**Let’s not pretend**

**Syed Talat Hussain**

Last week, while responding to a question regarding news about Washington sharing the transcript of the controversial call between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Prime Minister Imran Khan, the Foreign Office spokesman faced an awkward moment: he couldn’t confirm the news because that would have meant embarrassing his institution and the prime minister. And he couldn’t deny it because that could provoke the US State Department to make the content of the call officially available. The spokesman wriggled out of the bind by using a classic fudge: “We would want the episode to end. The foreign minister has commented on this in detail. Politically, we need to move on”.

In other words, his response to the lingering question of which of the two, Pompeo or the prime minister, lied about the contents of the call was: ‘End it. Move on’. He might have also added: “Pretend it never happened.” The reaction, while disingenuous, was also profound because it captured what has become a disease of epidemic proportions among wielders of power. On every important count, they simply want to kill debate, shove national embarrassments under the carpet and – while laying thick layers of new deceptions atop denials – point to fictional demands of national interest to plead silence.

Diplomatic deviousness designed to hide truth or create illusions is done across the world but in very few places is this prompted and enforced at home. In this respect, as indeed in many others, the present government represents an aggravated continuity rather than radical departure from the past. Official sophistry and chicanery is plumbing new depths and the diet of deliberate distractions is getting fatter by the day. There is a justification for every mistake. Every misstep is rationalised. Every wrong decision is projected as a gem of a glittering vision that the critics are too blind to see.

So an incompetent and totally unqualified chief minister of Punjab is good because he is ‘brave’ – exactly what acts of bravery he has committed as a useful front of powerful billionaires and family lobbies isn’t clear but he is so because PM Imran has described him as such. The ludicrous and extended defence of the per nautical mile cost of PM Imran’s travel is part of the same culture of insult to common sense. So is silence over the Khawar Maneka affair.

The Punjab information minister’s outbursts and his tendency to mouth absurdities, which any government would find too embarrassing and damaging to defend, have really been taken in their stride by his party. He continues to strut about the stage and holds in his hands the moral scale for everything that happens in a province his party is mandated to govern.

It is no different elsewhere: in Sindh the appointment of a rather inadequately qualified governor (who as chancellor of all provincial universities will award degrees to high qualified young men and women) has dropped no jaws in a party that thrives on the mantra of merit. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa almost every vacated seat now has a candidate who is a relative of an influential member of the assemblies. Whether it is Pervaiz Khattak or Ali Amin Gandapur or Asad Qaisar, relatives, friends and family members now are the pool that the party picks and chooses from when fielding candidates.

Again, you will not witness red faces when such open nepotism is promoted; instead there is a counter-attack, geared towards defiling the critic rather than answering criticism. From obnoxious social media campaigns to outright threats, the new method of response to critical questions starts from rationalising illogic, moves to hushing up the matter and then culminates in abuse and aggression.

This has killed debate and promoted polemics, and together both have deepened political divisions to such an extent that the country exists as a fractured polity. If these were pains of transition and the incidents cited above were mere teething problems, they would not warrant comment or even serious consideration. Unfortunately, they are anything but a transitory phenomenon. They reflect a deeply disturbing pattern of behaviour that has seeped into and spread across the nation. The new generation of political activism is a product of a vile culture of irrational aggression; it is thriving in an environment laden with downright lies and delusional self-praise of imaginary greatness – an environment where profundity is profane and where the only freedom that exists in abundance is the freedom to be dumb, and deaf to reason.

Just like the Roman rulers who would push their unruly lot into frenzies of violent sports events to distract their potentially politically dangerous energies, the powerful corridors have designed tempting portals of pointless contests to keep the nation busy in trivia while they extract more advantages out of the system and tighten their grip over the levers of power.

It is a valid argument that this absence of debate and debasement and debarring of genuine criticism has not arrived on the scene in 2018, but has been part and parcel of our politics and the conduct of our state institutions for decades. This is historically correct. We have not been a fair and open political entity in the best of times. Even the most revered political figure of our recent history, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was totally intolerant of criticism and treated intellectual accountability with derision and contempt followed by long vendetta. During their peak times in power, the Sharifs were a haughty lot whose definition of competence was personal loyalty that bordered on the slavish. And, of course, we know about dictators, both overt and covert – they all banished from their presence what they could not defend.

What is different this time is the spread and depth of these trends. These are not tendencies that are likely to go away over time. These are now part of a national psyche that is on display in practically every household in our land. You don’t have to travel anywhere to find a politically overactive but rationally retarded citizen. You live in their midst. The reasons for this pervasive state of mind are not just political – politics, though, surely is the trigger – these are now social norms. They are the go-to philosophy of survival. To be ridiculous is to be glorious. Fashioning a living out of reasoning is deadly.

The cost to the nation of such behaviour is heavy; we have become incapable of asking the right questions, unable to sustain and carry forward reasoned debate on core national issues and have no space to agree on a middle ground for crafting consensus. There is anger. There is hatred. There is prejudice. And as one psychologist put it: “….If you are an angry bigot, you will thrive in situations and groups dominated by blame, prejudice and hate…..You can’t argue with prejudice as it has no basis in logic. You can’t compete with a spittle-projecting merchant of hatred; the power of emotion is sufficient to demolish an office-block. If you get in the way you will get hurt. If you live in a situation where such conditions prevail, you are in a very toxic place.”

More than economic woes, bad governance, and absence of justice, toxicity is what ails the system – in fact, it sits at the root of all other problems. It has polluted minds and promoted a lot whose business it is to be deceitful and hateful. The Imran government is starting afresh. It still has time on its hands. It can detach itself from the known tendencies of bullying and braying in awkward situations. It can attempt to turn the prevalent culture of scapegoating into a more modern and useful template of self-accountability and cleansing through conscientious criticism.

There is nothing wrong with being wrong. What is abominable is open-chested defence of known absurdities, travestying of reality, and pretensions contrary to the truth. You can fool all the people some time and some people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time. Past rulers, both military and civilian, learnt the value of this Abraham Lincoln quote by ignoring it. PM Imran, who often cited this when he was in the opposition, would do well to hang it on the front wall of his office and ask his ministers to do the same.

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