**The devil is in the detail**

BY A R I FA N O O R 2020-11-17

WE seamlessly switch between languages during a single conversation, from Urdu to English to a mother tongue; we speak of sexual harassment of working women and have laws for it but the same legal system doesn`t recognise rape in a marriage; we jostle modernity with tradition in our lives and Mercedes cars speed over the same roads that rickshaws are rattling over.  
  
Our prime ministers get confused about geography and missile technology. And some of them defend not just U-turns but the `U-turn` as a principle. Our civil society complains about judicial overreach and yet it petitions the judges to look into political matters, when offended by twists and turns of the madness called politics in Pakistan.  
  
Clarity is overrated and contradictions are acceptable. No wonder then that all our politicians are busy proving who is the bigger patriot and defender of the armed forces, as they declaim their democratic credentials. The bigger the patriot, the bigger the democrat and well-wisher of the armed forces. And this is also why, democrats want civilian supremacy and rule of law but then blame only an individual or two. So what if history proves otherwise? Our democrats also put their own spin on their democratic beliefs. A true democrat is fine with a government being sent packing before its tenure is over because of incompetence while another kind of democrat is angry that `corrupt` rivals (and some friends) cannot be put behind bars immediately because due process is such an inconvenience.  
  
Corruption too is unacceptable when mafias are involved and just a part of life when chief executives from little-known places are pressured by their country cousins for small-time government postings or jobs. If the two positions are contradictory, no one loses any sleep, it seems.  
  
In this body politic, then, language is rarely ever precise or clear. At times the ambiguity is deliberate, a precaution when we refer to `khalaimakhlooq` or explain away a missing couple of days in one`s life as a short holiday to the northern areas.  
  
At other times, the lack of clarity is because we are just lazy and can`t be bothered to focus our thoughts.  
  
So, it is these days, as we try and figure out how the political class and the establishment (another precautionary euphemism) can lower the raised political temperatures; we casually refer to vastly different processes in the same breath. A truth and reconciliation commission and a national dialogue are both easy solutions for the larai ihagra (bickering) at present.  
  
But which one is the answer? Surely, a truth and reconciliation committee is about resolving some matters of the past while a national dialogue seems to look to the future.  
  
Truth and reconciliation commissions are formed when retribution is not possible; when the aim is to simply allow people to speak of what they have suffered as well as what they have inflicted on others and hope that it will heal some of the rifts and wounds and bring a people together. Rarely is there punishment involved and sometimes not even coercion to ensure the truth. Such concepts seem so far away in the midst of an angry season, which is unchanging. None of our politicians seem to be in the mood for this; for they are all busy trumpeting like Maula Jatt and not aspiring to be Nelson Mandela. And there was so much more to him than just his long imprisonment.  
  
Moments in history can be made and unmade by men. And we are too busy unmaking it to be invested in any truths and any reconciliations.  
  
A national dialogue is another suggestion but once again no one has any details to offer. Details are boring and unworthy of talk shows, which set all agendas these days. And a national dialogue makes for a good sound bite that can withstand an hour-long back-and-forth and no more. Some say it should be about improving election and accounta-bility laws; as if our only problem is the making of legislation (by hook or by crook) and not its implementation.  
  
Others say it should be about running the country according to the Constitution as if this is a simple matter resolved by a bit of talk-shalk, in parliament or outside it (as if the National Security Council or the previous exchange in the National Assembly led to any progress on this matter). The politicos and the non-civilians will sit down at one table to talk; the politicos will say the Constitution mandates us to rule and the other side will say, `Oh yes, you do! And now that this has been pointed out, we will let you be`. Surely, if it was this simple, we wouldn`t be grappling with this problem after so many years.  
  
And this is also to be televised, so the people are watching. This obsession to televise every speech, every dialogue and every revolution may run contrary to the idea of a meaningful exchange but no one seems to care.  
  
We are averse to details and planning; always have been. For we rarely talk and create consensus within, making it well-nigh impossible to learn how to find common ground with the other. So none of the political players agree with each other on what they are up to. The revolutionary hasn`t taken his team members on board on what the end game is and neither are all the napa premier`s players onboard with his various crusades including the one against the purana Pakistanis. Everyone is busy writing on his own page and ignoring what the others are scribbling away.  
  
We need more detail, boring detail, and much gup-shup in private if we are serious about dialogue and to simply figure out what the dialogue will be about. But chances are that we will continue to blow hot and hotter. And sound bites will remain confined to the studios.  The writer is a journalist