**The art of creating enemies**

Hussain H Zaidi

Wednesday, Jul 26, 2023

The PTI received a second setback after the fateful day of May 9, 2023. A few weeks ago, a large number of frontline party leaders from Punjab – many of whom held key positions in the party’s government – broke ranks with the PTI to join a new political party fashioned by some of his closest erstwhile allies. And now, the PTI’s leadership from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), its power base, has parted ways en masse to set up their party. The PTI has met the fate of a typical king’s party, whose fall is as steep as its rise.

Seen from another perspective, the large-scale desertions in the PTI represent a predictable outcome of the kind of politics practised and perfected by the party supremo Imran Khan.

Political theorist Carl Schmitt defined politics as based on the distinction between friends and enemies. Setting aside liberalism and its mainspring rationalism, he argued that man is a political animal because of the ‘eternal propensity’ of human beings to identify each other as enemies. Given such propensities, ‘mortal combat is a constant possibility and a frequent reality’ in the political arena. For Schmitt, politics is the art of building narratives and making decisions by creating the people’s enemies.

Schmitt’s views echo the perennial divide between the two powerful notions of romanticism and classicism, which runs through both political and intellectual history. Classicism puts its faith in rationalism and empiricism as the reliable guide to advancement and freedom. People are regarded as essentially similar everywhere, governed by the same universal laws. They only differ in how far they have travelled on the same linear road.

Knowledge constitutes the only credible difference between nations or societies. Accumulation of knowledge and expertise in the form of science and technology and institution building on the basis of this accumulation is the only secret of success of a people.

Romanticism ennobles will, sentiments, intuition or faith. In one sweep, the will can accomplish what intellect fails to do despite years of sweat and labour. Cultural differences are abiding; some nations or ethnicities because of their inherent characteristics are destined to rule, while others are fated to serve. Likewise, people have inborn qualities of head and heart which make them natural masters or servants.

For classicists, the fundamental condition in society is one of cooperation and consensus. Conflict and disagreement, whenever they arise, are underpinned primarily by lack of knowledge and coordination. Overtime, and with pursuit of rational self-interest and reciprocal adjustment, all conflicts and contradictions are resolved.

For romanticism, by contrast, the fundamental condition in a society is one of conflict; the apparent consensus is contrived and maintained by power. Far from being an aberration in an otherwise society in concord, discord is the driving force of history and the engine of social change. Conflict is undergirded by systemic, and often irreconcilable, forces in which one side either decimates the other or gets decimated. There is no middle ground.

In politics, whereas classicism appeals to common principles, programmes and ideologies, romanticism draws strength from shared sentiments, narratives and myths. Romanticism upends the world of harmony and freedom postulated by classicism. The prime political virtue for the people is not freedom but loyalty; the principal qualification for the leader is not common sense but charisma.

Debates and arguments are only wit and gossip – a bourgeois notion in the terminology of revolutionary socialism. It is the indomitable will and emotional intelligence that make all the difference. Romantics look to men and women of destiny, who, as Schmitt saw it, create politics by defining the people’s enemies.

In both intellectual and political realms, the romantic-classic divide is unending and has produced towering figures on both sides. For every Bentham, there’s a Coleridge; for every Hegel, there’s a Schopenhauer; for every Churchill, there’s a Hitler; and for every Chiang there’s a Mao.

Because of its irrational character, romanticism has a kind of emotional appeal which classicism can never have. It can sweep millions off their feet in no time, which classicism is incapable of doing. In politics, one of the mesmerizing notions begotten by romanticism is that of a saviour, who is capable of turning things around by sheer will and strength of character in an otherwise ‘decadent’ society.

In Pakistan, all conditions conducive to the rise of the political variety of romanticism have existed: democracy having had a chequered history, political expediency trumping rule of law as a matter of course, a long tradition of feudalism ennobling personal loyalty (‘namak halali’), the state’s indifference to the people’s plight, a culture of blind submission to the authority, lack of critical thinking even among the educated people, disenchantment of the middle class with the political system, and infatuation with sweeping changes.

It was such a milieu that midwifed the rise of Imran Khan. With or without taking a leaf out of the book of Carl Schmitt, Khan created politics primarily by defining the peoples’ enemies: the corrupt elite, which he called mafias, self-serving politicians, and rent-seeking businesspersons, with whom he ruled out compromise.

The youth – impatient and impressionable as they are everywhere – were enthralled by his potent anti-corruption, anti-elite narrative hook, line and sinker. Here was a leader who seemed capable of turning around their fortune and taking on their enemies head-on.

Last year, while facing a no-confidence motion as prime minister, Khan added the US to the list of people’s enemies by claiming that Washington had colluded with the opposition to bring him down. Subsequent events and Khan’s statements have left it abundantly clear that the conspiracy allegations were no more than a hoax designed to stir anti-American sentiments and lead the people down the garden path with regard to the performance of his government.

Since his exit from power, he has directed all his guns towards the powerful quarters, on whose coattails he rode to power, and whom he would praise to the skies day in and day out. At any rate, after the saviour had unambiguously and unequivocally defined the people’s enemies, it was up to them to strike the final blow, which they did – albeit abortively – on May 9.

If politics is the art of creating people’s enemies, it does not really matter whether those given such an epitaph are in reality so. In the end, what matters is that the people are manipulated into looking upon them as their foes. It is then that the perception becomes more important than the reality and the narrative clouds the facts.

By the same token, while the leader may appear dead set against the people’s ‘enemies’ – the electable, corrupt politicians, rent-seeking businesspersons, Washington and the powers that be – in reality he may be willing, if not desperate, to rub shoulder with them when doing so is in his interest. Verily, the best art is that which conceals itself.

The difference between a genuine romantic and one who is merely a caricature of it is that the former wholeheartedly believes in his narrative and would never embrace the people’s ‘enemies’ once they have been defined. In a word, a true romantic is stranger to the politics of opportunism. His ‘absolutely not’ will never give way to ‘absolutely yes.’

He will accept only those fellows in his ranks who, like him, are committed to the cause they are espousing and not just pulling the wool over the people’s eyes. Rain or shine, such people will stand by their leader, drawing sustenance from the principles that hold them together.

However, a league of opportunists resting on the common bond of power and all that it brings will remain intact as long as luck smiles on it. Once the chips are down, the alliance will crumble and its members will look for greener pastures. Overnight, the people’s ‘enemies’ will become their friends, as they would become those of the leader.

The writer is an Islamabad-based columnist. He tweets @hussainhzaidi and can be reached at: hussainhzaidi@gmail.com