**Grand dialogue ?**

BY N I A Z M U R T A Z A 2021-01-12

AS the PDM protests increase tensions, many tense souls want a grand dialogue to avert a crisis. They include think tanks, former generals, politicians, analysts and media, amongst others. Some people say that talks would perhaps include politicians, the army, judges and even bureaucrats, media, civil society and scholars.

While the PDM aims only to end unconstitutional political forays, some suggest a wider agenda to end endemic political misrule too. For many pro-establishment minds, this means more provinces, presidential system, proportional representation, technocracy and ending dynastic politics. While most don`t give a post-dialogue road map, there have been warnings that unless the parties sign a contract on some such points, the establishment`s forays won`t end. Presumably, all parties would also have to pass needed consutudonal changes.

Sentimental patriots may rise to their feet to applaud all this and be brought to tears by the heart-warming idea of key actors finally uniting for the national good.

But the sheer audacity of the idea gives goose pimples to rational souls. First, talks with such a wide agenda and participants will likely fail. Second, even if they succeed, pro-democracy minds ask warily that given that politicians will have to ef fect constitutional changes upfront, what incentive will there then be for the establishment to keep its promises over many future decades. Since forays aren`t driven by political misrule but enduring lesser interests, many muse if a signed contract can bind those whom constitutional edicts and institutional oaths don`t seem to.

Third, misrule emerges from societal power inequities and can be ended not instantly via mere talk but via long-term mass political mobilisation. No developing state has ended misrule by such unusual supra-constitutional talks that included unelected elements with no legal role or expertise in decision-making. Impatient patriots stubbornly brush aside such legalities saying such talks will serve the national interest by ending misrule. But patient analysts say the ideas being given by the establishment`s supporters are all designed to strengthen khaki sway and will actually enhance misrule, put stress on the delicate societal fabric and enhance societal conflict.

So, small provinces made on an administrative and not ethnic basis will lack a binding glue, create capacity and funding issues and make provinces dependent on a strong centre. Global and regional data shows that the best-governed states mostly have a parliamentary and not presidential system, which is unsuited for diverse nations.Proportional representation will fragment political parties and strengthen unelected forces. Technocracies don`t lead to better decisions but undermine accountability, as in the PTI`s cabinet.

Finally, with dynastic politics, one must note that politics emerges from and reflects societal realities. We have dynastic politics as we are a dynastic society, with dynasties rampant in local business, media, religious orders and entertainment. Dynastic politics will reduce gradually only when dynasties in society reduce first. Only those political brands can thrive naturally which build on widespread societal mores, like dynasties.

So ending dynastic politics artificially will not lead to merit-based politics as merit is not widespread in society. In f act, worse forms of politics based on crude mores widespread in South Asian societies will emerge, eg bigoted politics, as seen in the rise of the non-dynastic BJP and MQM. Odd though it may sound, dynastic politics is the least worse type of politics that can emerge naturally from oursociety immediately until long-term political mobilisation weans the masses away from it.

Thus, the constitutional design to exclude unelected forces in political decisions is not ad hoc but driven by the reality thattheir inputs will not serve national but lesser interests. Irked patriots may ask what then will reduce misrule. For liberals, the answer based on global data is clear: f ree polls; civilian sway; no inclusion of military and religion in politics, and a strong opposition, media and civil society to hold regimes accountable and mobilise masses. However, some push unproven ideas in the name of good governance while suppressing globally proven governance good practices that serve public interests but undermine their own.

Thus dialogue must focus only on ending the harmful political forays of unelected institutions, and ensuring civilian sway and fair polls. But would such institutions leave the room quietly? The PDM struggle is crucial despite the disunity and dodgy traits and pasts of component parties. Unrelenting pressure from such struggle may put the genie back into the bottle given the huge internal and external vulnerabilities the state faces.  The writer heads INSPIRING Pakistan, a progressive policy unit.

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