**Power of words**

BY N I A Z M U R T A Z A 2020-12-15

STICKS and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me, sages say. But we see the reverse today. Those immune to stick and stones have been hurt by the open words at PDM rallies about their rarely discussed illegitimate role in politics. The trance has been broken.

Still, it`s unclear if the opposition PDM`s words alone can have the desired effect.

More basically, some even question its approach. First, there are the PDM`s dicey tactics of gathering thousands physically despite Covid-19 risks. It can keep protesting while keeping the Covid-19 risk low by only having a token, masked-up crowd at the grounds, for its real audience are the millions who watch on TV and those who already know about their ability to gather crowds. The PTI too is being lax about Covid-19 in the matter of the huge Khadim Rizvi funeral and congregational prayers, both equal to several PDM rallies. Yet the PTI`s follies don`t justify the PDM ones.

Beyond tactics, some question even its aims and credentials. The PDM says that the PTI`s misrule and illegitimacy justify toppling it via protests. However, misrule is a valid rationale for doing so if it is highly exceptional. Seen objectively, the PTI`s misrule is at most only somewhat worse than the levels seen over the last few decades.

This includes the PML-N and PPP`s own past misrule norms. So neither misrule nor the PDM`s own credentials here provide a strong rationale.

Nevertheless, the issue of the PTI`s perceived illegitimacy is weighty. The EU`s 2018 election report, whose findings were muf fled in Pakistan via media gags, starkly blames two `big` unelected institutions of pre-poll rigging against the PML-N via fixing cases and horse-trading. Credible national civil society and media sources echo such charges. The PTI`s thin majority ups the weight of such charges.

Beyond this controversy, there is the debate that the PTI survives due to propups allegedly by some in the establishment, given its thin majority and misrule. And then there is the huge crackdown on dissent. Thus, peaceful and safe protests, not for toppling the PTI directly, but for fair polls, civilian sway, free speech and an end to any extra-constitutional support for the PTI are legitimate. If the PTI survives on its own without support from other forces, fine.

If not, its fall will serve democracy, even if some PDM leaders often give a muddled message: the PDM is not asking for the PTI to be removed unnaturally but is asking for a stop to alleged ongoing efforts to prop up the PTI and leave the rest to politics.

And on this count, the PDM has basic even if not perfect credentials. While thedeeppastofitskeypardesontheseissuesis dicey, at least during 2008-2018, they won polls fairly, allowed more dissent and quizzed the establishment more than the PTI today. Some doubt the PDM`s credentials since they did not deliver advanced democracy earlier, given their dynasties, sleaze etc. But such democracy is present hardly in any of the 100-plus developing states globally, even in many with much higher per capita incomes. Still many, perhaps even most, have fair polls and civilian sway. Thus, it`s inapt to use advanced democracy as a standard for our political system, which not just Pakistan but most developing states may not attain in decades.

The correct standards and realistic immediate democratic aims for Pakistan are fair polls and civilian sway, ie the procedural democracy it had f rom 2008-2018. In politics today, one rarely comes across classic battles between good and evil. Most are between shades of evil. From that lens, the PDM clearly represents a lighter shade thanautocracy.

However, even with valid aims and credentials, can the PDM win via sit-ins and resignadons as the second round starts? The PTI didn`t in 2014. But then, its riggingcharges were flimsy; the PML-N had popular support and the economy was doing better. The PDM can also deliver bigger and tougher crowds for sit-ins and many more resignations. But nixing all this is the alleged establishment support for the PTI despite its misrule.

Institutional and personal interests appear to tempt the powers that be to ignore the nadonal ones and prop up the PTI. Yet the poor economy and cool ties with big allies like the US and Saudis limit their attempts to thrust their will over an unwilling and unwieldy society. The autocratic system today is already as weak in just two and a half years as earlier ones became in eight to 10 years. So, if the PDM stays peaceful, united and persistent, it may succeed at least partially given this weakness. Its success will not lead to advanced democracy or much progress instantly. But even the end of autocracy will be a worthwhile f ruit.  The writer is a political economist and heads INSPIR ING Pakistan, a progressive policy unit.

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