**Both sides unaware of their role**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2021-04-08

T HE common practice in Pakistan is to condemn the opposition groups as thieves and receive an identical response in return. This was not always the practice in this country and political rivals were treated with due courtesy. The change for the worse is the contribution to political discourse by characterless upstarts. The usual practice these days is to raise one`s stature by demeaning the other and this often without the requisite information. Thus exchanges between political opponents quite often become weird exercises in search for the most vulgar labels for adversaries.

The present government in Pakistan, for instance, chooses to describe its political opponents as `thieves` and `looters`, the last word being our subcontinent`s contribution to the English language. In f act, the level of political debate appears tohave degeneratedinto an exchange ofindecent expressions and abusive terms. This is a most unfortunate contribution of political elements who suffer from an excess of self-righteousness and treat all others as a form of pestilence. The result is steep vulgarisation of whatever little political discourse there is and for which we can claim credit. As a result, the citizens are deprived of any possibility of learning from routine political give and take.

Matters might not have come to this stage if our politicians had tried to recognise their responsibility to lay the foundations of decent exchanges between political rivals and if they had defined the parameters of political discourse. The most common form of denunciation of a political rival in our part of the world is to declare him `unpatriotic` without explaining by what magic this ultimate flaw has been uncovered. In countries where politicians` fortunes fluctuate more quickly than elsewhere, the entire lot of political figures could be dumped as untrustworthy over a short period. This situation can be rectified with little ef fort by treating the other party with the respect that one should like oneselftoreceive.These are the fundamental requirements of responsible political conduct that most activists learn in politically conscious societies during their apprenticeship, where one is taught the manner in which to make the maiden speech in a house of people`s elected representatives and how to choose one`s area of specialisation. One wonders whether such ideas cross the minds of fresh Pakistan entrantsin thelegislatures or the heads of political parties who should accept the responsibility of training their new representatives in the assemblies.

No society is born with sufficient knowledge of politics worth any intelligent person`s equipment; there are basic rules of political conduct that one should hope to learn from senior politicians who belong to one`s own party as well as to other parties. The point one is making is that politics, especially of the democratic form, is learnt through a conscious process. It is the duty of a party`s senior members to initiate the younger lot in the intricacies of political conduct but they can discharge this responsibility only if they themselves have received such training.

The essential point is that parties march towards maturity on the strength of their seniors` knowledge and experience. Unfortunately, much of this might sound unf amiliar to our young politicians who are left to make the best of their own limited resources. In Pakistan, the leaders of political parties are too afraid of losing their berths to share their wisdom with the party rank and file and as a result they end up as leaders of a herd of ignorant followers.

The root cause of political backwardness in societies such as Pakistan is a failure to move beyond the phase of agitation activity that had to be adopted out of necessity during the short struggle for liberation from alien rule. Politically conscious societies having experience of stable democratic politics over a reasonable period provide for the training of young politicians at various forumsincluding through normal educational courses. But countries such as Pakistan where the need for this kind of training is the greatest ignore this important prerequisite of democratic politics.

Unfortunately, we in Pakistan don`t care to learn from our own experience let alone from other societies. For instance, we are witnessing the co-option of an opposition leader by the establishment`s skilled operators. By allowing Yusuf Raza Gilani a few small victories, the establishment has considerably dented his role as an opposition stalwart and is now moving towards using him as a middleman in our feudal politics.

The strength of a democratic set-up doesn`t lie in its majestic vanguard but in the commitment of its tailenders who are or should be as well informed in essential matters as the front runners. It sometimes appears that party leaders are afraid of losing their privileges if they allow their followers to learn a few tricks of the trade. They are perhaps unaware of the fact that one becomes richer and certainly not poorer by sharing one`s wisdom with less fortunate human beings. One of the reasons for Pakistan`s politics being poor is the lack of communication between political leaders and the rank and ble. Let the party leaders adopt a system of regularly talking to their seconds in command and encourage them to do the same with their juniors. We would then see the party transformed in no time. Whatever has been said here is no more than certain basics of political organisation but we will start moving towards substantial political organisation if we start with these basic steps.

The upshot of this discussion is to take politics as a serious vocation and not as a Sunday afternoon diversion from attempts to enlarge one`s coffers, and to follow the rough path with sincere labour without dreaming of an early windfall. It is certainly time the ruling party and the disparate and desperate opposition started playing their role honestly. 