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**Beware the Ides of March**

Clichéd it certainly is but I am not resisting the temptation of invoking Shakespeare. It was a soothsayer’s warning to Julius Caesar: “Beware the Ides of March”. That was about a specific date – March 15. In our case, it is the entire month of March that bears dark forebodings.

This is not to say that there would be no cause for celebration for this or that side of the political divide. March 3 – Wednesday – was, of course, a day of great triumph for the opposition when Yousaf Raza Gilani defeated Hafeez Sheikh in the National Assembly for a seat in the Senate. This is a major upset, since it literally implies a vote of no confidence against the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

All of a sudden, a tremor ran through the entire political landscape – since it could not have happened without numerous defections from the ruling alliance, and members of the PTI were precisely under the spotlight. Here was an unambiguous certification of reports that many PTI members of the National Assembly were not happy with the choice of Hafeez Sheikh, a veritable outsider, as their candidate for the Senate. There was a reason why the PTI had strived so hard for an open ballot for the Senate elections.

In any case, Pakistan is now caught up in the whirling vortex of the aftermath of Wednesday’s election in Islamabad. Imran Khan and his commanders in the battlefield have angrily asserted that votes had been bought and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had failed in its obligation to check these derelictions. This has led almost to a state of confrontation between the PTI and the Election Commission.

For brevity’s sake, let me just share two headlines. “PM blasts ECP over ‘foul play’ in Senate election”. This was on Imran’s address to the nation on Thursday. “Stop with the mudslinging, ECP responds to PM Imran’s remarks”, on the Election Commission’s statement on Friday. To carry this argument further, federal ministers were ready to challenge the ECP’s rather firm declaration of its constitutional authority.

In his address to the nation, the prime minister announced that he was seeking a vote of confidence on March 6. After the defeat of his candidate in the National Assembly, this is seen as a face-saving exercise. But the irony here is that this vote is also sought from the 15 or 16 PTI MNAs who, as Imran himself admitted, had ‘sold’ their votes. But they have not been identified. It is unlikely that a probe into the video released on the eve of the election in which Yousaf Raza Gilani’s son was instructing off-screen PTI members on how to spoil their ballot papers would provide the necessary clarifications.

These are matters that contain many complexities and controversies. Pakistan’s electoral history has numerous dark passages and the present crisis is born of the PML-N’s indictment of the 2018 general elections for having been manipulated to bring Imran Khan into power. There was that familiar display of ‘electables’ changing their parties, in some cases under pressure, in the midst of the campaign.

A number of PTI lawmakers and ministers have had a happy fling with other parties and alliances that were previously in power. With a few exceptions, there has always been buying and selling in the marketplace of power politics. And Imran Khan is not averse to playing this game. But will the upheaval that is taking shape during this month of March make any difference in Pakistan’s politics? Can Pakistan realise its dream of a free and fair election that is not disputed by any party?

One way of looking at it is to delve into the meaning and the message of Yousaf Raza Gilani’s victor. There is this feeling, strengthened by comments made by the leaders of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), that the establishment has become ‘neutral’. What has obviously happened is that the opposition has gained confidence and Imran Khan seems vulnerable.

There is something ominous about this month of March. A sharp rise in the political temperature began before the March 3 elections. Just recall the scene in the Sindh Assembly when, a day before the Senate showdown, PTI lawmakers physically attacked a ‘rebel’ colleague.

I feel sorry for not being appropriately able to attend to tomorrow’s Aurat March, and to its significance in the context of the evolution of Pakistani society. It is a tragic fact that our rulers, for whatever reasons that may have clouded their minds, have patronised orthodox and misogynist elements. But the success of this inspirational struggle for women’s emancipation is mandatory for our democratic survival.

Another big day will be March 12, when the Senate will elect its new chairman. This again will be a secret ballot. Imran Khan has nominated Sadiq Sanjarani, the present chairman, as the candidate of the ruling alliance. Yousaf Raza Gilani is likely to be the opposition’s choice for this crucial post. Though PTI now is the largest party in the Upper House, the opposition has 53 senators against 47 of the ruling alliance. Will Imran Khan reject the verdict if his candidate wins this election?

Given the present rush of events, March 26 seems so far away. But this date, when the opposition will begin its Long March to Islamabad, will come – with its intimations of another dramatic clash between political adversaries. Meanwhile, the PDM has set its sights on Punjab, where the PTI is playing on a weak wicket. Will the winds of change first rise in Lahore?

Ah, but there are other rumblings we can hear in these early days of March. After the National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) announced its Covid-19 relaxations, cases have suddenly started to go up. A third wave is appearing on the horizon. Our campaign for vaccination is not yet in full swing.

Another quote from ‘Julius Caesar’ would be about the fault in our stars – or in ourselves. On Thursday, the T20 cricket league, PSL-6, was abruptly postponed after three more players tested positive for Covid-19. It is really a bad omen that one cannot even manage cricket.

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