**Mixed messages or signals?**

BY A B B A S N A S I R 2020-11-15

IF it is mixed signalling from the PDM leadership as part of a deliberate deception strategy it would be one thing, but altogether another if it is mixed messaging and reflects disagreements among the alliance leadership over fundamental issues.

Since the start of the Gilgit-Baltistan election campaign, in which first PPP leader Bilawal BhuttoZardari and then PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz Sharif plunged with considerable vigour, a number of interviews and statements have emerged that seem to not be coming from the `same page`.

First the PPP leader differed publicly with PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif over the latter`s naming of the army chief and the ISI DG for their alleged role in destabilising the last elected government and paving the way for Imran Khan to become prime minister.

To be fair, Mr Bhutto-Zardari also hastened to acknowledge Mr Sharif`s right to say whatever he wanted to and howsoever he chose to. He asserted that even as allies they both had their own parties and policies and did not pick words for each other or tell each other what to say.

Then, differing perceptions appeared in the public domain when the ISPR announced the findings of the Commander, 5 Corps, inquiry into last month`s kidnapping of the Sindh IGP by ISI-Rangers officials and forcing him to order the arrest of PML-N`s Capt Muhammad Safdar.

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari welcomed the report saying it would serve to `increase the integrity` of the army as an institution; Nawaz Sharif took the opposite view as he `rejected` the findings as a cover-up which scapegoated junior officers and spared those at the top who ordered the move.

Finally, Ms Sharif`s BBC interview again triggered speculation she was softening her hard line in saying it was `my army` and that she would not object to an open, transparent and public dialogue after the `puppet government is removed`.

The following day, addressing throngs of supporters gathered in Swat, her father reiterated his position, not budging an inch from his tough stand, I suspect not without reason. He is receiving real-time information on how his stance is playing with the support base in Punjab. Also that this support base is now fully reflecting the country`s current demo-graphics and has a big share of young, charged-up workers and supporters who are said to be prepared to go are raring to go, as one source told me the mile for their cause and leader.

Perhaps this new reality is having an impact on those tasked with gathering on-the-ground information because they are exposed to it. One manifestation was that a key establishment figure recently acknowledged the need for a broad-based national dialogue.

To discerning observers, his remarks appeared necessitated by the changed ground reality, which ismainly due to Nawaz Sharif`s relentless hammering of his no-holds-barred narrative and the resonance it is finding among his supporters in Punjab in particular.

Mr Sharif has been chipping away at the establishment resolve and who knows what dividend, if any, his persistence will deliver over the medium to long term. In the short term, it is causing considerable anxiety among government ministers, as evident in their daily statements.

Also, if the establishment figure`s thoughts were not merely his own and echoed a possible changed, wider view in the institution, then we are in for an interesting few weeks as winter approaches. Who knows what political games, palace intrigues, etc are on the cards.

The faltering economy, galloping inflation and shortages of food items, gas and other essentials may also be weighing on the minds of the government backers. The international environment is also challenging, with a new US president to enter office andthe continued aggressive, intransigent tone of the Modi government.

Even then, while all sides may have spol(en about a need for a national dialogue, there are few specifics about how the paradigm can be reset to reflect any changed realities and the extent to which stakeholders would agree with such a scenario.

To give him his due, PML-N`s Shahid Khagan Abbasi has been the first politician over the past few years to have spoken about the need to talk to all players in national politics. He has argued this is inevitable as the current scheme of things is not workable, and will repeatedly suffer breakdowns.

Apart from Mr Abbasi, and way before him, PPP leader Benazir Bhutto talked in similar terms of the need for a new social contract. Of late, `new social contract` is a term also used by PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif.

At least the politicians are clear on what they mean to achieve or get out of a dialogue such as the one they are proposing: free and fair elections and then respect for the principle of civilian supremacy, the bedrock of any constitutional democracy.

This is a globally acknowledged principle, but in our case it has repeatedly been evidenced how much contempt it evokes in some institutions. So the question is: if a dialogue were ever to happen, would, Nawaz Sharif, for example, be willing to concede anything to the establishment? Equally, how much give and take is possible or even acceptable? For surely no politician would take matters to a fever pitch and threaten protests, or actually take to the streets to press for demands, and then surrender the initiative and most of the gains at the negotiating table.

Also, in the event of such an agreement ever being possible, who will underwrite it or be its guarantor? These are but some of the questions that come to mind as potential impediments. Answers will have to be found, and quicldy, if we are ever to come out of the morass we find ourselves in. Perhaps the `good cops` in the opposition could become the vehicles of a dialogue. The writer is a former editor of Dawn.

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