**Looking back but moving forward**

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Thursday, Jun 06, 2024

There are necessary controversies and some that should at best be avoided. Our power woes and what to do about the alleged loot of independent power producers falls in the necessary category. With circular debt choking us, we must debate and hold to account those that have put us in this jam.

The events of 1971 and who is responsible for the breakup of Pakistan is a controversy best avoided. It is a touchy subject and emotions are still high fifty-three years on. Every time the civil-military divide sharpens, the breakup of Pakistan becomes a pet subject on all sides to hurl accusations at each other.

One such example of these verbal missiles is a video going around social media of a normally wooden Nawaz Sharif animatedly blaming the military for every sin under the sun regarding 1971. This ‘eloquence’ probably came after he was removed from office in 2017 and which he blamed on the then army chief, Gen Bajwa.

In the same vein is a tweet from Imran Khan’s account, whether deliberate or without his knowledge. It is another example of emotions taking over. Whoever has done it, has only managed to exacerbate a difficult situation even further. What the nation needs is reconciliation. What the PTI needs is a recognition that no such national coming together is possible without it. Both these objectives become impossible if each other’s sensitivities are not catered to.

This tweet has heightened tensions without moving the stalemate one inch forward. That the military leadership has reacted with anger is not a surprise; that this without mandate government has decided to take full advantage of the situation is not a surprise either. The question is not who manages to hurt the other more. The real question is: do such hardened attitudes favour an already beleaguered nation? The obvious answer is no.

This does not mean that we should not discuss or try to draw lessons from our history. The much-quoted philosopher George Santayana comes to mind; he famously said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. And we have much to learn from our history. The challenge is how to do it without weaponizing its details to hurt each other.

I remember speaking in 1999 at a seminar in Staff College Quetta on the 1971 events leading to break up of Pakistan. Present among speakers was a former chief of army staff and many prominent scholars. The audience was obviously military as it is a defence establishment. In a free-flowing discussion, there were no barriers to what can and what cannot be discussed. And this was during military rule as Gen Musharraf had already taken over. My experience of other military institutions such as the National Defence University is similar.

I have given examples of military institutions but this kind of academic freedom is taken as given in most universities of the country. I taught political history of Pakistan at the Lahore School of Economics for many years without any direction to curtail this or that. Every December our media freely discusses events of 1971 and almost every discussion involves drawing some lessons from what happened then. There has never been any restriction.

So, the problem then is not discussing our history. We should and draw the right lessons – hopefully. It is how we do it and in what context that is important. We are passing through a very difficult period The economy is teetering on the edge with an increasing number of people slipping below the poverty line. Peace and security are a serious problem and not just in parts of Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Society is deeply polarized with different fault lines becoming sharper by the day.

It is this and more that dictates coming together. One can go on and on describing the problem but that is not helpful. It is the search for solutions that should push us in the right direction. History can and should become a guide but without rancour and blame. Similarly, the state should not be in the business of criminalizing genuinely different points of view. That is not helpful either.

When discussions of our history take place, the one institution that is as much discussed as the military and constantly in the dock is our judiciary. Its sins are often recounted beginning with the Tamizuddin case and on and on to legalizing every martial law. A particular black mark on it is the judicial execution of Mr Bhutto. In a remarkable attempt at undoing historical wrongs, this has been reversed by the SC, in a manner of speaking. But can others be?

It is difficult to do this while new annals of controversial judgments are constantly been written – the taking away of the bat symbol from the PTI being one of them. This too will go down in history as an epoch-making decision of the Isa court and will be much discussed for a long long time.

While on the subject of the symbol decision, another episode comes to mind. A wrong kind of historical precedent has been set by the Supreme Court with its registrar writing a letter to the British high commissioner on the direction of the honourable chief justice. I have two issues with that. One, Supreme Court is a premier institution of the state. It does not and should not write letters to foreign emissaries explaining its decisions. In fact, as judges speak through their judgments, it has already spoken. It has no need to write letters to explain further.

The second is the tone of the letter. The letter digs up the Mossadagh overthrow in Iran and the creation through British doing, of the state of Israel. If British crimes had to be found, there are thousands more and many nearer home, like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre or the Radcliff boundary commission which did grave injustice to us while partitioning Punjab. But, why go there? If at all any reply had to be given, it should have been through a demarche by the Foreign Office. It is a bit embarrassing for such an exchange to have taken place.

But it has – just as the controversy on social media re 1971. These two episodes also have lessons for us, in both cases what not to do. Let us learn whatever we can and move forward. And let retribution be the domain of history.

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