**Curse of celebrity politics**

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The public in many countries across the world is fed up with traditional politicians. But instead of replacing bad politicians with better ones, voters in several countries have chosen celebrities as their anti-politician alternative. This has proved to be a mistake. Celebrities are people who become famous, and receive media attention, from being rich, successfully participating in sports or from their position in the entertainment industry.

Donald Trump used his celebrity as a wealthy businessman and flame throwing television personality to win the Republican Party’s nomination for the US presidency in 2016. He ended up becoming president and leaving a legacy of polarizing the world’s oldest democracy.

Italian comedian Beppe Grillo formed a political party and remained centre-stage for a while between 2010 and 2018. But his stint as leader of the Five Star Movement did little to help resolve any of Italy’s political or economic issues.

Pakistan is still reeling from the aftereffects of the rise of a cricket star to the country’s prime ministership. It is here that the problem of substituting politicians with celebrities is on full display. Politicians tend to identify with a point of view or a set of ideas. Celebrity politicians need to only point out how the system is broken and how they, with their magical touch, can fix things. Throughout their careers, politicians face criticism and the public get to weigh their promises and performance against critical comments.

Celebrities have little by way of a political track record and escape stringent media scrutiny, well until it is too late. More significantly, politicians have supporters and followers; celebrities have fans. Supporters can shift their support, based on issues, but a fan – defined as “an ardent devotee, an enthusiast” – is less amenable to reasoning. After all, fan is often considered to be short for the English word ‘fanatic’, which is defined as someone representing “an extreme unreasoning enthusiasm”.

A few years ago, former presidential speechwriter and Washington Post columnist, Michael Gerson, posed the question, “Is the skill set of the celebrity suited to the reality of governing?”

The column was written in the context of the US and the rise of Donald Trump, who had entered politics as a celebrity without going through the mill of politics. But it also sheds light on the phenomenon of celebrity politicians in general.

For many years, Trump had bought and sold real estate, appeared at fundraisers in a tuxedo, and generated publicity about his private life before hosting the TV show, ‘Apprentice’. In that show, Trump hired one of 16 people to work at one of his companies, while he fired the rest one by one based on their mistakes and incompetence. It built the image of Trump as a successful and decisive businessman even though his businesses often lost money borrowed from banks.

When Trump declared his candidacy for American presidency, he got lots of media attention. His rallies were entertainment interspersed with complaints about the failings of his rivals and the corrupt political system. People frustrated by the corruption of traditional politics flocked to Trump’s rallies and saw them as a new version of his entertaining television show. They ultimately voted for him, expecting him to make the country as prosperous as he had made himself and to fire the incompetent officials they had come to resent over the years.

The impression created by television helped overcome the reality that Trump had no experience of governance or of sitting in a legislature. It was akin to Pakistanis who thought that their cricket hero would bowl out corruption, hit a six in the field of economics, and transform the government into a charity just as he reputedly built a hospital in his mother’s name after retiring from cricket.

Our cricket hero entertained his fans from atop a container for days on end, with full television coverage. He mocked his opponents, railed against corruption, and made fantastic promises. Within 48 hours of being sworn in as prime minister, he discovered that his assumption of lavish expenditure by Nawaz Sharif on the prime minister’s official residence from the exchequer was wrong. Nawaz Sharif had dutifully written cheques to reimburse his personal expenses and those of his family.

Soon after that, he had to renege on promises about transforming the prime minister’s house into a university. Although crowds applauded him for promises like reduction in expenses on catering for official events, it soon became apparent that catering expenses are a drop in the bucket of Pakistan’s huge deficit, and the gimmick of transforming a residential building into a university might end up incurring significant costs. The claims about making Pakistan collectively wealthy by repatriating ‘billions of dollars’ held by ‘corrupt’ Pakistan in foreign banks proved equally vacuous.

The lesson in the experience of several countries with celebrity demagogues is that politics and governance is too serious to be left to those whose primary claim to fame lies in their ability to entertain us. It is not that comedians, sportsmen, or TV and film personalities should not enter politics. It is just that their knowledge of politics and governance, and not their status as celebrities, should be the determinant of their political standing.

As Michael Gerson had noted in his column, “The culture of celebrity elevates appearance over accomplishment.” In this culture, “rivalries and feuds are essential to the storyline”, and “it encourages theatrical bitterness. Instead of pursuing a policy vision, the first calling of the celebrity is to maintain a brand”. According to Gerson, the celebrity is likely to use “the power of his office to pursue personal vendettas. Instead of yelling at the television when people displease him, he now has the power to hurt them in practical ways”.

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