**Politics of expediency**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2021-02-15

PAKISTAN`S politics looks increasingly like the rerun of an old movie in which the actors remain the same and so does the plot which twists and turns to an unsurprising end. The politicalfracas leading up to the Senate election has familiar echoes of the past: chaotic scenes in parliament, hasty action by the ruling party to force a change in the Senate`s voting procedure, and mutual accusations of malintent and malfeasance between the government and opposition which have clouded the substance of the issue.

The latest row between the government and opposition has been provoked by the ruling party`s effort for the upcoming Senate election to take place by an open vote and not secret ballot.

Predictably, the opposition alliance, PDM, rejected this and accused the government of planning to manipulate the poll scheduled for March 3.

The justification for the government`s move is well founded even if its unilateral approach and motive are open to question.

One of the country`s worst-kept secrets has been the buying and selling of votes in indirect elections when the electorate is small and therefore easy to manipulate and even corrupt. This was famously evidenced in the past in elections to seats in the National Assembly reserved for Fata and in the Senate polls.

Horse-trading and buying and selling of votes has a long and inglorious pedigree. Politicians aren`t the only ones who have indulged in this practice. The phenomenon flourished under military governments and at other times when the ubiquitous establishment needed pliant political figures to do their bidding. To ensure their election all sorts of financial blandishments were used. What historian Ayesha Jalal calls the `monetisation of politics and elections` in fact reached a new level under Gen Ziaul Haq in his partyless polls and political system.

The case for reform to end such practices is therefore a compelling and long-standing one.

However, the way in which the PTI government went about securing the change stoked controversy and the PDM`s opposition. The last-minute and contradictory manner in which it proceeded displayeda sense of desperation, even panic. It moved both to introduce a constitution amendment bill (which was dead on arrival for lack of parliamentary support) and also refer the matter for an advisory opinion to the Supreme Court. Then without waiting for the SC`s decision, a presidential ordinance was promulgated to scrap secret balloting.

These actions confused its own party ranks and baffled political observers. Clearly, the manoeuvre was motivated more by a lack of confidence in its own parliamentarians than concern for any high principle of political probity. Cloaked in its vocabulary of righteousness was the fear of its members being tempted by monetary incentives to brealc ranl( and vote for non-PTI Senate hopefuls.

A prudent path for the government would have been to announce its intention well ahead of time and reach out to all parliamentary parties to build consensus.Itcouldhave argued thatsuchachange would be win-win for all and not just one party.

This is how a parliamentary democracy should work when even political foes, with some effort, evolve a shared interest to agree on a proposed amendment. But a government with a unilateralist mindset was not inclined to take this consensual path. Instead, a quick-fix approach was adopted which became mired in acrimony especially as the government cast the opposition`s resistance as a preference for corrupt practices.

In whatever way this eventually plays out, and even if the SC rules in the government`s favour, the episode holds a mirror to the conduct of the country`s political leaders and parties. In the past, almost all major parties advocated the need for reform of Senate practices and spoke out against money being used to manipulate elections. The two main opposition parties, the PML-N and PPP, have been in favour of open balloting for Senate elections. The Charter of Democracy signed by them in 2006 stated explicitly that `To prevent corruption and floor crossing all votes for the Senate and indirect seats will be by open identifiable ballot`.

A few years ago, the PML-N contemplated parIlamentary action to achieve this but failed to make progress because it lacked the necessarynumbers for a constitutional amendment. As for the PPP, its leaders declared during the current confrontation that they were not against greater Senate transparency but want this to be part of comprehensive electoral reforms.

The opposition should have been smarter to demonstrate its commitment to end electoral malpractices by offering to engage on the issue and insist that a constitutional amendment required a full debate in parliament. This needed time and therefore they were open to such a change provided a consensus was built after open debate. This of course didn`t happen.

The point is that in a political culture where expediency takes primacy over principle almost all political parties have acted inconsistently and at odds with their previously stated positions. When it has suited them, they have advocated reform. But when their political adversary appears to be the beneficiary, they have viewed this from zero-sum lens and resisted by employing disingenuous arguments.

This conduct raises bigger questions which are consequential for the political system. When political leaders act in ways that is contrary to what they themselves have long been advocating it generates widespread public scepticism. They are then increasingly perceived by the public as believing in nothing except themselves with consistency being sacrificed at the altar of expediency. The more each side accuses the other of engaging in questionable parliamentary practices or trying to protect procedures amenable to corruption, the greater public cynicism about political leaders and the legislature itself. Today, with the government and opposition accusing each other of mala fide intent in the Senate election this does little to enhance the legitimacy of the upper house in popular perception. Political expediency extracts a price public disillusionment and disenchantment not only with politicians but with the political system, leaving democracy the poorer for it. The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.