**Unfair assault on institutions**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2021-03-11

THE failure of the government to get Finance Minister Abdul Hafeez Sheikh elected as a senator from Islamabad appears to have caused a great shock to the prime minister who has resumed his of fensive against any election or selection by secret balloting. He has been calling for open balloting in all elections for quite some time now, but, in keeping with his style of advancing proposals for change without actually offering a rationale for it, he has yet to support his plea with a cogent argument.

The main problem that Prime Minister Imran Khan faces in his campaign to get the system of secret voting abandoned is that this method has become a universal practice and it is followed by underdeveloped and developed countries both.

Many states have encountered difficulties in making secret voting work satisfactorily but the best response has been to remove the difficulties instead of opting for open balloting. Pakistani supporters of the open ballot would indeed be doing the nation a great favour if they could tell us as to how many democratic states have switched over to this form of voting.

The Pakistan electorate has a rich experience of elections through secret balloting. That a great many voters make wrong choices or sell their votes for some consideration or the other is quite well known. But that has nothing to do with the system of balloting, and open balloting will not automatically end such electoral malpractices.

An important question is whether the proposal to switch over to open balloting is backed by any research or study in Pakistan or in any other country. Or is it based solely on the opinion of one or more political leaders? If the move to adopt open balloting is not backed by an academic exercise of standard quality then the first thing the government should do is to create a commission to discover the contribution to democratic progress that the system of open balloting is expected to make.

That open balloting does not guarantee free andf air voting has of ten been demonstrated. If an ordinary citizen finds that his decision to vote for a particular candidate becomes known to a rival candidate`s watchman, who may have the power to harm him, it is obvious that he would prefer to save his life and surrender his freedom of choice.

In the course of his assault on various institutions, the prime minister has deemed it necessary to have a dig at the Election Commission of Pakistan too and to ask it to explain why it was not possible to prepare ballot papers that satisfy the government`s (questionable) desire to know how a person had voted. This was an extraordinary demand and perhaps unlawful too. The ECP is not bound to carry out the executive`s bidding if it is not legally defensible. Besides, the objective the government`s desire to know how a person has voted has absolutely no place in any democratic dispensation.

Unfortunately, the shock caused by the defeat of the finance minister at the hands of former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has generated a wave of despair in the ruling coalition. The latest proof of this development is the declaration by a government spokesperson that from now on the government would respond to the opposition`s malevolence with matching medicine of its own.

This is quite an extraordinary situation. It appears that the head of government is threatening institutions of governance which he is required to protect and use in the interest of the people. Some of these institutions, such as the ECP, can deliver only when their autonomy is inviolable in letter and spirit.

Indeed, much of the ongoing sabre-rattling is unnecessary. The government will only harm itself by trying to fight shadows. It faces no real threat from the opposition, at least not in the immediate future. Now is the time to replace governance by rhetoric with governance that puts people-friendly initiatives at the centre governance that should offer the nation legitimate hope of a much-neededturnaround in the situation. Instead, the government seems to have increased its problems by assuming that everything that the previous administrations had done was wrong and that all precedentshave tobe discarded.

No government can proceed on the strength of such assumptions: the failure to get the finance minister elected to the Senate from Islamabad was a minor setback that a strong government could have taken in its stride. Regrettably, the government deemed it prudent to overreact and unnecessarily sought to prove that the prime minister was firmly in the saddle. There was no point in seeking a vote of confidence from parliament as nobody had hinted at the government`s loss of such confidence.

When the prime minister started attacking the institutions of governance, people were amazed that the defender of these institutions was thoughtlessly cutting the branch of the tree on which the edifice of governance rested.

Any informed observer of national politics would be able to tell the prime minister that the attempt to tilt at windmills is not warranted as the government f aces no dif ficulty in carrying out its policies.

Indeed, the fears the government betrays now and then suggest weaknesses of which the people are not aware. The institutions that the prime minister has attacked are vital pillars of governance.

Pulling them down will only lead to the government`s collapse and that would serve nobody`s purpose.

The government`s desire to appear to be different to the regimes it denounces with regularity is understandable but change for the sake of change could destabilise the system altogether. We already find some governments equating constructive change with frequent transfers of administrators.

The prime minister`s assault on institutions of governance without offering better and workable alternatives was like flogging an exhausted horse without any possibility of a useful outcome.