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March 7, 2021

**The PM and the ECP**

Prime Minister Imran Khan’s address to the nation on Thursday was more of a lashing out than the discourse of a seasoned politician. The PM looked angry and beleaguered and focused more on the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) than his own government’s performance. In what seemed like a desperate attempt to shift the blame of his own party’s failures to the ECP, the PM said that the ECP was ‘protecting those who made money by holding the Senate elections through secret ballot’. His remarks were unsavoury and smacked of his troubled situation in the current hybrid dispensation.

The opposition’s ability to stage an upset in the Senate’s elections has clearly riled up the PM who tried to talk about a problem he did not fully understand but pretended to grasp fully. If you try to explain something that you yourself are not clear about, you end up further confusing your listeners. His main thrust was that the nation could comprehend all the problems of this country by looking at the use of money in the recent elections for the Senate of Pakistan. Somehow, he failed to inform the audience about what action he had taken against those PTI members who in his opinion had sold themselves out.

A major question is about how he knew that the money bought the votes. If he has any proof, he should bring them out to the public and call out names. Secondly, his claims about having a party of ‘honest people’ for the past over two decades have evaporated in thin air. If he had the best and the cleanest party in the country, why did its members sell themselves out? He claimed that money has been playing a role in Senate elections for the past 30-40 years.

He conveniently forgot to mention that for 20 out of 43 years since 1977 the country was under the yoke of military dictatorships directly – 11 years under General Ziaul Haq and nine years under General Musharraf. While the dictators could rule with the help of their state machinery for decades, no civilian and popularly elected politician could complete her or his five-year term as prime minister. Imran Khan himself staged long sit-ins to remove elected governments in the past.

In contrast, the response by the Election Commission of Pakistan to the criticism PM Khan levelled against it reads like a well-thought-out piece of advice. Though no institution can claim to be entirely above board, the ECP recently has held its head up under the leadership of Sikandar Sultan. The ECP is right in asserting its authority and making it clear that it will not respond to pressure. Had that been the case in 2018 and afterwards during the no-confidence against the chairman of the Senate, perhaps the outcomes of both would have been different.

The ECP is right again in pointing out that it will not ignore the law and the constitution just to please someone. We have been witness to repeated attempts by which the constitution was mutilated beyond recognition and the courts too provided relief to all those who committed this serious crime. All dictators who violated the constitution got a safe exit and then even the parliaments put in place by the dictators themselves were ready to please the dictators to save their own skins. This country has seldom seen independent elections, and the new-found voice of the ECP we must respect and support.

This is not to say that fraudulent practices are no more possible; the point is if you call for evidence in all such practices, you must be ready to produce your own evidence against any fraud. The defeat of the no-confidence move against the chairman of the Senate was a case in point. The late Hasil Bizenjo was a hot favourite and commanded the majority of the Senate members as displayed by the show of hand in the Senate. But when the vote count was complete, the result was unexpected and smacked of some wrongdoing.

At that time, the PM was happy and demanded proof of fraud and did not even accept that some of the Senate members might have sold themselves out; or would have voted under duress. The opposition was unable to produce the solid proof demanded by the PM. According to the same logic, now the burden of proof lies with the PM and his simple rhetoric is not going to help him. The Supreme Court of Pakistan in its opinion about the Senate polls had clearly said that the polling should be held in accordance with the constitution.

The demand of the PM that the ECP should have introduced traceable balloting was out of place as there is no provision in the constitution for this method. It is true that the Charter of Democracy signed by the PML-N and the PPP does mention open balloting; and for that you need a constitutional amendment. Suddenly, this love for the Charter of Democracy displayed by the PM is intriguing as he never talks about any other point in that charter, which also calls for a complete neutrality of all state institutions in political matters.

If the PTI is so enamoured by the Charter it should initiate a new legislation to approve the Charter by parliament; the PML-N and PPP would gladly approve of it. This cherry-picking by the PM from the Charter of Democracy was not for the benefit of democracy, neither is it in the interest of the country if it fails to get the full Charter. The assertion of the PM in his address that those who want to become senators use money is an outright insult to his own senators and to his own MPs who it seems according to the PM accepted incentives to change loyalties.

The PM also wondered about the ‘joke being played with our democracy’; the question is: does he actually know or realize who started playing jokes with democracy in our country? You don’t need to read the 74-year history of the country; you just look at the two decades of the 21st century and find for yourself who has been playing havoc – not jokes – with democracy since the turn of the century. The PM claims to have started a campaign to save democracy, but in his campaign the real culprits are missing and the real villains are his heroes when he nostalgically talks about the 1960s when the country was run by self-appointed president General Ayub Khan.

The PM’s only criteria of evaluating a Pakistani head of state was that the president of the US used to welcome him. Shall we tell the prime minister that the youngest and the first female prime minister of the Muslim world addressed the American parliament? But it can hardly be counted as a criterion to judge the respect of a PM internationally. For the US, most dictators of the world were welcome and American presidents opened their arms for these dictators as long as the latter followed the diktats and toed the line given by the US.

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