**Ignorance is the enemy**

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We had all settled down to worry about the so-called mini-budget and the price of everything that matters when tragedy struck in the breakdown of Murree – about an hour and a half’s drive from Islamabad. A massive snowstorm, akin to a blizzard, struck the city, at a time when thousands of motorists were there with their families to celebrate the snow. A town which can take 5,000 vehicles was drowned in a sea of 150,000 in a few hours; traffic jams ensued – as did misadventure piled upon misadventure.

By the end of the day some 23 people, women and children included, had died, and the country’s media channels were screaming blue murder. The government’s ministers and functionaries, never the brightest of people, were busy contradicting themselves and generally making a fool of themselves with their crackpot statements which made matters worse. The political opposition, always on the lookout for something to beat Imran Khan with went into a frenzy to blame him for the tragedy, conveniently forgetting that it was a natural disaster made worse by incompetence and stupidity. Incompetence by the government for not publicising the expected blizzard and then stopping so many cars from going to Murree – one minister had even celebrated it as a sign that tourism was picking up in Pakistan.

People did not think of the consequences of what the expected bad weather could do as they piled their families into their cars to go to Murree. Once they got there, there was a god-awful traffic jam, it was deadly cold, and many people decided to get out of their cars and walk to the nearest hotel. The hotel staff and owners saw it as a great opportunity to rake it in and thus raised their rates considerably. Women had to leave their jewellery with the hotel reception as a surety. There was no food and no water, forget about tea and coffee.

People also raised prices to whatever they could: charging enormous amounts to help push cars and ending up making a killing of a tragic sort. All kinds of horrendous things were done just to make money. To the extent that it ended up killing people. Because they couldn’t afford the hotels, many went back to their cars, switched on the heaters and went to sleep, not realising that a car with the heater on would release deadly carbon monoxide which turned the cars into gas rooms. Most of the dead were victims of gas poisoning rather than the cold.

The list of tragedies and stupidities is endless. For a government to assume that making announcements on electronic media was enough means not to know your people. For the people to assume that no misadventure would strike them is not to know God. They went in droves; some totally unprepared and without enough funds or food. For over 100,000 cars to arrive in a place that can comfortably take just 5,000 is the height of stupidity. For people to raise the rates of necessities such as hotel rooms and food is the height of callousness – it was manslaughter galore. And now, the denizens of Murree are worried about the reputation of their city, which really is ridiculous.

Mr Imran Khan should realise that making Pakistan a great tourist destination requires a lot of intelligence and hard work prior to getting people to come here. Intelligence is a commodity in short supply – it really puts into sharp focus what I have been lamenting for many years: education, education, education. Ignorance, as Islam says, is the enemy of a good man and we should do our utmost to do away with it.

This is not the end of the many flashpoints that keep happening here with a sickening regularity. Though there are many who believe that Imran’s time is up, and he will lose government this year, I find that difficult to fathom given the crass stupidity of those opposing him. The question is, if not Imran – then who? One of the Sharifs? Or, that great Urdu scholar of the PPP? It seems that we have taken out the franchise for forcing stupid, semi-educated people to the forefront.

I can’t call Imran semi-educated, what with his fancy Oxford degree, but he is still better by leaps than anyone in the opposition. The media is manipulating the people to assume that Nawaz Sharif will be returning soon, his cases and convictions will become fiction, and he will become prime minister again. But, given that anything can happen in Pakistan, a lot of people are giving this return-of-Sharif theory credence. But it is not outside the realm of credibility that those who make prime ministers, and unmake them, decide they have had enough of the Imran experiment and that it is time for change. So, Imran has to be extra careful in what he does and how he does it.

With talk of possible extensions in service coming up, Imran should play his cards very carefully and keep them very close to his chest – do and say nothing that will cause institutions and individuals embarrassment. Don’t make a production of appointments or possible extensions that could lead to umbrage. Once Imran is over that hill and he wins the next election, another story will start. Since it does not take very much to make a fool out of Imran, he should not try complicated strategies and should just call a spade a spade and get on with it.

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