**When dreams crumble**

Friday, Oct 27, 2023

The Friday Column

By Raoof Hasan

Transition is a strange phenomenon that impacts life in a million ways. Most importantly, it comes laden with dreams that tomorrow shall erase the sorrows of today and the struggle that is underway shall bring relief to the weak and the impoverished. This element of hope in the justness of a cause continues to shape the lives of vast multitudes of people across the globe with each success story sequentially rekindling faith in the promise of the future.

But there is no guarantee that these dreams may be realized, and life may take a turn away from the problems that we are beset with in the present. It could also be that they may even multiply in the days to come, thus increasing our burdens and cultivating a gradual loss of hope in the way these issues are tackled as also in people who are entrusted with the responsibility of accomplishing the task.

The way crime is being legitimized and celebrated in the country these days, and those who have been convicted by the apex court as guilty of grievous transgressions being accorded state protocol against the letter and spirit of law and the constitution, is a grievous matter which is casting aspersions on the foundational ethos of the state. It is also denting the faith that people, despite monumental challenges they have faced in recent times, had nurtured in their future and that of the country.

They are now harbouring a prospect where the state is not looked upon as a friend as it does not treat them with compassion. The bond has degenerated to become one that would exist between two adversaries. This is a damaging outcome of this spree of inexplicable bonhomie that the state has developed for crime and its perpetrators.

Instead of following the stages as scripted in the statute book, a convict who fled the country for a limited period on medical grounds against a guarantee provided by his brother, but opted to stay away for over four years, comes back to a state reception. He doesn’t even go to the institutions to complete the formalities for his bail. Instead, representatives of state outfits ensure their presence at the airport to do the needful. From that of a convict and an absconder, his status was summarily raised to one who is going to be crowned as the king. Everyone seems to be bending over backward to facilitate his passage to the corridors of power.

Why are we so besotted with crime, both as a state and a nation? Why is it that we not only accept it but we nurture it, promote it, and legitimize it as we see happening so lavishly around us these days? Why is it that, in the process, we have lost sense of differentiating between what is right and what is not? As a matter of fact, right is no longer relevant. Practising wrong to move on in life is the new fashion on the block.

One of the fundamental reasons why such conduct is now readily accepted is because the beneficiary elite were never held accountable for their grievous crimes. They always managed to escape the clutches of law because they not only indulged in corruption themselves, but they also spread the menace around all of society which was soon picked up as a convenient means for filling the coffers and exercising power. So, what we witnessed is the emergence of a coterie of the rich who used their pelf to ascend the steps to the seats of power and then used it to prolong their stay there, and to keep coming back when thrown out.

The curse of money as a tool to power was first introduced in politics by the Sharif clan. Hailing from a business background, they used their deposits lavishly to put together a tribe of partners and associates who benefitted from their indulgences. Being the protege of dictatorship, they were enamoured by the levers of power pulled with no fear of the law.

Soon it was to become a habit which, when they secured power, was used with abandon to perpetuate it further. There were no limits to their pursuit of absolute power and no detriment to them piling up their billions.

The Zardari-Bhutto clan were quick to follow as they considered that, due to the Sharifs’ shenanigans, politics was no longer possible without lavish use of the bounty. While Benazir played the role of a silent partner, it is Zardari who won the notoriety of being known, the world over, as Mr 10%. That was a long time ago. The percentage of commission continued to increase as did their lust for more.

Between the Sharif and the Zardari clans, it was not just a battle to secure power, but to use it as their base to earn more of the illicit bounty. While the country was rendered poor, holding a begging bowl spread before the world to manage its bare survival, its wealth and promise were considered private properties of these two families as they made the most of the opportunities that came their way.

Even a cursory glance at how things are being conducted in the country makes one numb. There is no constitution, no rule of law, and no moral code that will dictate an individual’s conduct. It is like the state has been criminalised to a point of grave enfeeblement. The foundations on which the edifice stands have begun to collapse. But no one seems to care as they continue nurturing their ingrained lust for more.

What is worrisome is the involvement of the state and its institutions in this heinous trade – bartering national interests for personal enrichment and advancement and, even more importantly, sponsoring, and abetting crime.

Despite a background of rabid indulgence in criminal practices, such people are being planted in seats of power by elements who, it seems, have been rendered devoid of rational thinking faculties. They appear to be powerless when faced with the juggernaut of crime razing every constitutional, legal and moral edifice to ground.

If we continue treading the path of corruption and crime, we are bound to push the country into a bottomless pit. The state’s love affair with crime and its perpetrators will prove to be its damnation. There will be nothing left to start afresh as every asset will be washed away and the beneficiary elite will retire to their illicitly secured palatial mansions and their billions invested in businesses and deposited in banks.

A begging bowl will be the only asset Pakistan will be left with. This is how dreams crumble.

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