**Age of extremes**

BY A R I FA N O O R 2021-11-02

ONLY in Pakistan do we express outrage against the expected. The TLP-government agreement, which few were surprised by, caused much heartburn on Sunday evening, despite many insisting they knew this was coming. And the expected is not just the agreement but the near certainty that some of the incarcerated leaders will be let go and the ban on the party overturned. The negotiators and guarantors may have tried to keep the conditions secret but only in front of the cameras; once the lights are switched off, everyone seems ready for a heart to a heart. The zarai (sources) are never sworn to secrecy.

But what else were we expecting than what has been leaked so far? For in our homeland, protesters can get away with rampage provided they have enough clout or numbers.

Remember Lal Masjid. It is still around as are those who inhabit it while the dictator who carried out an operation against it, left our shores a long time ago. seeking his illegitimacy, we turned his decision .an act of the state into a criminal act.

If earlier he was charged with murder alone, in 2013, a one-man judicial commission recommended he and others in the then cabinet be charged with murder of those killed. No one batted an eyelid at the notion of a state operation, however flawed or poorly carried out, being equated with murder. And neither did any one ask, what sort of a precedent it would set for those to follow later, except for the poor policemen who lives are too cheap to matter.

Politics was at play there, as it is now with the TLP. And as it was when lawyers went on a rampage in a hospital in Lahore in 2019. Those who insist that the state is only scared of the turbaned lot should look into how the legal eagles were treated.

The latter weren`t even carrying guns. And neither can they match the street power of the real right wing.Nonetheless, in the coming days and weeks, there is bound to be much anguish at what happened in this sorry saga and fingers will be pointed (and rightly so) at the government`s earlier inaction and then ill-planned bluster without thinking of the realm of possibilities. But this is simply a discussion over firefighting.

What deserves our outrage is, why does this keep on happening? Crowds or hordes who go on the rampage and then negotiations which lead to cases being withdrawn? Be it the PTPs dharna, the black coats running through a hospital or the TLP workers? It is about a weak state which can easily be held hostage in certain places in the country. And it is about a society in which all political forces political parties and beyond think a prolonged street protest is an acceptable form of political behaviour.

The PTI did it in the past, the opposition is at it right now and there will always be some parties which will support this form of agitation consider the support of the Jamaat-i-Islami and JUI-F for TLP and even the clergy and some journalists, who have been doing far more than simply reporting or commenting on the matter. Is it because politics has been reduced to reaching for power (through elections or street power) and not ensuring stability? Indeed, it is also about the religiosity in society which leaves the state so helpless in the face of all issues religious that become so emotive that everyone is left standing on thin ice, including the military establishment, which has played the starring role when it comes to encouraging these trends.

The PTI exploited the TLP issue in the last election; the Lal Masjid issue was exploited in the 2008 election; and few politicians can afford to count on a victory in their constituency without reaching out to the religious vote banks within. And since 2011, thereisthe ever-constantfearofthe consequences of taking a public stand on any matter with reli-gious overtones.

Instead of simply blaming the politicians, perhaps the debate needs to focus on the solutions. It is not enough to make sure that the state has the monopoly over violence the state set out to ensure this when it cracked down against the TTP but this was merely the beginning. There was far more to do; the NAP was simply a hurried list put together and if nothing else, it hinted at the vast task ahead. But as is our wont, we never bothered with the details the recent Single National Curriculum saga shows us the difficulties or rather pitfalls of `mainstreaming madressahs` when we launch full speed ahead without having done any homework. But at the same time, if we think this religiosity in society can be addressed with simply fixing our school curriculum, we have another thought coming. The list of what needs addressing is long and needs far more work than simply putting down sub-headings on a piece of paper.

And linked with this is our economic well-being.

We have to ask ourselves why is it so easy for any political party to bring so many people on to the streets for days at a stretch. Why is there no economic cost these protesters have to pay for taking to the streets for an indefinite period? Or if there is an economic cost, why is it so low for the individuals who form the horde? Especially for reasons which are unclear to begin with? Be it a dharna by Tahirul Qadri or the TLP, we must consider not simply the lives these people lead which are so easily exchanged for camping out on the roads but also the ease with which they confront violence. It is too simplistic to believe that only ideology is at work here. And the state cannot and should not be blamed for simply encouraging religiosity it needs to be held responsible for not offering anything else. m The writer is a joumalist.