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**Dangerous divisions**

The US election has shown us how dangerous a divided country can be. It has also highlighted the risks that are posed when a leader, in this case Donald Trump, openly speaks out for racists, fascists and others who hold extreme views.

The fact that Trump did so over four years appears to have encouraged people who hold such beliefs to come out in the open. Their prejudices, hidden for years under layers of deception and political correctness, have come out in the emergence of groups which believe in extremism of various kinds, and in some cases, also violence. They include the all white, all male Proud Boys, which Trump mentioned in one of his debate speeches, as well as a mixture of neo Nazis, skinheads, fascists and even remnants of the Ku Klux Klan.

The challenge for Joe Biden will be to knit back the country again and bring it together. Whether he can do so is difficult to say. It will take time. It will take patience, it will take effort and perhaps it will take another decade or so of change and the gradual return to older norms.

Trump’s example brings us back to our own country. Our prime minister has openly praised Trump as a man who behaves spontaneously and is direct. Imran Khan has said that Trump and he share common traits. This is all very well, but it is also frightening. We ask because there have been analysts who say that the Tiger Force created by Imran is a kind of a potential militia.

But, of course, the problem of division goes far beyond the existence of extremist groups. These have existed for years in the US and include organisations such as the National Alliance founded in the 1970s by William Pierce, whose son later renounced the group and closed it down after entering the compound it had made its base. There is always a danger that such groups can gain a stronger and stronger hold in Pakistan, where some already exist.

The real issue, however, is that of divided nations. The US today is divided – on the basis of race, on the basis of belief, on the basis of loyalty, and on the basis of the colour blue or red, representing Democrats or Republicans. But there are also other divides based around gender, belief, and ways of life. Pakistan is not starkly different. Our political reality has become completely disjointed with no real ability to hold together, or to work as a unit, for the sake of the country and its people. Democratically elected governments are after all expected to work for the people. So are other leaders from other parties, who may not be a part of government, but are a part of parliament.

In our situation, we see openly expressed hatred between the PTI and the PML-N. The PPP has sometimes swung in its position from one way to the other, making it a little unclear precisely what Bilawal Bhutto means when he makes his speeches. And we have hatred in Karachi, between parties with influence in that troubled city. The challenge for leaders must be to bring our country together and make a more harmonious federation. This is not an easy task; the reality that we saw in the US where riots broke out soon after the poll was opened, even if there were limited ones, shows us how important it is to prevent a complete divide between political groups and forces. They must be able to sit together, defend their views, but at least be able to talk.

At the present moment, we are not at this point. There is no possibility that the main parties would be ready to sit together and discuss the problems with the country, which at the present time are many in number. The dangers ranges from inflation, which has literally put food beyond the reach of millions of people in the country, to the Covid virus and incoming problems, such as smog created by environmental pollution and climate change, which has greatly affected farmers.

We also have divides between the people and the government. There was no logical reason at all for the Punjab government and its police to act so violently against farmers who had chosen to protest peacefully in Lahore and raise their demands for higher prices for the items they sold, or a deduction in the prices of fertilisers, pesticides, and other equipment they needed to produce the food and other items we used on a daily basis. The attack with water cannons, teargas and batons, which resulted in the death of at least one farmer was completely unnecessary. But we have seen precisely such violence against students and social activists, as well as other groups before. Even teachers and nurses have been attacked as have junior doctors.

We need to create more tolerance harmony, and a greater willingness to accept different points of view. We also need to learn from America and develop the capacity to be able to talk, no matter what differences may exist. Until this happens, there can be no real hope of a future which is without violence and without unrest.

The task of our prime minister and his team must be to create this situation so that people can learn to live in a place which offers them safety, security and tolerance all humans need no matter where they live and what they do.

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