**Counting down to disaster**

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The national divide is getting worse as is the desperation in the ruling circles. The kind of rhetoric used by a tag team of government ministers is a sure sign of their deep funk. But nothing is more desperate than the threat to ban the PTI, the largest and clearly the only truly nationwide party in the country.

The ban, if it happens, visibly applies only to the party elite. We have little experience of how much and how deep the impact would be. Do they all lose membership of the assemblies? What happens to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government? And to the Senate members, and the rank and file of the party? The list of possible repercussions is long and deep.

A more lethal impact of a possible banning is less visible though, for the moment. It is the sense of loss among the millions who vote for and support the PTI. There is already a deep alienation among a vast majority of the people because they resent the imposition of a fake and unrepresentative government on their head. Banning the party would further widen the gulf between the state and the people.

This would be terrible, particularly for a country facing virtual insurgencies in more than one place. The overt armed conflict is already a huge challenge, costing lives and diversion of scarce national resources. To be successful it also requires complete, total and unquestioning support of the people.

Unquestioning because so called kinetic operations by definition leave collateral damage. Modern weaponry is lethal and its impact far and wide. This is particularly true if the engagement takes place in urban areas but unforeseen consequences can happen anywhere. Taking on terrorists is a fight among the people. They not only have to understand the nature of the battle but must be its enthusiastic supporters.

This is only possible if the people own the state with all its trials and tribulations. Political parties, and in some cases popular leaders by themselves, bring the two together. They articulate and the people accept and internalize the objectives of the state. This joining or the creation of a shared national identity cannot happen by coercion, however fierce it may be.

These are the imperatives of nationhood and must be understood. It should not matter whether the political forces holding the nation together are palatable to everyone or not. In many cases they may not be but throwing the baby out with the bathwater is no solution.

Banning the PTI would be self-defeating. It would affect the bond between the state and the large majority – as demonstrated in the last election – that supports the party. With all the problems that we face today – some would call them existential – this would be tragic. We cannot allow ourselves to become hostage to this government’s deep insecurities. We need bonding not divisions.

The state is not some mythic entity but the superstructure of governance put together by the people through mutual consent. This in democratic societies is called the constitution. It may be a book of a few hundred pages (not twelve as Ziaul Haq disparagingly said) but it provides not only the organizational principles of the state but also a set of laws that have to be observed.

Like in any other book of principles and laws, there can be and often are different interpretations of its statutes. Taking note of this, constitutions the world over designate a particular authority to interpret its provisions. Our constitution designates the Supreme Court as such an authority and its conclusions are final.

Given this arrangement, it requires no great wisdom to say that if the constitution and its interpreting authority are ignored or flouted it damages the very foundation of the state. It literally amounts to breaking the social contract and denying popular will. Unfortunately, this has happened often in our history and every time left the state weaker.

It also happened last year when the constitutional provision to hold an election in 90 days was publicly ignored by the Election Commission of Pakistan with no consequences. Regrettably it is set to happen again after the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the constitution on reserved seats. It was one of the rare instances when the full court sat and decided this issue by an overwhelming majority. But this is not acceptable to this imposed government.

The language used to attack the Supreme Court is unbelievable. Ministers, including the law minister who should know better, have been doing their bit but Maryam Nawaz, the Punjab chief minister, has stood out. She has implied that judges will be dealt with an ‘iron hand’. What is meant by this? Will they be physically assaulted? This has been done before by the PML-N. Do they plan to do it again?

They say you have to lie a thousand times to cover one lie. This government is set to take a thousand steps to ensure that its fake majority is preserved. If in the process the constitution is flouted, sacred institutions belittled and rule of law pushed aside, so be it. This level of shamelessness has no parallel even in our more than chequered seventy seven year history.

Where will all this lead us? One wise thing done by the state was to give the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government to the PTI. Not only because it was the correct democratic thing to do but because of the security challenge in the province. If a fake government, like the one in the centre, had been imposed it would have disillusioned millions who voted for the party. This would have made the task of fighting terrorism even harder.

The same principle in a different way has to be applied to the fight against poverty, injustice, hunger, disease, literacy and much more. No single entity or party can solve these problems but it would certainly help if people assume ownership of whatever is being done.

No one is saying the government should be handed over to the PTI, but the acrimony has to be reduced. The damage polarization does to a nation must be recognized as is ignoring the constitution and law. This banning of a political party should be off the table and the vilification of the Supreme Court must stop.

A way forward should be found where no one feels left behind. It’s not easy but it won’t happen unless deliberate effort is made for it. It has to be a conscious conclusion that the way things are panning out can only lead to disaster. Changing ways of thinking is not easy but when faced with overwhelming odds, this is the only option.

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