**More of the same**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2021-03-04

BY the time these lines see the light of the day the great hullabaloo over the Senate elections would have come to an end and the PTI regime might be a small step short of realising its ambition to establish absolute rule in the country. The runup to yesterday`s Senate elections showed that nothing has changed in the country`s politics except for an increase in reliance on violence.

The more patriotic PTI legislators did not hesitate to bring the doubting Toms in their party back into the fold and attempts made to keep Karim Gabol within his lane seemed to have come straight out of the chase sequences in Bollywood movies.

Those who have been building their reputations with slogans about their campaign against corrupt practices lost sight of what they themselves were doing. While loyalties were being openly purchased the battle cry still was a commitment to build a corruption-free Pakistan. Nobody could, however, imagine how much the state had changed.

The people will soon realise how much yesterday`s election to the Senate has changed the nature of the state and its direction.

Observers of the country`s politics with long memories could not have failed to notice that the PTI leadership was not stopping short of doing anything needed to capture the Senate. Herding of legislators and use of a vigilante brigade to keep a close watch on them revived memories of similar tactics used in the past and for which the present government has consistently denounced its predecessors.

Before the Senate elections pushed all matters aside, the main debate was on the right to due process. The discussion began when the PTI supremo was reported to have sacked the district party boss in Nowshera in KP after an electoral setback. The media report did not describe the procedure fol-lowed before punitive action was taken. Were the demands of due process adequately met? Was any show-cause notice issued to the district party chief? Was he given a proper hearing? Had the party adopted any standard procedure to deal with such situations? Is the procedure for inquiry into a supporter`s adherence to fair play or otherwise adequate and ef fective? These questions arise because entitlement to due process is a basic right though it is honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

Many will agree that the bond between leaders and members of political associations or civil society organisations cannot be described as a master-servant relationship, and that the two parties deserve to be treated as collaborators in a given cause.

Most civil society organisations, and political parties to a greater extent, tend to treat their paid employees as casual labour that does not deserve a proper letter of appointment nor any specific terms of service and remuneration. This state of affairs jeopardises the interests of employers and employees both. If a political leader engages a person to help him increase the return on his investment or labour he is obviously seeking a relationship that both parties must find gainful.

This reality has been accepted in stable democracies and there the worth of political figures` staf f is duly recognised. In underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, where politicians treat their careers as hit-and-run affairs, the employment of politically aware workers is generally considered fruitless and an unnecessary wastage of resources.

Some Pakistani politicians do engage professionals for public relations duties but such assignments are rarely formalised.

A dangerous consequence of summarily dispens-ing with the services of party colleagues is that such tendencies develop into routine practices when a politician comes to power and the state replaces the individual operator. Further, the desire to keep the bond between politicians and their staf f informal can increase the temptation for eachpartytocheattheotherside.

Pakistan`s politics is likely to take a long time to develop into a serious game that responsible persons should like to play according to its rules but a movement towards this goal, however modest it might be, need not be postponed. This is particularly necessary if we want to replace the disorganised political work that is the norm today with disciplined activity which is carried out with minimum possible wastage of resources.

One form of disregard for due process that has recently been noticed in Pakistan is the harassment and persecution of the families of dissidents who have taken refuge in different countries abroad. The state`s persecution of Gulalai Ismail`s father has been exposed in its most ugly form.

Such actions are common in police states and one should like to hope that Pakistan is not trying to join the infamous club. The government is not short of any means to deal with those few who might be acting abroad in a manner disapproved by the state of Pakistan but their sins must not be laid at the door of their kith and kin in the country, especially if their families have no record of questionable activities.

A major objection to the persecution of dissidents` f amilies is that everything is based on uncorroborated information gathered or cooked up by intelligence agencies. Also manifest is the fact that the victims of harassment are offered no chance to challenge the f anciful yarns the state agencies spin to trap their victims. 