**Not one party is revolutionary**

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Monday, Oct 30, 2023

Paradoxical though it may sound, politics in Pakistan remain both tantalizingly unpredictable and ridiculously predictable.

A prime minister commanding a comfortable majority may be conveniently shown the door, leaving everyone gobsmacked. Conversely, a fallen leader may be resurrected to the former glory hands down. It’s a drama that is at once thrilling and boring, tragic and comic, fear inspiring and hope bestowing. Battered badly, the protagonist is knocked down but never knocked out.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif’s return from exile only shows that the tragicomedy of Pakistani politics has come full circle yet another time.

Novelist E M Forster categorizes characters in a work of fiction into flat and round. Flat characters don’t change in the course of a novel; they always do what they are expected to do. Round characters undergo change and thus often take the reader by surprise. In Pakistani politics, many characters that seem to be flat become round. But after a while it turns out that their roundness was merely an eyewash.

Nawaz Sharif set off his political career under the wings of military dictator General Ziaul Haq. He started as the Punjab finance minister and was made the province’s chief minister after the 1985 elections. From then on, he was to be the proverbial blue-eyed boy of the establishment. In two years (1990), he assumed the highest political office of the land.

The year 1993 was a turning point in his career. The irresistible impulse to break free made him bite the hand that had so far fed him. He was forced to vacate the prime minister’s office. His role was beginning to change. Four years later, he swept back to power. But he was never to enjoy the same confidence of his mentors again. In 1999, he was ousted for a second time, this time in a coup.

Having been forced into exile and dismissed as dead in the water by all, Sharif returned, first to the country in 2007 and then to power in 2013, thus becoming the first person in the country’s turbulent political history to have held the office of the prime minister thrice – a feat that his erstwhile rival Benazir Bhutto was on the brink of accomplishing before him. Given his party’s unassailable position in parliament, it appeared that Sharif would set another record: becoming the first premier to complete his/her tenure.

But that wasn’t to be. In 2017, he was given the sack by the Supreme Court for not being truthful and honest. His disqualification from holding public office was declared lifetime. In related developments, he was convicted of corruption and sentenced as well as debarred from formally heading a political party.

Sharif had two courses open to him. He could grin and bear his disqualification and pack up his bags. He did not choose the reconciliatory course. Instead, he decided to go on the offensive and started rounding on the institutions which, he believed, unfairly brought his tenure to an abrupt end. Having spent one-and-a-half years behind bars, he was allowed to leave the country on medical grounds. To many, the permission signaled the beginning of a detente between him and his powerful antagonists.

Sharif’s fall was accompanied by the rise of Imran Khan to the office of prime minister in 2018. In the initial years of his political career, Khan remained a nonentity. But eventually, luck smiled on him and he became the blue-eyed boy of the mighty. When destiny was writing the script of Sharif’s fall, it was simultaneously decreeing Khan’s rise. Destiny is the force which can turn the apparently impossible into possible, even make it look like necessary. Thus, a person whose only strength was demagogy was made into the most populist leader in present-day Pakistan. Thus, also began a chapter in the country’s political history when all movers and shakers were on the same page.

It was obvious that Sharif’s fortune couldn’t revive unless that of Khan took a tumble. The moment finally arrived when he, like his arch adversary, tried to bite the hand that had so far fed him. Contrary to his expectations, Khan’s populism couldn’t head off his fall. The wheel of fortune turned half circle. The fall of Khan necessitated the reinstatement of the Sharifs, with the third major political player – the Bhuttos/Zardaris – getting their due share as well.

Is Imran Khan a round character? After his fall, Khan went all-out against the powerful people and with the support of his social media brigade has presented himself as the torchbearer of civilian supremacy. Yet, he too is a flat character: a staunch supporter of the system as long as its scales remain tilted in his favour. His fight is not against the system but only against his place in it.

The PTI and the PPP have taken a strong stand against the ‘favourable’ treatment being meted out to Nawaz Sharif. In principle, the PTI has no cause for complaint, because the treatment that its leader received until quite recently was no less favourable. As for the PPP, no one should nourish the impression that it hasn’t hobnobbed with the powerful people.

The PPP’s anti-establishment credentials received the first serious jolt when Benazir Bhutto made a common cause with the then president Ghulam Ishaq Khan (GIK), an archetype establishmentarian, who earlier sacked him in 1990, in forcing the popularly elected Sharif to quit in 1993. For a party which avowedly believed in respecting the popular mandate, striking an alliance with a GIK-like figure to force the exit of an elected government was hard to defend.

Next, Ms Bhutto struck a deal with the military regime of Gen Pervez Musharraf in the form of the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), which washed away corruption charges against the party’s top leadership and subsequently enabled the party to govern the country for a full five years.

The NRO was defended on the ground that the country needed a grand reconciliation among all the players, allowing the leadership to focus on nation-building and economic development. Be that as it may, if ‘reconciliation’ was such a brilliant idea in 2007, its efficacy ought not to be questioned now, just because at present the beneficiary is someone else. Like the PTI and the PML-N, the PPP is not against the system as long as it isn’t treated ‘unfairly.’ The allegiance, or opposition, to the system on the part of all three parties is conditional – ‘wafadari basharte austwari’.

In politics, fair is foul and foul is fair. In the scramble for power, questions of morality or of law often take a backseat. That said, by making choices in testing political situations, a party positions itself in a particular way. It can choose to hunt with the hounds or run with the hare. It can’t do both. If it does, it leaves none with any doubt that it’s with neither; rather it’s loyal only to itself.

At present, Imran Khan is projecting himself as a revolutionary, as Nawaz Sharif did until a couple of years ago. The word ‘revolution’ has been blatantly misused in our society. If political or economic power only changes hands, or the same elite, albeit putting on a different garb, continues to be in charge of the destiny of the people, the change is anything but revolutionary. At any rate, liberals are seldom cast in the revolutionary mold.

None of our prime leaders has sought to shake the prevalent political or economic order. They have never attacked the crony capitalism or the heartless market forces that survive every change in the government. None of them is a whit against the sticky-fingered elite or racketeering businesspersons as long as they are on their side.

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