**Reflecting on our follies**

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ONE listened with rapt attention to what President Joe Biden said at his inauguration: `To overcome ... challenges to restore the soul and secure the future of America requires so much more than words. It requires the most elusive of all things in a democracy: unity.` He asserted: `We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal`, adding, `We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts`. It set me thinking that we in Pakistan too need to end an uncivil war.

Then I read what a lady in her mid-90s reflected on: `the two most dangerous words in the human vocabulary: `us` and `them`.`Former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright described the most destructive cycle of thinking when on Jan 6, her `nation`s political divisions erupted into a spectacle of lawlessness on Capitol Hill`. Her words are relevant for us too: `There is no question that we all have a right to quarrel with one another; that`s the democratic way. But we also have a responsibility to talk frankly and to listen carefully, to recognise our own faults and to refrain from pinning dehumanising labels on those with whom we disagree.

She stated, ``We the People`is an inclusive phrase.

Yes, we the people of Pakistan need to reflect upon the state of our federation. We need leaders who understand the value of humility, integrity, compassion and dignity. There is acrimony and slander in our conversations. Families and friends are divided, and anger dominates our lives. Our arbitrariness goes back almost a half century. I felt it on joining public service in 1973. Jinnah built our national purpose around a democratic polity based on the rule of law, good governance and accountability of public servants. Alas, the dream of democracy went sour rather early.

During the 1960s, we had a military dictator who celebrated his rule as the decade of development.

But as students we protested against Gen Ayub who was responsible for the abrogation of the 1956 constitution and imposition of martial law. He was forced to hand over power to another general who presided over Pakistan`s breakup. Gen Yahya could have saved the union by handing over gov-ernment to the elected majority leader from East Pakistan. Instead, our military surrendered after a short war and grudgingly handed over power to Z.A. Bhutto. Our sagging morale was somewhat lifted when we hosted a summit of Muslim leaders in 1974. Earlier, the near-consensus Constitution of 1973 created a sense of hope for democracy and a strong federation ensuring provincial autonomy.

That was not to be. Sacking governments in two smaller provinces, a military operation in Balochistan and curbing dissent created unrest.

Rigging in the 1977 polls triggered protests and led a wily handpicked junior general, elevated as army chief, to declare martial law.

Thusstartedanotherdecade ofdecadenceunder Gen Zia who hanged Z.A. Bhutto. A nexus developed between the mullahs and militants. `Jihad` was promoted as an industry. Sectarian violence and intolerance were rife. Zia`s death in 1988 heralded a prolonged era of unstable democracy. The troika of the president, prime minister and army chief was involved in a game of thrones.

Politics alternated between the Bhuttos and Sharifs. Civil servants and government officials were pawns. Politics was a game of chess.

Corruption was condoned in the highest corridors of authority. The deep state called the shots.

Whenever a politician tried to adopt an independent stance, he or she was shown the door. Voices of dissent and courage were muzzled or people simply went missing.

We were in for another decade of `enlightened` confusion when another general surfaced as a messiah against `corrupt` civilian rule. Gen Musharraf pursued an agenda to please a superpower in the so-called war on terror. However, generals and military rulers always suffer from a crisis of legitimacy. Instead of taking unpopular decisions in the national interest, they attempt to create a halo of legitimacy through sham referenda or elections.

They create an aura of invincibility through gunboat governance. Combating corruption is their favourite mantra. This mindset of both democratic despots and military men have resulted in institutions like the Ehtesab Cell and NAB. Instead of making the FIA more autonomous and a profes-sional accountability organisation, new institutions are created with specific agendas to settle scores.

While a civilian prime minister created an accountability cell for political point-scoring, a military ruler installed a parallel institution to nab those opposing his illegitimate rule.

The Broadsheet saga exposed many institutions and persons. NAB is the principal culprit. Who will nab NAB? A well-known general was its first chairman under whom an incredibly faulty agreement was signed with a hastily established asset recovery firm in the UK. The then prosecutor general associated with the agreement did not bother about conflict of interest and became a consultant to that firm after leaving his job. No one noted Clause-4 of the agreement or ascertained the credentials of professionals seel(ing favours. This farcical agreement`s summary must have been prepared in the law ministry in consultation with the then attorney general. The buck stops with the chief executive.

Then there are prime ministers of the PPP and PML-N era who either released amounts to the wrong people in 2008 or covered up the award announced in 2016. Even the 2018 caretaker government has a role.

This government must answer questions about the release of funds to Broadsheet with the approval of ECC and the cabinet on a summary by NAB in November 2020. Those behind the scenes must be exposed. Let`s see if the inquiry commission ensures accountability of all NAB chairmen since 2000 along with those who colluded to defraud the people. However, the commission`s terms of reference look like another exercise in witch-hunting.

It is surprising that a former Supreme Court justice who served as deputy prosecutor general, NAB, and was part of the Panama case bench has consented to head the commission. Perhaps generals and judges here do not like to fade away. Postretirement perks and privileges are hard to resist.

Meanwhile, pity the nation whose prime minister is caught between the devil and the deep state. The writer is former DG FIA and author of T be Faltering State and Inconvenient Truths.