**An Era of Despair**

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The high inflation, the shrinking individual and national savings, the increasing unemployment and poverty, the gnawing hunger, the helplessness, the crumbling law and order, the intensifying political tussle, the shameful abuse of the state’s coercive power in dismantling and creating political parties, the torture of political workers, the gagging of media, the falling credibility of state institutions including the Election Commission and judiciary, the thickening atmosphere of suffocation and despair have taken a heavy toll on the endurance of the populace. The elite and the ruling class are unconcerned and have shifted their focus on destroying the most popular political party and its leader.

It is not Myanmar, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen we are talking of. It is our dear Pakistan – a federation of four political and geographical entities, a country of 230 million population with a huge number of youth. This country has not been treated well during the past 75 years. It has not been allowed to develop a representative political system where the people feel their stakes in the state institutions, to mature into a nation of dignity and honour, learn from their past mistakes and forge ahead with renewed resolve and clarity.

Reduced to the status of a banana state, Pakistan is today struggling for its territorial, political and economic survival. The survivability of a country does not lie in its military strength or the heap of nuclear arsenal possessed by it. It needs much more for its successful existence. These include political stability, economic viability, fair distribution of national resources, rule of law and equality before the law, fair play and justice. Over-reliance on the state’s coercive power is no guarantee for the security of a country. The suppression of the political aspirations of the people engenders political chaos, insurgencies, militancy and violence. Representative governance works as a safety valve to deal with centrifugal forces, secessionist tendencies and political anarchies.

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General Omar Al-Bashir ruled Sudan for over 30 years. His predecessors including General Ibrahim Al-Aboud (1958-1964), Jaffar Numeiry (1969-1985) and Abdul Rehman (1985-1986) also ruled Sudan for 25 years. South Sudan – with its overwhelming Christian population never felt secure under the military Generals from the North and resorted to armed struggle for separation after the elected government of Prime Minister Ismail Al-Azhar was overthrown by General Ibrahim Al-Aboud. Their insurgency that started in 1958 under George Grang culminated in the independence of South Sudan as a result of the UN-supervised referendum in July 2011.

However, the insurgency within Darfur continued unabated despite the massacres committed by the military-backed Janjaweed militia – later converted into Rapid Support Force (RSF) by the Army in 2013. Today, the military and RSF are engaged in a full fratricidal war to the peril of the country. This civil war has overcast the very future of this largely Muslim country. The country with the two Niles – White and Blue Niles – flowing through its large territory and merging in Khartoum, large dams including the Roseires and Meroe, has been infamously known for chronic poverty, hunger, maladministration and corruption.

How the autocracies brazenly suppressing the political aspirations of their populace led to the setback of Egypt, and the ruination of Libya and Syria should have been an eye-opener for us. Egypt has fallen back into an autocracy with Libya, Syria and Yemen struggling to overcome the likely territorial disintegration as a result of the insurgencies and civil wars. These countries have been pushed back into an age of darkness as far as representative and democratic governance is concerned.

Our political experience is also too depressing. We have had cyclical encounters with faulty democracies with military leadership pulling the strings from behind the scene and, then, long military rules. Our civilian leadership never showed a fondness for constitutional rule in the true spirit of democracy. Though the death of General Zia in August 1988 seemingly ushered in a democratic era, the successive civilian regimes were never allowed to govern. The civilian Presidents with draconian powers always breathed over their necks and sent them packing home at the behest of the security establishment. Muhtarma Benazir inherited her father’s political mantle and won general elections genuinely with all odds stacked against her. But she was never allowed to govern.

The senior Sharif emerged as the leader of Punjab from the hatchery of the establishment. He was groomed and launched by the Generals to hinder Benazir’s ascent to power. But when he grew a bit too big for his boots in 1992, his government was dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan in 1992. He was overthrown by his Army Chief in 1999 when, in the wake of his two-thirds majority in the Parliament of 1997, he considered himself infallible fiddling unnecessarily with military matters. This saga was repeated in 2016-2017.

The former Army Chief has publicly admitted having helped Imran Khan ascend to the throne. He hardly put up with the hybrid political system for over three years. His political foes and the establishment considered him a spent political force and showed him the door through a no-confidence motion. His expected rise as a political giant threw formidable challenges to his political foes and the establishment keeping them on tenterhooks. In his unprecedented popularity, he lost sight of his vulnerabilities. He abandoned the parliament leaving the field open for his political foes. He dissolved his provincial governments Punjab and KP cutting down his political strength.

Worst of all, he resorted to a head-on collision with the most powerful institution of the country which, as the history of this country shows, has always been ruthless in preserving its domineering position. It is not difficult to foresee what he would have to suffer in the wake of the 9 May events notwithstanding his public popularity. He has already got himself and his supporters into trouble. Along with his physical safety at stake are democracy, Constitution and the constitutional rule and the judiciary’s credibility. Everything has fallen apart what to speak of the economic revival.

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