**Need for a strategic pause**

BY M A L E E H A L O D H I 2020-12-07

AN inflection point seems to have been reached in the country`s politics that could propel the country into uncharted territory with uncertain consequences for its stability. The confrontation between the government and opposition shows no sign of easing. Instead, the political temperature has risen to a fever pitch and a bitter power struggle continues to rage. This is unlikely to produce any winners. It puts at risk serious management of the pandemic`s second wave, efforts for the country`s economic recovery and responses to a volatile regional security situation. Deepening political polarisation is already casting a shadow on efforts to effectively address these internal and external challenges.

The political paralysis that looms will only exacerbate this grim situation and leave people more dispirited aboutthefuture.

The positions of the two sides are now so far apart that any political space or meeting ground has all but been eliminated for a national dialogue, which seemed a sensible way out of this stand-off.

The PTI government has repeatedly insisted that it will not countenance a dialogue on an NRO which it claims is all that the opposition wants to discuss despite vehement denials by the latter. The opposition for its part, has been calling for Prime Minister Imran Khan`s resignation, which too rules out any ground for talks.

Of course, political rivals of ten adopt maximalist positions that can be narrowed down in purposeful negotiations. But both sides have now dug their heels in and adopted such extreme and uncompromising postures that chances of any dialogue seem to have been overtaken by these hardened positions. The incendiary rhetoric employed by both sides has further vitiated the atmosphere.

Government spokesmen continue to cast the opposition as looters and foreign agents while opposition leaders have dubbed the PTI leadership as a virus worse than Covid-19.

Before the second wave of the pandemic began afflicting the country, and in anticipation of this widely predicted danger, the government could arguably have reached out to the parliamentary opposition to keep it briefed on a continuing basison the Covid-19 situation. Leading from the front, it could have acted proactively and created the conditions for cooperation in this regard. Instead, it only started issuing public exhortations once the opposition had already embarked on its falsa plans.

Opposition leaders too did not take any initiative to ask the authorities the NCOC for example to bring them up to speed on the pandemic and take a reasoned decision on that basis. Fearful they would lose the momentum created by their public campaign PDM leaders dismissed calls to limit or postpone their rallies.

The opposition`s decision to go ahead with its Multan rally took the government-opposition confrontation to a new peak. The falsa went ahead in defiance of government restrictions and hurdles, and while scuffles between opposition supporters and local authorities remained limited, they held out the spectre of more serious clashes ahead as the PDM announced it would not back down from plans to hold more rallies and a `long march` on the capital. That people were willing to attend opposition rallies in disregard of the virus threat showed both the extent of public disaffection with the government as well as underlined the danger of rallies becoming superspreader events.

Where does this leave the country? In a precarious place at a time of extraordinary challenge.

Both the government and opposition are now trapped in a vicious cycle from which neither has the intent nor will to escape. This poses risks to the country. For a start the intensifying political conflict will be an obvious hurdle in efforts to get the pandemic under control before a vaccine becomes available and can be distributed. Even now it is perhaps not too late for detailed briefings to be given to opposition representatives, in parliament for example, to encourage understanding of the risks they are running and the negative impact on public perceptions of their conduct in the midst of a health emergency.

Apart from Covid-19, prolonged confrontation between the government and opposition can also imperil the country`s much-needed economic recovery after the ravages caused by the pandemicto an already fragile economy. Rebound from a virus-induced economic recession depends critically on establishing an environment of political calm and tranquillity and evolving a political consensus to support the measures instituted to affect a turnaround. The government should accept that this is as much a political as a technocratic task and the initiative to create the necessary atmosphere for economic activity rests with it. Already shortages of essential commodities and gas are causing people daily hardship. This urges the need for a political truce.

So does the regional security situation an implacable foe on the eastern border directing subversive activities in the country and intensifying repression in occupied Kashmir while uncertainties mount on the western frontier with escalating violence in Afghanistan. This calls for national cohesion in the face of external challenges.

Against this backdrop what is needed is a strategic pause in the political battle to afford an opportunity for both sides to step back, introspect, rethink and consider how to engage for a cause higher than themselves the country. Not a tactical pause of standing down only to ready themselves to continue a battle of attrition but a strategic one that opens the way to a change in approach by both sides. The establishment may have to play a role in helping to move the two parties towards such a strategic pause which could then enable the government and opposition to reconsider their positions and think of how to put the interest of the country foremost in their strategies.

By accepting a pause including in the war of words, neither side need see itself as having submitted to the other. This may then create an atmosphere where a dialogue could eventually become possible giving the country much-needed respite from political turmoil. It will also be an opportunity for the government to show it can put aside its brand of exclusionary politics to represent the entire nation, not just its own supporters.  The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.