**Time to Repair Fissures in the Fort**

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Should we take pride in Pakistan being one of the most important countries of the Muslim world possessing a strong army of over 600,000 soldiers? Or, its formidable conventional firepower and a stock of nuclear arsenal, a huge population of over 200 million and a vibrant workforce? Or, should we lose sleep over its unstable economy that, most of the years, has remained aid-dependent with a GDP of $280billion and unimpressive foreign exchange reserves and exports hovering around $20 and $22billion respectively – much less than Bangladesh?

The poverty index has been on the rise with social sectors like education and healthcare sliding into steep decline. The state’s failure to provide education to the children of the country as provided in the Constitution has resulted in the burgeoning of seminaries. The religious class engaged in the spread of seminaries has emerged as the well-organised and vocal class to reckon with. They have developed formidable street power and can paralyse any elected government. The state has been unable to register the seminaries with an approved curriculum. This problem has to be addressed if we want to set the country on the path to progress and modernity.

There is simmering unrest in the smaller federating units of the country, particularly in Balochistan and Sindh. The Baloch have been struggling to have ownership over the economic resources of their province since the very inception of the country. We have relied more on the use of force to subdue Baloch than on political dialogue with the leaders of the province to strengthen national unity. We have been following this erroneous policy since the amalgamation of Balochistan in Pakistan in 1948. The policy has miserably failed to yield positive results. The trust deficit between the federal authority and the Baloch has kept widening.

The ethnic polarisation sowed long years ago by dictator Zia has taken strong roots, practically dividing the province into two ethnic populations.

The unrest in Balochistan has been excessively exploited by our adversaries to weaken our national harmony. The population balance in the province was disturbed by the huge influx of Afghan refugees deepening the political fissures there. Along with the use of force, we have followed the imperial policy of divide and rule. This policy did not help us in the former East Pakistan, or the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. It would also fail us in Balochistan.

After his visit to Balochistan some months ago, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced that he would like to initiate talks with the Baloch insurgents for reconciliation. However, this welcome initiative was scuttled even before it could have taken a shape. What would have been the harm in making a serious attempt at reconciliation with Baloch insurgents if the federal authorities have no qualms in talking with the militant groups?

The situation in Sindh is not much different from Balochistan. The connivance between the landed gentry and the powerful establishment has so far succeeded in keeping the nationalist movements in check. The province has serious differences with the federal government over the Financial Commission Awards, management of coastal belt, allocation of irrigation waters and natural gas, construction of dams on Indus River and provincial autonomy in terms of the 18th Amendment.

These problems are exploited by the miscreants to sow the seeds of discord in the country. Instead of correcting these unjust policies by the Federal Government, the security forces of the country have been depending on the same failed strategy of forced disappearances and dumping of dead bodies. The workers of the Jiyee Sindh Qaumi Mahaz (JSQM) and Jiyee Sindh Mutahida Mahaz (JSMM) have borne the brunt of the disappearances.

The ethnic polarisation sowed long years ago by dictator Zia has taken strong roots, practically dividing the province into two ethnic populations. The rural and urban divide aggravated by the undue interference of the establishment has the potential of ripping Sindh apart. Political parties are hostage to their narrow political interests and have been fanning this ethnic divide between Pakhtun and Baloch in Balochistan and the Sindhi and Urdu speaking and Pashtun populations in Sindh to the peril of national unity. A country so deeply divided by economic and political interests cannot emerge as a powerful nation merely on the strength of its firepower.

In recent decades, the provinces of Balochistan and Sindh have witnessed the worst kind of misgovernance, corruption and plunder and enormous growth of poverty. The current process of accountability has been too politicised to inspire any confidence. Over the years, the FIA and the Provincial Anti-Corruption Establishments have turned into cesspools of inefficiency and corruption. The politicians and their cronies in the bureaucracy siphon off development funds and dispose of public lands at throw-away prices without any fear of accountability. As put by Victor Hugo, “The scoundrels use their education and intelligence to eke out evil”. Over 500 senior and mid-ranking bureaucrats in Sindh have benefited from the plea bargain clause of the NAB Ordinance and regained their lucrative posts.

The public does not expect any positive contribution in lowering political tension in the country by the frustrated and desperate opposition. Their sole objective seems to fail the ongoing accountability process to save the skin of those who have been involved in the loot and plunder of the country. Instead of facing their cases in the courts of law, they have adopted mafia-like tactics to circumvent the reach of the law. Their movement has no roadmap for the rehabilitation of the economy, reversal of inflationary trends, alleviation of poverty, revamping of the foreign and security policy. We cannot address these problems by mere rhetoric or emotive sloganeering.

The Federal government should not lose time in addressing these weak spots in the fort. Prime Minister Khan will be well advised to reduce the political polarisation in the country keeping lines of communication open with opposition and initiating the process of constant dialogue and interaction with all the political parties represented in the Parliament.

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