**Transformation time**

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Before we bid adieu to the old, let’s applaud it. It carried Pakistan to seventy. It helped usher in, albeit slowly, structures and institutions which have stood the test of time, and buffets and turmoil, and still held against all odds.

The assaults are not yet over but our belief that they can withstand any amount of ferociousness and insidious attacks against the integrity of the state and the nation are reassuring. A lot has been said about our national ‘resilience’ and the capacity to thwart evil in this space already. We can only be proud of it as a nation. The elections were just one more proof of it. Despite the political strife and a divided house emerging from such a polarised culture, we resurrected promise and hope as we venture on another fresh journey. Our problems may be old and pre-ordained, arising out of our inadequacies, but a new leadership, a fresh approach and a possibly better conduct in government may just help matters take a turn for the better.

Think of it. There is new untried leadership at the top, beyond the known faces that had become stale over decades with their frivolities and susceptibilities; that should give us hope of a different outcome. The issues that plague us may be entrenched and pervasive but with a fresher look we may just find the missing clue to alleviate our woes better. This hope about us as nation under a new leadership is not restricted to Pakistanis alone; the world too hopes Pakistan makes the change to its blotted image with course corrections that can only come with a more rational management of our difficulties. It is worth an attempt. Yes, conjuring a government may seem an ordeal but it always is when you have a new player in the midst and the people have answered the call of their choice opposed to the domination of the two most frequented parties in power over repeated cycles.

It’s not a divided mandate or a hung parliament, this is the real aspiration expressed by a frustrated people disappointed with their usual choices because of unfulfilled promises. If it ends up being not one-sided it has bona-fide political logic to it, greatly more than the aspersions cast on the role of the establishment in engineering a fragmented mandate.

We are so used to only one type of politics that it makes it harder to accept the new realities. The induction of Imran Khan’s PTI has shaken the old system to the core. If for a moment – despite all reservations on the counting process after the polls and the ensuing confusion from it – it was to be imagined that it was in fact the voice of the people against the status quo of the traditional ruling elites, it all begins to seem greatly more promising. What follows in administrative set-ups and policy options gets driven by what will meet the aspirations of the people. This is where the focus needs to be rather than on allegations of one omission or another commission from the opposition while the government-in-waiting loses precious time fighting those charges.

What is equally amazing is how international and independent observers, from the EU to the UN to Fafen, have all lauded the elections. These were the largest elections in the history of our country and conducted simultaneously for the national and provincial assemblies – a rarity. Indian election observers too were only full of praise. It may please Pakistanis to know that India not only very closely monitored the entire process but also referred to it as an example worthy of emulation. But so smitten are we with our personalised loyalties and political affiliations that to process a different outcome has become a bane. It remains the most crucial moment of our political journey where the voice of the people commands a change. It is time to deal with it.

There remain questions of some misconduct or procedural violation, if at all, during the counting process. In the words of India’s chief election commissioner who was on the panel of international observers, ‘the polling agents of contesting parties were positioned at around 7-8 meters from the place where the counting was done in their full view’, yet the plaints of miscounting were alleged. In his words, ‘the election commission could have managed it better to assuage any subsequent apprehensions’. Possibly yes. Authority is mostly wrongly enforced to seek order, but better management could have helped avoid serious allegations later which even if frivolous have tended to taint the polls. Such is the unique hold of the proverbially established elites of the system as they go wild in claiming foul.

There is a need for all-round grace. Sides had been well chosen long before the day of polling and the commitment to outdo the other was intense. Pollsters identified a some 18 percent electorate that still stood undecided. Clearly, the banter of the campaign and the stagnation in conventional politics kept them waiting to choose sides. This was perhaps the first time that a significant chunk had chosen to bypass the usual determinants of the voting pattern, based around familial or tribal affiliations. This group needed greater convincing and those who stuck to the older patterns of politics were never going to be the ones who could have influenced their choice.

A more informed chunk thus made a more informed choice, trumping tradition with the fresh promise of better hope in the backdrop of a heavily tainted PML-N because of the ongoing corruption cases against their leadership, a lesser evil. What then is the cacophony about? It sadly reflects the continuation of the open season of how this country’s military establishment has been maligned to divert focus from the personal plight of the PML-N’s mainstream leadership. The same sense fuels the acrimony even after the polls. Those who find themselves on the wrong side of the electoral equation wish to burn the house down. Sad.

The PML-N failed to put its own house in order and displayed inadequate political and moral wisdom in navigating itself out of its self-generated quagmire. To lump it on the military was only crass opportunism. Panama was a self-created disaster. Many an intervening opportunity was lost to unmitigated arrogance and poor counsel. The Sharifs have literally walked themselves into incarceration. The saving grace was its wide presence in Punjab where traditional voting patterns came to its rescue. That has saved its political base with a chance to fight another day. This is hugely reassuring for them. Hereon if they continue to err in policy and strategy, choosing instead to continue maligning others rather than building on their current strength, they can end up losing their base too in a far more informed electorate.

It would be a shame if we again failed the expectations of the people, from either side – the opposition and the party in power. That will need far more mature political wisdom than what is on display.

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