**Beyond resilience**

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Thursday, Mar 21, 2024

Many political commentators classify Pakistani society as an extremely resilient one. We have fought for democracy time after time – unlike nations in the Middle East such as Libya, Egypt and Iraq, and many others around the world which have endured three to four decades of harsh dictatorships.

In Pakistan’s case, even though the majority of our seven decades in existence have been spent under autocratic regimes, there has always been a pushback for the return of democracy. Each time, democracy has returned – even if it is, in Pluto’s words, a ‘warped one’.

Resilience also means that Pakistanis have withstood all kinds of hardships and injustices. There are places that have produced a different kind of resilience and spirit. From these nurseries have arrived people willing to fight to push back the inequities and injustices we see in society everywhere. They are willing to fight against misgovernance which leads to hyperinflation. They are ready to give everything they have to ensure a labourer does not receive a utility bill which is higher than his/her monthly wage and leaves him/her either without electricity or without food for his children.

These nurseries include student unions, perhaps the most important places where thinking and debate happens and where resilience is created. Students at universities learn not only in their classes but also through debating different ideas and putting them into effect. Even in the US – the country that calls itself the nation at the top of the pyramid of democracy – it is mostly students who have rallied for the people of Falesteen.

Unfortunately, these student unions have been banned in our nation since the 1980s. Now we only have on-campus ‘groups’ such as the Punjab Students Group, the Baloch Students Group, the Pashtun Students Group and others which essentially divide students on ethnic lines instead of uniting them as a nation.

At the same time, we have also lost other unions such as those in the labour sector and on farms even when peasants have fought back, as they did in Okara, and continue to raise a little hope of victory. There can now no longer be any confidence that people across the country will rise up for any cause which does not directly affect them. Indeed, people have become more inward-looking. The idea of nationhood of national news which has an impact on everyone has somehow been lost.

But at some point, there has to be an end to passive resilience and start of a willingness to fight. This is not a revolutionary idea. It is a matter of survival and a matter of getting some kind of meaningful life for people everywhere in the country. Men such as Manzoor Pashteen and women such as Mahrang Baloch have managed to achieve this to some degree for their people. People from parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan consider them their heroes. We need many more like them. But we also need a central figure who can be a hero for his/her people, and this country at its present moment needs heroes no matter where they come from or what their background is.

We need these people because citizens are unable to keep up with hyperinflation that has affected almost everyone in the land. A security guard who earns a salary of say Rs15,000 a month simply cannot pay his monthly bills. And, of course, the fact that Rs15,000 is below the minimum wage is something that he does not really know, and others know even less about the fact that they have basic rights which should be protected and should be secured by the state.

The state does little to ensure this, acting only as a mouthpiece for those who truly enjoy power in the country and overlooking the hardships of the people it should be serving. The first task of the heroes of the future must be to put an end to ignorance. People need to know what rights they have and how to exercise them. Today women across the country have little idea about their reproductive rights or other rights they should be enjoying as equal citizens of the state.

The same is true for persons like ‘haris’, labourers and other low-paid workers who do not realize that they are being wrongfully done with by authorities, unwilling to address their grievances year after year and decade after decade.

At some point, this resilience and its willingness to fight back against the odds will have to come. After all, for how long will people endure a situation where they have no gas in their houses but are forced to pay bills significantly higher than what they were paying just a few months ago? What will they do when these bills rise even higher, as many believe they will? After all, the country will go into a new agreement with the IMF this month. Unless people fight back, they will keep enduring more hardship and more threats to their wellbeing for years to come.

The question is: who will take this resilience forward? It is popularly believed that a single charismatic figure is required to build any kind of revolution or uprising against injustice. Revolution may be too strong a word in a situation where we are nowhere close to one. But we know that there is immense anger amongst people. In the most recent election, we have seen it among the youth and in their voting patterns. The existence of this rage will at some point emerge in a more open and direct fashion. Indeed, it should emerge in a more direct fashion.

The fact that people are resilient is not really a quality worth praising. It is rather a factor which holds back the nation and prevents people from speaking up for their rights. It is imperative that they do speak up for their rights and against the injustices poured down upon them for so many decades. Even those who suffer these outrages themselves are unable to overcome the power of the elite which ruled the country and demand rights for those who have been killed, those who have died in a factory accident or those injured in some other way.

This cannot continue indefinitely. If it does, we would be left with a nation where people live lives virtually as zombies. They work only because they must, in order to survive; many, of course, cannot find any work at all. The number of such people is rising rapidly.

We need to think about the feelings that this will cause and the rage this will bring upon families who have struggled hard to educate their children and ensure that they go to universities. If after this stage in life they cannot find jobs, only anger, and with it fear, lies ahead. When this will surface and in what form is something we should be thinking about very hard right now, everywhere in the country.

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