**Burial of reason**

Friday, Aug 04, 2023

By Raoof Hasan

It is said: what’s in a number; after all, it is just a number. But did anyone ever think that it could be much more than that? It could actually reflect the latent psyche of an individual, or a group of people who function behind the creation of some seemingly harmless numbers that could generate disastrous consequences.

One hundred and eighty (180) may also be just a number, but it also signifies the fake and frivolous cases which have so far been registered against the former prime minister and chairman of the PTI, Imran Khan. Alongside other possibilities, it inherently necessitates his movement from one court to the other, on a daily basis, with an odd judge insisting on violating the basic norms of justice in reading out a pre-drafted judgement in a rush.

That brings me to a subject that I have written about often: the centrality of the judiciary in determining the fate of a country. It has been so in Pakistan where, unfortunately, this pillar of the state has always ended up on the side of those who have used the power of the bullet to subdue the power of reason. There have been some bright stars, but the quantum of damage which those who did not belong to this miniscule coterie of honourable people have done to the country cannot be measured in words. Decades have elapsed but we remain either afraid, or deeply afflicted by the bite of venom that dictatorships bring in their wake.

Having failed repeatedly to safeguard the democratic and constitutional ethos of the country, the judiciary went along to legitimize military takeovers, thus plunging it into a regressive cycle that it has not been able to break out from. As a matter of fact, the latest amendments carried out in the Official Secrets Act 1923 is going to further broaden the outreach of the intelligence agencies by incorporating modern means of communication into the law’s ambit.

Redefinition of the word ‘document’ has facilitated its applicability to any “written, unwritten electronic, digital, or any other tangible or intangible instrument relating to the military’s procurements and capabilities”.

Similarly, the definition of the word ‘enemy’ would now encompass “every person who, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, works for or engages with a foreign power, foreign agent, non-state actor, organisation, entity, association, or group guilty of a particular act prejudicial to the safety and interest of Pakistan”.

Through amendments in Section 11, vast powers have been given to officials of intelligence agencies enabling them to “at any time, enter and search any person or place, without warrant and if necessary, by use of force, and seize any document, sketch, or anything which is or can be evidence of an offence committed, or suspected of having been committed”.

The law also deals with admissibility of evidence in a case: “All material collected during the course of enquiry or investigation, including electronic devices, data, information, documents, or such other related material which facilitates the commission of any offence under this act shall be admissible”.

It would also be an offence if “someone intrude, approach, or attack any military installation, office, camp office, or part of a building”. Instead of being restricted to war time alone, the scope of this clause has been expanded to peacetime as well.

This amendment effectively seals the fate of rights in the country. Henceforth, there will be no rights for individuals, and no privacy either. Both can be trampled upon at the sole discretion of officers of the intelligence agencies. They, in their exclusive judgement, shall determine whether one is eligible to have any rights, or he shall be deprived of all that is still part of the constitution on the mere suspicion of being engaged in acts that may be prejudicial to the perceived interests of the country.

Burial of rights it definitely is but, much more significantly, it reflects burial of reason in matters between the state and the people. Instead of going by the contents of the statute book, a new commandment has been scribbled which shall be interpreted by individuals in preference to what was decided by the combined will of the citizens of the country. All that has been effectively consigned to the bin and a new extra-constitutional narrative has been created to replace the voice of the people.

It is like transforming living beings into corpses. It is like turning them into objects which are forever afraid of every step in the corridor, every knock on the door, and every whisper from across the wall. This is living under the perpetual shadows of fear. In his epic poem ‘The Waste Land’, T S Eliot bemoaned the burial of the dead: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?/Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?/O’ keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,/Or with his nails, he’ll dig it up again!/You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, – mon frère!”

Elsewhere in the same poem, Eliot enacts a poignant image of such living: “Come in under the shadow of this red rock,/And I will show you something different from either/Your shadow at morning striding behind you,/Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you:/I will show you fear in a handful of dust”.

It is in such times that one can hardly piece one’s thoughts together. Though appropriate to the occasion, one is forced to bank on what is written by others, Eliot in the instant case. It could even be Faiz who has written extensively about the vibrancy of the human spirit. In his poem ‘Dawn of freedom’, he talks of ruptured dreams, but remains resolute not to give in to dread and despondency:

“Fire inside, longing in the eyes and burning in the heart,/Nothing provides relief from separation,

From whence came the beloved zephyr, and whither it disappeared,/The lantern by the wayside has no clue.

The night is still oppressive,/And the heart and mind remain in chains,

Keep moving, my friends, the coveted destination,/Has not arrived yet”.

I have often written in the recent past of the need to banish the demons of uncertainty and let sanity walk in to exert its mammoth influence in shaping the path forward. Divorcing it, as we appear to be doing at this critical juncture, would be an immense tragedy as, once unleashed, we may not be able to walk out of the tentacles of its venom and ferocity.

The time to stop is now. The time to stop is here. Let us not allow the demon of unquestioned control take over lest we have to formally celebrate the burial of reason.

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