiary propriety. But sadly, and I say sadly because of the widespread cynicism, this was bound to happen come what may.

This has changed somewhat – or a lot; only time will tell. The six judges of the Islamabad High Court have not only stopped the wheel but are beginning to turn it around. Other high court judges and even some in the subordinate judiciary have begun to speak up. Justice Babar Sattar is playing on the proverbial front foot holding factotums to account. The Lahore High Court is overturning the blatant afterthought of recounts reinstating many sent packing after declared victories. The Sindh High Court is asking serious questions regarding the throttling of social media app X (Twitter). Judges in Peshawar have reinforced their already visible notes of defiance.

The world of make-believe is being challenged from the most unlikely of quarters. Those that had never stood up in the past are beginning to find their legs. Those that had always endorsed every blatant disregard of law and constitution are showing early signs of defiance. It is too soon to tell whether this is sustainable. Some within are actively pulling them down. Others outside are sharpening their knives. Where it will end is uncertain. If history is any guide, it is an uphill battle, but then the tide is only turned through victories in uphill battles.

In the midst of all this has emerged the intention to change the procedures of judges’ appointments. Is this the thin end of the wedge to stop the dissenters in their tracks? The message is not veiled once the verbiage is wiped clean. If a constitutional amendment is possible, then judicial conduct or its interpretations are also not off the table. The law minister coyly hums and haws when planted questions are asked about the CJ’s tenure. This from a party that had loudly opposed any such proposal in the past. While kite flying may be and should be awkward for the incumbent, it serves a purpose. It shows that there is no limit to what can be done.

While we wait for the outcome of this (may be) history-making battle, cracks are beginning to appear in the world of make believe. Those planted in power have started to find fault with those who ostensibly put them there. The most amusing has been the fracas between Hanif Abbasi and Anwaarul Haq Kakar. Accusations of mega corruption by Abbasi on Kakar got Form 47 thrown on his face. And this from someone who is actually responsible for whatever happened in the February 8 elections.

There can be no greater star witness than Mr Kakar.

It will never come to witnessing because the origins of both are the same. It is a domestic quarrel that will be internally resolved. Being roundly abused in the farmlands of Punjab, the PML-N is itching to blame someone else but it won’t come to that. This minor storm will abate as will others. But storms will continue and it is only a matter of time before the PPP screams murder and threatens to quit. The make-believe world will keep tottering on a knife’s edge until reality strikes.

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