**The messiah and the leper**

Zaigham Khan

Why is the PTI behaving like a child who has just stolen his father’s car-keys and is trying to make sense of the gear stick and pedals? Hasn’t the party governed a complex province for five years – and not too badly, though the real change falls short of claims by a million miles. Isn’t its cabinet overwhelmingly manned by the seasoned Musharraf Eleven who had ‘reconstructed’ the nation in their earlier incarnation before they lost their lucrative employments for a decade? Why can’t they put the Lego pieces together again, according to the fertile imagination of their new boss and give us Naya Pakistan?

It is hard to replicate Naya Pakhtunkhwa at the centre and in Punjab because the PTI governed that province in unique circumstances that can’t be created again. When the PTI took over, KP was the epicentre of terrorism. During the PTI’s tenure in the province, the military fought decisive battles, snatched back safe havens from terrorists and restored order. After half a generation, the people in KP experienced peace and, quite wrongly, thanked the PTI for it.

Alongside peace came relative prosperity. The PML-N government was able to double the GDP growth, bringing it close to 6 percent, while inflation remained very low. Ishaq Dar doubled the tax receipts, raising them from around Rs2000 billion to around Rs4000 billion. Thanks to the7th NFC Award, which was the result of a ‘muk muka’ between PML-N and the PPP, a good part of the money went to the provinces. KP’s development budget doubled because of the enhanced receipts from the centre. People again wrongly thanked the PTI and thought it was not the new money earned by Ishaq Dar doing wonders, but money well spent because of the PTI’s honesty and integrity.

Even more importantly, the government in KP was in the hands of a former government contractor, who knew the ins and outs of the system and who had the courage to overrule his boss when needed. While his government was slightly above average, the PTI’s Photoshop army turned it into an epic revolution. In public imagination, KP constructed 300 dams, produced cheap electricity in abundance and turned Peshawar into an envy of European cities.

Everything combined together, people in KP experienced a huge change and decided to reward the PTI. For the first time in our history, KP catapulted a party into government in Islamabad. (Of course, I am not denying here the role of other, more powerful forces and factors at play.) Unfortunately, the PTI refused to thank Parvaiz Khattak, the hero of tabdeeli, for delivering them governments in Peshawar and Islamabad. Even mentioning such a thing would be blasphemy against the messiah who is the deliverer of change.

Now the reins of the government have gone directly into the hands of the Mahathir Bin Mohammad of Pakistan. While the Malaysian Mahathir had a wide experience of governance when he took over as prime minister in 1981, the experience of our Mahathir is limited to collecting donations and making motivational speeches.

Though much is made of his management of the Shaukat Khanum Hospital and Namal College, he does not have anything to do with the management of these institutions. He has of course, handed these institutions to able hands. His main job is to ensure resources for these institutions through fund-raising. We must also remember that, compared to state ministries and departments, these are much smaller charity institutions managed very differently from public leviathans.

Like the leader himself, his colleagues believe that their leader belongs to the league of Ayub Khan, Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad – honest leaders who singlehandedly changed the destinies of their nations. Therefore, Imran Khan’s colleagues look towards him for guidance in everything. And he is responding with the things he knows best – charity appeals and motivational speeches. In his whole life he has collected around Rs40 billion in charity (a huge achievement no doubt). In government, he wants to build a Rs1500 billion dam through crowd-funding.

His job requires him to take some of the most unpopular decisions ever taken in our history – if we want to come out of the predictable cycle of misery and move forward. The sportsman in him wants constant applause. Rather than delivering surgery, he is administering recreational drugs to keep his followers in constant euphoria. Imagine a government that has to deal with 38 billion dollars of trade deficit worrying about junk cars that are worth a few million dollars and four buffaloes that are worth a few thousand dollars. In the absence of policy guidance, the loose cannons in his team are firing at random, trying to amuse the audience through their own private spectacles.

The government is behaving like a retailer who has been handed the finance department of a multinational company. It remains obsessed with small change, failing to understanding that such behaviour could bankrupt the corporation. We haven’t heard about the state-owned enterprises making losses to the tune of Rs750 billion a year. We do not know what has happened to the withholding company – Pakistan’s answer to Khazanah Nasional Berhad of Malaysia – that was to be created to turn around these companies. We have no clue about the FBR reforms and the government’s plan to double tax receipts in the next five years. The news coming from the reforms committees is not encouraging. The quality of debate remains low and directionless. This is work that the PTI should have done long before forming government.

India’s tax-to-GDP ratio is 22 percent, ours 11 percent. If we raise our tax-to-GDP ratio to the same level, we can collect Rs4000 billion extra in taxes every year at the current level of GDP. It is time for the Lee Kuan Yew of the Islamic Republic to understand the difference between charity and state revenue and between a hospital and the state of Pakistan.

While civil servants wait for decisive direction, Imran Khan is delivering them motivational speeches. The state remains in a state of disarray, something that Imran Khan the prime minister has received from Imran Khan the opposition leader. It is a result of the creative destruction that forms the foundation of Naya Pakistan. All departments remained frozen for more than a year. Civil servants lurked under their desks as motion detectors at Constitution Avenue used to spot any moving object and huge pain was inflicted for not sitting still.

Then came the hurricane of the interim government that uproots even small time civil servants and lands them in alien territories. The PTI government has heaped more fear, and added new confusion and chaos to the existing situation. This situation will not be corrected by motivational speeches, particularly when the situation on the ground belies and mocks these speeches. The leper has been laid before the messiah and the messiah, it appears, does not know what to do with the wretched soul.

The writer is an anthropologist and development professional.

Email: zaighamkhan@yahoo.com

Twitter: @zaighamkhan