**[He said, she said](https://www.dawn.com/news/1660513/he-said-she-said)**

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SAYING what you mean, and meaning what you say, is apparently so old-fashioned.

Recent events have reminded us though that there are always exceptions to the rule. Maryam Nawaz Sharif’s [audio leak](https://www.dawn.com/news/1660001) has triggered a debate even when there isn’t much to debate about. The audio mysteriously found its way to the social media — as all such leaks do — with a convenient sense of timing. Former chief Justice Saqib Nisar’s purported [telephonic conversation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1659570) was poking holes in many carefully orchestrated narratives when Maryam’s recording surfaced to compete for space and attention. It got both. But it also raised a question that most among us would find uncomfortable to answer.

The discomfort germinates from the question and flows into the answer. This is why it is hard to frame it inside a prison of words. But you see it floating here, there, everywhere, and it makes you wonder why things so obvious remain so invisible. It is only when you take the ethereal and blend it with the mundane that you are truly able to acknowledge the ridiculousness of this duality which hides in plain sight.

Inch by inch we float away from the righteousness ingrained in the document that guides the running of this system.

In the leaked audio, Maryam Nawaz accepted what every government has done and continues to do. But everyone who has used government advertisements to pressure the media pretends he or she has never done it. He says something but means something else. She does too. Both are not called out for this duality that hides in plain sight.

**Editorial:** [*High time for govt to formalise policy on advertisements to media groups*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1660340/ad-distribution)

There’s more.

Prime Minister Imran Khan and his party supporters fuel their narrative with the corruption of their political opponents. While many have drunk their own Kool-Aid, the more sober ones accept and acknowledge the significant levels of corruption taking place in Punjab. Such tales have become the stuff of legends and officials admit that the intelligence agencies have reported them in graphic detail to the PTI leadership. The same people who acknowledge this corruption, and bemoan it, will stand in front of a microphone and launch a tirade against the corruption of their opponents. He says you are corrupt, she says no, you are. Neither is called out for this duality which hides in plain sight.

Then there’s the accountability charade. When allegations are dressed up as evidence, and accusations are dolled-up attestation, we have a problem. That problem, however, is brushed aside as an inconvenient truth which has no place in a high-octane political conflict. He says you’re guilty, she says no, you are. The investigators cannot find evidence, the prosecutors cannot find convincing arguments and the judge cannot convict. Or can, despite this. The parody of due process unfolds on a daily basis like a bad soap opera without end. He says you’re the villain, she says no, you are. Neither is called out for this duality which hides in plain sight.

The question is, why not?

This duality — or hypocrisy, if you will — has become a digestible ingredient of our political diet. The informal truth sits comfortably with a formal lie. We have even coined a word for it: narrative. So if you want to dignify a falsehood, call it narrative; if you want to make lying respectable, term it narrative; and if you want to make hypocrisy acceptable, paint it as narrative. The narrative-peddlers may find such painful mangling of a value-system justifiable in the name of political partisanship, but for the electorate at large what it does is normalise the soiled art of dishonesty, duplicity and deceit. He can get away with saying what he says without meaning it, and she can do the same without being called out.

The question is, why?

In the game of pretence, all players play by the rules. The rules place limitations. Such limitations dissuade the players from upsetting the game for fear of not being able to play it at all. The ministers know who among them is corrupt but they will not point fingers and the system will look the other way. Their rivals will hide their sins for the righteousness of their self-professed cause and play the victim when held to account.

The lawyers will take the law into their hands through their fists, and will not be called out because the system is trained to look the other way. The judges will … well, the system does not allow us even to say what the judges will do, or won’t do in order to keep playing.

The establishment will pretend it has nothing to do with the business of the state, and of the ruling party — when it, in fact, does so, far above and beyond the call of duty. But who shall call them out?

And the journalists? In the box full of Pakistan’s worst-kept secrets, the least secret secret is the co-option of a very large segment of the Pakistani media. Who does not know which media organisation speaks for which party, and which individual journalist peddles which brand of truth? Who does not know which media owner revels in what kind of ‘facilitation’ by the authorities so that he can wear the badge of flexible credibility with a straight face? He says I am the most virtuous, she says no, I am. None is called out for the duality that hides in plain sight.

The consequences are distressing. Truth has become relative to the vantage point of the speaker. So has right and wrong. Values have become flexible and laws adjustable. And all this has become digestible for a system that appears to honour loyalty more than merit, and allegiance more than legitimacy. It is a slow drift, this. Inch by painstaking inch we float away from the righteousness ingrained in the document that guides the running of this system. The rot seeps deeper and deeper through the funnel of hypocrisy while the players sneer and scheme their way towards their petty pyrrhic victories.

He says I’m the patriot, she says no, I am — as they hatchet away at the pillars that must hold us all aloft.

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