**The people have spoken**

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What we see in the National Assembly – following the polling which took place amidst various rumours of foul play or unfair play – essentially depicts the rage of the people.

This rage is easy to understand. In some ways, the mandate given to one particular group reflects the kind of mandate given to the PPP in 1970 when small-time candidates, including shopkeepers and vendors, defeated feudal lords in a vital contest that marked the start of democracy in Pakistan.

The people have once again shown where they stand and what they think of all the institutions in the country and why they believe in a party that essentially did very little for them during its tenure in power. But then it is also true that both the PML-N and the PPP did not do anything of significance either.

The rage can be seen at the micro level in households. There are reports from across Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) of breakdowns in the usual filial relationships. In KP, a father who was contesting a provincial seat shot dead his son because he had announced that he was voting for the PTI and had put up a party flag outside their home.

This of course is an extreme example, but across the country, houses are divided. Many young voters opt for the party they think has taken the best stance against systems in the country and who still believe in the cult-like charisma of its real leader.

The rage has significance. Some believe it has so much significance that it could multiply in the days ahead. This cannot be determined with certainty, but this rage is not surprising in a country which, according to top economists, has no resources and where inflation has defeated people so badly that they are unable to put a meal on the table or send children to school.

The financial condition of most families has become worse. When a wage earner falls sick, most families fail to cover the medical bills. A few months ago, protests erupted in Punjab against the increasing costs of gas and electricity. Protesters tore up the bills or set them on fire. These small but significant episodes highlight the anger that lurks in the country. This is always dangerous and can take even more dangerous forms in the future.

We understand the reasons for this rage in a nation that has the highest infant and maternal mortality rate in the South Asian region. We also understand the desperate situation in which people live. In many ways, the manner in which they voted was intended to reflect this. The question is: as governments are formed, one way or the other, with alliances coming up amongst candidates from mainstream parties, will there be further demonstrations and exhibitions of the anger that now lies among the youth? This is a dangerous situation. Anger like this led to the Arab Spring a decade or so ago and to other incidents in countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America. We need to watch carefully what direction this anger will take now and the fact that it is more strongly embedded amongst people aged between 18 and, say, 40 or 50.

There can be many ways to display public anger. We have seen this happen in many places. The question for us is whether anything can be done to cool the rage that lurks everywhere. Will some actions that help people carve out a better standard of living for themselves make a difference?

The answers are uncertain, and it is questionable whether any government in Pakistan can make these changes. We know that the public exchequer is essentially empty. A new deal with the IMF has to be reached in March, and we already know that this deal will not be kind to desperate people or to households that simply cannot manage on the income they have. What the government can do in this situation is difficult to say. The danger therefore lurks of a new outbreak of rage, this time in a more dangerous form, perhaps, with the arrest of PTI workers in small groups in Punjab and other places certainly not helping matters.

No government will be in a situation to make a difference at any speed. The main challenge for those who come to power will be to persuade people that change will happen in, say, eight years or more and to put forward a full blueprint for this. Eight years or a decade seems a long time to wait for the young but if significant alterations in our badly marred system can be made by then, this would still carry some weight, provided that the plan of action was put across clearly to people everywhere. These people have already shown that they are savvy both in terms of technology and in their ability to determine where and what they want to vote for.

It is extremely difficult to say precisely how the much-awaited change is to come. Many analysts have said that Pakistan will suffer a period of between three and seven years of worsening economic times. Perhaps only after this will it make some kind of recovery based on what actions the government takes. Whether the people are willing to wait is difficult to determine. The wave of voting that has shocked many in the country shows the times have changed and the people are no longer willing to accept things that were always accepted in the past.

There are some assessments that outside powers may intervene in the democratic process, which has been restored to the country after long years and periods of autocratic rule, and this will only worsen the situation for many. This again is something we do not know much about. The forces that could intervene are of course unwilling to show themselves, but major changes are needed. Steps like land reforms, something which never happened in Pakistan but began quickly in India soon after the country appeared on the map of the world, must be implemented.

The taxation system needs to change, but how this will be done and how people will react to it is difficult to say. For now, we live in a time of rage and a time of mass anger. Households have been divided, and society has been cut across lines of age as well as belief. There is now more hatred than ever before. This makes it extremely difficult to ensure that peace and harmony can continue in a country where so many people clearly believe that the events of the past were not just and that they have suffered as a result.

The coming days will be volatile and through them, we can only wait to see which turn is taken and how the future is worked out by whatever government comes to power.

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