**Realigning National Discourse**

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Although many issues demanded national attention, the entire nation-poor, rich, youngsters and elderly-had only one topic to discuss: politics. Families were divided and developed personal vendettas against each other based on divergent viewpoints: officers and staff in both private and government offices focused less on official business and more on debating the pros of political moves by political rivals. The commercial establishments, plazas and market areas were more concerned with politics than with their enterprises. The entire country was paralyzed by hysteria, hyperboles, allegations, counter-allegations, and hurling insults and hatred at their political opponents. The media, both traditional and social, was having a field day. Programs, talk shows, vlogs, movies, and snippets promoted hatred, violence, and insults directed at opposing political leaders and national institutions, oblivious to the axiom that your freedom ends where your nose begins.

Followers of different political leaders filled social media with filthy language used against each other disregarding all norms of decency and civility and behaving like sworn enemies taking the political difference to a personal level. They also set aside Article 19 of the constitution, which forbade undue criticism of the defence of Pakistan and judiciary and friendly relations with other countries. They also forgot that freedom of expression comes with responsibility, accuracy and keeping the national interests supreme and desisting from creating commotion, unrest and promoting hate or violence in society.

After all, every national discourse is geared toward some bigger ideal that brings improvement in the existing system, reforms the institutions to make them efficient and productive and by any stretch of the imagination and freedom of expression, right to speak and assembly necessarily takes place within the framework of the constitution, internationally accepted norms of decency and civility and conduct and geared towards the betterment of the society and the country as a whole.

Freedom of expression comes with responsibility, accuracy and keeping the national interests supreme

Perhaps the most misunderstood and misused word and process in our country is politics. Politics in Pakistan is akin to achieving set personal objectives by hook or crook, bribery or intimidation, carrot or stick to achieve power and then use it to amass as much wealth and influence as possible while completely disregarding the welfare and wellbeing of the people and trampling the constitution, the law of the land, and jeopardizing larger national interests wherever possible while pursuing personal agendas.

In actuality, politics is an integral component of society, both an art and a science of running a country and providing the common good, which encompasses national security, economic well-being, and social justice. It also refers to a method of resolving conflict between diverse parties by negotiating agreements, mediating disputes, and reaching a consensus. It makes laws, allocates resources, and makes policy for the greater benefit. It is a way for people to come together to make decisions that affect everyone, such as eliminating poverty through social welfare programs, boosting environmental protection through pollution-reduction legislation, and improving education through campaigning for increased school money.

But what we had seen in recent months was not politics, but a destructive road, in which political entities urged their followers and workers to use violence as the only way to achieve their objectives and safeguard their interests. The followers and workers started degrading their adversaries, viewing them as less than human and hence more deserving of violence. This was a dangerous mindset that led to people committing acts of violence they would not normally consider.

This was indeed a dangerous path and therefore needed a fundamental course correction to put the national discourse on the right track. The events of May 9th provided that opportunity for the government to change the direction of national discourse from intangibles to tangibles and it indeed did.

Political violence is a serious issue with potentially disastrous repercussions. It has the potential to result in the deaths of innocent people, the loss of property, and the deterioration of trust in government. There is always a peaceful way to resolve conflict, and violence is never the answer. Education about the hazards of violence and the necessity of peaceful conflict resolution is one of the most effective approaches to preventing violence. This can be accomplished through the use of schools, community organizations, and the media. It is critical to provide opportunities for people to engage in discourse with one another, even if their political ideas disagree. This can aid in the development of understanding and trust, to prevent people from conducting violent crimes. Those who engage in political violence must be held accountable for their conduct. This can dissuade others from committing similar crimes and send a message that violence is not an option.

Governments around the world opt for a similar and standard policy to limit and discourage the use of violence to achieve political goals which include but are not limited to, establishing special courts to prosecute cases of political violence, establishing a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate past acts of violence and promote reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, prosecuting perpetrators in regular courts or special courts to gather evidence and secure convictions, and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, even if it takes time and effort.

There are numerous examples of such processes being effectively implemented, but the most relevant is France, which experienced several instances of violent protests, most notably during the “Yellow Vest” movement that began in late 2018. The French government took a variety of actions and measures to manage these protests, including the deployment of security forces such as riot police and gendarmerie to maintain public order and contain violence during protests, as well as to prevent further escalation and protect public infrastructure. To disperse aggressive demonstrators and restore order, use crowd control tactics such as tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets to target those participating in acts of violence or property damage. Arrests and prosecutions occurred during violent protests, primarily targeting those involved in damage, looting, or violence and subjecting them to legal penalties and punishment under applicable laws. Dialogue and negotiation to address the concerns of protest organizers and representatives, as well as to debate their grievances and potential solutions. Security tactics and legislation aimed at reducing protest violence include harsher fines for violations committed during rallies and increased surveillance capabilities.

The 9th of May was a turning point in Pakistani politics and public discourse. It aided the government in reviewing and assessing who violated the constitution and public order and why. What demonstrators can and cannot do. What a political leader can and cannot do in accordance with the constitution and the law of the land. What the media can and cannot discuss, according to Article 19 of the Constitution, and later it determined the mode of operation to redirect national energies, political capital, and state resources to realign the national discourse from meaningless pursuits to those elements necessary for instilling social harmony, national unity, the perseverance of national institutions, and their due respect and dignity.

The government achieved its objectives by investigating all aspects of the violence, including the instigators, perpetrators, and victims. Initiated legal proceedings against the perpetrators of the violence, arrested over 1,000 people in connection with the violence, and charged over 500 people with offences ranging from murder to attempted murder to arson. Peace and tolerance were promoted by staging peace marches and workshops and conducting public awareness initiatives. Civil society took initiatives on its own to promote peace and tolerance by organizing peace marches and rallies and launching public awareness campaigns to combat the rise of violence and extremism.

As a part of the course correction strategy, the government took a number of steps to prevent traditional and social media from promoting and inciting violence including but not limited to increased monitoring of social media for content that promotes or incites violence through the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning to identify and remove harmful content more quickly. Collaboration with social media platforms to create policies and processes to limit the spread of harmful content, such as mandating platforms to remove harmful content within 24 hours of being aware of it. Providing law enforcement with training on how to detect and investigate cases of online violence, as well as enhancing the government’s power to prosecute people who promote or instigate violence online. It also educated the public about the hazards of online violence through public awareness campaigns and educational programs that teach people about the perils of online radicalization and how to stay safe online.

Of course, Pakistan is not the only country taking such steps to realign the national discourse. In the aftermath of the 2013 Boston Marathon, law enforcement authorities in the United States watched social media channels, studied videos and photographs uploaded by the public, and used internet platforms to acquire information that led to the arrest of those involved. In 2017, the United Kingdom government established the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit (CTIRU) to monitor and remove extreme and violent content from the internet. This section collaborates closely with social media firms to identify and remove content that incites terrorism and violence, as well as to ensure that perpetrators who spread or support violent content suffer legal ramifications. Following the communal riots in Delhi in February 2020, in which social media was used to encourage violence, the government in India took steps to monitor and limit the transmission of incendiary content. Social media providers have been under pressure to remove content that promotes violence and hate speech. The police conducted an investigation into many people who were identified through their social media activities and were later arrested and charged. Following the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, the Sri Lankan authorities temporarily restricted social media platforms to prevent the spread of false information and hate speech. Authorities worked with social media providers to delete messages inciting violence and identify anyone engaged in the assaults’ planning or promotion. Several people were later caught and held accountable.

The government has been effective in diverting national debate in the intended direction as a consequence of a clear, well-thought-out, and comprehensive strategy executed with full commitment and determination. Now, the highly watched TV sit-ins that have always been full of drama and discussion on political issues that sometimes trespass the limits set by the constitution and media laws and ended up knowing or unknowing glorifying the instigators and perpetrators of violence and hate mongers were systematically and lawfully and successfully diverted to discuss social issues, the economy, natural and manmade disasters, and to exercise extreme care not even to take names of instigators of violence and to desist from maligning the institutions that are protected by the constitution. The social media operators who were too vocal in inciting violence and spreading hatred have been penalized and are now either obeying decency and social norms when posting or have stopped using social media to pursue their vested political interests. Instead of spending hours talking about politics and causing division within the family, family members are now discussing religion, concerns concerning children, and financial aspects of the family and enjoying a social life. Known social media political activists are either facing legal action or have hidden themselves from possible arrest and punishment for their actions. There is calm, albeit uneasy, but politicians, civil society, and pressure groups have learned, rather painfully, that they no longer have the option of resorting to violence to pursue their political, business, or social objectives, but must instead use only peaceful means for protests and demonstration and to respect the institutions as provided by the constitution and the law of the land.

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