**Let the truth loose**

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Imran Khan is a crowd puller and has the genuine support of many people – as well as the potential to keep his followers intact. Apart from his personal charisma, his strong social media cell helps him reach a wider range of people.

And, like all populist leaders, Khan has succeeded in bifurcating society to his advantage. He has largely been successful in fighting the battle of narratives, so much so that powerbrokers in the country have had to reiterate their ‘neutrality’ again and again.

Not so long ago, Nawaz Sharif was asking hard questions and was being censored by the media. Critics and voices of dissent were being silenced. Who was the prime minister then? Did he not think the chickens might come back home to roost? While things have now escalated much, the difference is that Khan’s followers are angrier now. With the PTI’s strong social media cell, any curbs on the media are practically destined to backfire on the government.

The youth of the country is oblivious of our political history. Whose mistake is that? Certainly not the PTI’s. Providing education to citizens is the government’s job. The PPP, PML-N and uniformed dictators have been ruling the country for the most part. What have they done to ensure that people are aware of basic political ideas, so they do not fall into the trap of populism? Whose mistake is it to keep them unaware of the importance of the constitution? Who is responsible for providing the PTI with an enabling atmosphere to reach where it is now?

Today, it has rightly been realized that Khan is spreading conspiracies to suit his political pursuit of power. But the answer to why people fall for conspiracies that are otherwise so meaningless lies in the question. People tend to discard what they find meaningless and find meaning in things that attract them, no matter the degree of truth they hold. The truth can feel like a lie and vice versa. And Khan has mastered the art of using social media effectively for manipulation. No other party is close to what the PTI is doing. Khan’s message spreads like wildfire.

Go back a couple of years. The PTI was in government. The ‘one page’ was intact. Everything looked beautiful for the people that are today assuming themselves to be the champion of democracy after they have become hopeless of the umpire’s assistance. There were some, however, who could foresee the time would not remain the same. It never does, something those in power today must remember.

In those days, Pakistan saw one of the darkest eras of curbs on freedom of expression. What happened? The voice of one mainstream political party, along with a right-wing religious party, was amplified. Critics at that time were either forced to remain silent or their side of the story was made to disappear amid a flood of propaganda. Resultantly, the culture of manipulation solidified.

There is a lesson here. Fake news, conspiracies and propaganda are controlled by free speech and not by curbing expression. Two things are important to note. First, when the voice of one group is suppressed, it provides them a reason to believe something is wrong and it needs to fight back with more energy. Second, when mainstream media is controlled, people start to believe less in it and go for social media that is largely uncontrolled. However, by no means, should controlling social media be a remedy to this; freeing mainstream media is. The more controls there are, the more conspiracies are bound to circulate.

When there is freedom of expression, people believe in the news. When there isn’t, they switch their sources of information. It is that simple. Let people’s confidence in mainstream media revive by opening it up. When there is freedom, critics are welcomed or at least tolerated.

Take the example of critics like Noam Chomsky and John Mearsheimer. One may try hard and not find a parallel of Noam Chomsky in China or John Mearsheimer in Russia. They would not feel their lives threatened in the US, despite being vocal critics of the state policies. Despite a ton of faults in the US system, it is the freedom of expression that helps its intelligentsia and media wield soft power and keep trust intact. Red lines exist there too, though.

Propaganda and conspiracies are bound to spread fast. This is a sad reality of the times we live in. I am not talking solely about the things mentioned above. Any sort of propaganda can be lethal. Strategy to counter it is essential.

There are two ways to handle propaganda. One, start a counter-propaganda and dilute the effect of the target. This can be helpful in the short run only. Second, let the truth lose to defend itself which works slowly but surely. The solution to countering propaganda lies in freedom of expression. Usually, the government’s strategy lies in trying to shut specific voices. It might or might not be effective for the time being, but it is condemned to be ineffective in the long run. Freedom of thought and expression gives an impetus to keeping the dialect moving forward to a better synthesis. Let the truth loose and it will defend itself.

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