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**A tryst in Peshawar**

Like history proverbially does, Covid-19 is repeating itself – and this second wave is more intimidating. We, in Pakistan, were lucky with our encounter with the first wave of the pandemic. But the situation now is fraught with grim possibilities. The timing is also starkly ominous, with the promised surge in the opposition’s agitation.

In this environment of dark apprehensions and anxiety, Khadim Hussain Rizvi’s death on Thursday night – a bolt from the blue – has cast a shadow on the political landscape. In some ways, the maverick leader of a rather recent religious outfit was as enigmatic as the virus is proving to be.

Khadim Hussain’s Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) landed with a bang on the political stage in 2017 and garnered massive support, mainly on the blasphemy front. Though its agitation last weekend in Rawalpindi and Islamabad had invited police action, the government had to submit to make an agreement with the protesters on Monday night.

It was the TLP that announced that its demands had been accepted in a written document. These demands related to boycotting of French products, expelling the French ambassador, not appointing an ambassador in France and releasing all detained activists. There was no official confirmation of this agreement but TLP activists were promptly released. Once again, the Pakistani state surrendered to the ultra-right. Otherwise, how can agitators dictate matters that relate to the country’s conduct of its foreign affairs?

But when it comes to dealing with the mainstream political opposition, the rules of the game are different. That is how, under the darkening shadow of the second wave of coronavirus, a big confrontation is building up between the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and the PTI government. Its immediate focus is the rally today – Sunday, November 22 – in Peshawar.

A ban on all public gatherings is part of the measures announced by the government to check the spread of the pandemic and the Peshawar rally is not allowed, officially, but the PDM leaders are adamant that the rally would be held. This is becoming a critical issue. Given the steady rise in the cases, a number of independent observers have suggested that the opposition should postpone its Peshawar rally.

But the opposition is unwilling to break its momentum and argues that the government’s action is politically motivated. It points towards public meetings that the PTI had held just a few days ago, without observing any of the prescribed SOPs. Electioneering in Gilgit-Baltistan had thrown all caution to the wind. It is the same during protests held after the results were announced. Incidentally, the GB elections have diligently followed the old script and the electables, the usual suspects, have found their home in the party that is in power in Islamabad.

It is possible to find fault with the government’s resolve to enforce SOPs dictated by experts. In the first place, the government functionaries themselves have addressed large gatherings and have participated in crowded functions. Then, at a time when the ministers have vociferously been demanding that the PDM’s Peshawar rally be postponed, permission was given for Khadim Hussain’s funeral prayers at a historical site in Lahore.

Coming back to the TLP’s firebrand leader for a bit more, I am finding it difficult to not mention that formidable ‘dharna’ of November 2017 on the Faizabad interchange in Islamabad that catapulted Khadim Hussain into political stardom. It was more triumphant than Imran Khan’s long-running show in 2014.

The TLP activists, who had occupied the interchange for over 20 days – and, interestingly, also got cash for their efforts – were demanding the resignation of the law minister during the tenure of the PML-N. The government tried a police operation but it failed to do the job. Finally, an army-brokered agreement left the Nawaz Sharif government with egg on their face.

This, though, was not the end of the story. There was a Supreme Court judgment, written by Justice Qazi Faez Isa – and other consequences that are too extensive to be recounted here.

Anyhow, the overall situation, with reference to building defences against the deadly virus, is very unsatisfactory. Even though the rising figures of infections and fatalities are very disturbing, ordinary people generally seem unafraid. This lack of vigilance can do a lot of damage and our health system is not equipped to bear additional pressures.

We are now regularly receiving information about more and more people within our social circles falling ill. It is rather sudden and there is a fresh scare about the well-being of those who are more vulnerable. Our previous experience with the virus has apparently not made us any wiser. Besides, there is ample mystification about how the virus is behaving.

Meanwhile, all of us have to contend with considerable impediments and emotional strains that the pandemic has injected into our personal lives. A large number of people have had to bear a lot of pain. For many, economic difficulties have been unbearable. Those who have lost a loved one to the virus have to deal with their bereavement in circumstances that are exceptional.

Thankfully, we are not in the list of the countries that Covid-19 has hit the hardest. For instance, the United States has recorded more than 250,000 deaths as cases soar again. It has nearly 11.5 million cases. Europe’s second wave is more lethal than the first one.

In the midst of all this, our political crisis has deepened. Our society, in many respects, is in tatters. There is a stream of bad news. This is also a mental health pandemic. This year – 2020 – has effectively changed our lives. Covid-19 is creating fear and fragmentation.

There is no dearth of advice from experts on how to stay calm in these troubling times. We are tired of thinking these thoughts day after day, month after month and even though the vaccine is promised in the near future, we do not know when this will end. But will that also settle political turmoil and popular unrest that is rising in Pakistan and, strangely, in so many other countries?

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