**[Pride and prejudice](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774524/pride-and-prejudice)**

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HALFWAY into his term as prime minister, Imran Khan had proudly hyperbolised that, ‘I am democracy’. He had praised the military and security agencies for their services and threatened to incarcerate protesting opponents — “not in a VIP jail, but where the poor are sent”. Khan may never have ‘been’ democracy but his fall from elite populist to ordinary victim of state subjugation poises him for a second coming — this time, as a democrat.

As prime minister, Khan spoke with a forked tongue: he condemned Islamophobia internationally but weaponised Muslim pie­ty domestically, tolerated the torment of Ahmedis and other minorities, and his alleged pilferage was justified while rivals were condemned as dacoits. Rather than tackle institutional corruption or regulatory lapses, he perfected trolling as governance, peddled fake news, fumbled with the bureaucracy, blamed women victims for sexual violence and empowered military hubris.

The army leadership’s disenchantment with Khan and his subsequent defiance il­­lustrates how the clash of egos of state male elites shapes history in Pakistan. Khan’s biggest achievement to date has been ins­pired by his deep sulk for being ousted and becoming civilian-patriot versus regime-changing state sellout. This invited the vengean­­ce of the guardians of military hegemony.

Instead of envy, the ‘best revenge’ from Khan’s opponents should have been more democracy, via elections. Instead, the opportunist PDM served a prince whose unforgiving philosophy is that it is far safer to be feared than loved.

State excesses against all political activists must be opposed.

The violent events of May 9 could have been a clumsy coup attempt, or a thwarted Haqiqi Azadi Spring, but the images of moral injury that triggered his young, mostly urban middle-class, outraged, weeping supporters, especially defiant women, are compelling. This adulation has only escalated after his incarceration.

The admirable spine shown by some PTI ideologues, in contrast to the rats who jum­ped ship, could help Khan’s democratic conversion. The red line challenge may have been gauche and violent but has yielded rewards that come with genuine resistance movements. The leaders of the Lawyers’ Movement sensed this a while ago. But what about the rest of civil society?

Since 2007, the newly coined ‘civil society’ collective of NGOs, media personalities, rights defenders and public intellectuals have been debating the merits of transition versus transformation; boycotts of elections; and who to blame the most for failing democracy — the military, the parties and praetorians, or the elite that collaborate? The verdicts on these became easier with the signing of the Benazir-Nawaz Charter of Democracy.

Despite decades of debates and intellectual engagement through op-eds, donor-funded consultancy reports and WhatsApp clique wisdom, why does civil society get paralysed at times of political crisis? The main calling for activists is to defend democracy through fair and free elections and to uphold citizens’ constitutional rights.

Yes, the dissolution of the Punjab and KP assemblies must be scrutinised and resolved simultaneously and not shrugged aside. Parties can be held accountable and severely criticised for governance failure, but not punished, cancelled or censored. That’s the prerogative of voters via ballot.

A moment of cynical vindication is one thing, but punitive state excesses against all political activists must be robustly opposed, irrespective of motive, class, gender, ideology and political affiliation or their alleged offenses. Due process, fair trials, best defence, free speech and presumed innocence must be advocated by human rights activists without prejudice or partisanship.

For women’s rights groups, there can be no equivocation over some women de­­serving more de­­fence than others, or passive-aggressive resentment over the entitlement or ingratitude of the PTI. Human rights aren’t pardons to be dispensed by high priests, nor are they ear­ned. Democrats are often born out of political crises and personal rites of passage.

Admittedly, any principled or intellectual engagement with PTI activists and apologists has been a futile endeavour. Attempts to frame the mistreatment of PTI members in the gendered and class history of such state excesses has been arrogantly dismissed as ‘state collaboration’. Instead of building a common alliance of survivors, the counsels for PTI exceptionalism wanted to stand alone on the moral perch of defending martyrdom.

The singular victim-saviour that defines the populist has been perfected by the PTI, but now must be rid of this false pride for a politics of collectivism. Civil society must quit their prejudice, unequivocally oppose the state’s excesses and demand immediate elections and, robustly defend the human rights of all party activists, without exception.

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*Published in Dawn, September 7th, 2023*