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February 12, 2021

**No shame**

“With old liars who have been acting all their lives, there are moments when they enter so completely into their part that they tremble or shed tears in earnest although at that very moment, or a second later, they are able to whisper to themselves, ‘you know you are lying, you shameless old sinner!’” – Fyodor Dostoevsky

The leaked video showing legislators receiving huge sums of money in exchange for selling their votes for Senate seats back in 2018 has opened up a Pandora’s Box. The fact that it has come just days before the next Senate elections enhances its importance and relevance manifold.

For some time now, the government and the opposition have been locked up in a war zone over the proposal for holding elections to the Senate through open balloting. The government’s contention has been that all political parties should join hands to get rid of this plague of buying and selling of votes which is an integral ingredient for the spread of corruption.

To make that happen, it has done three things. It approached the SC for advice whether the elections to the Senate are held under the constitution as posited by Article 226 thereof, or under the ordinary statute law, being the Election Act, 2017. It also moved a constitutional amendment in the NA for holding the elections through open balloting. When that led to a pandemonium over two days, and keeping in mind the release of the election schedule by the ECP on February 11, it also unveiled a presidential ordinance to hold the Senate elections through open balloting. Its promulgation was, however, made conditional on positive advice by the SC regarding the petition pending before it.

Rather than taking cognisance of the substance of the matter, the opposition has been stuck with technicalities like the timing of the move and the failure of the government for creating a consensus in parliament. This is despite the fact that the two leading constituents of the PDM – the PML-N and the PPP – had agreed to hold the elections to the Senate through open balloting vide the Charter of Democracy. Article 23 of the CoD reads: “To prevent corruption and floor crossing, all votes for the Senate and indirect seats will be by open identifiable ballot”.

Ever since his entry into politics more than two decades ago, Imran Khan’s commitment to elimination of corruption has been absolute and he has never wavered in his resolve. This is effectively reflected in his decision to kick out 20 of his party MPAs in the KP Assembly who were involved in selling their votes before the last Senate elections to the benefit of the PPP which, in spite of having only three seats in the assembly, ended up with two senators. Even now when the name of Sultan Mohammad Khan, the sitting minister for law and parliamentary affairs in KP, surfaced in the controversy, he was immediately asked to resign.

Since assuming the charge of the prime minister, Imran Khan’s resolve has only strengthened further and he has often called upon the opposition parties to engage in a dialogue to make the electoral process transparent. Unfortunately, instead of coming to the negotiating table, the opposition has preferred to pursue its politics of agitation, thus adding further venom to the divide.

If we are all committed to democracy, there should be no hesitation in collaborating to get rid of the scourge of buying and selling of votes. This is the only way democracy will become stronger. By opposing the government move, the opposition is pitching itself on the side of corruption and malpractices in the annals of conducting elections. This is only going to render democracy weaker.

They must understand that if someone is paying a huge price to get elected to the Senate today, he is doing so because he knows he will use his office not only to recover his investment, but make a lot more on top of that to invest in future endeavours. This is the core reason why the cancer of corruption has ravaged the entire society and the affliction is no longer looked upon with disapproval, leading to moral collapse across the national fabric. In the process, we are doing no service to democracy. In fact, we are only digging the pit deeper for it to sink further.

The battle to end corruption should not be subject to any ifs and buts. It should also not be construed as political victimisation. Hiding behind these shallow covers only exposes the beneficiary elite further. The optics speak of the opposition’s effort to restore ‘respect of vote’, but the reality is that they are all lined up in defence of corrupt practices. They will have to come out clean which side of the divide they belong to.

Putting things right is the responsibility of all political parties. They must cooperate to get rid of corruption because if they don’t do it today, they will not be able to do it in the future either. An unmitigated tragedy it is, but there is no shame!

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