**Mishandling TLP**

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The agreement that the government reached with Tehreek-e-Lubbaik Pakistan last week was also possible a few months earlier when the group had staged a protest sit-in at Faizabad. But it tricked to shoot two birds–TLP and the parliamentary opposition–with a single stone.

Rather than conceding to or outrightly rejecting TLP’s demand for expulsion of the French ambassador, the government agreed to refer the matter to the parliament, thus, trying to drag PPP, PML-N and other opposition parties into the matter while getting itself scot-free.

For its part, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, in a bid to erode into Brelvi vote bank in Punjab, took it upon itself to spearhead the TLP’s cause in and outside the Parliament.

But it fell into its trap when the government agreed to take the issue to the parliament. It would lose its face if it failed to vote for TLP’s demand in the parliament but annoy the West if it supported it.

Pakistan People’s Party was wise enough to categorically state that it had nothing to do with the matter as it was between the government and a religious extremist group.

That is why the PML-N did not utter a word on Namoos-e-Risalat when the TLP again resorted to a protest march this time.

If the government had, instead of playing politics on the issue at that time, resolved it with TLP amicably or taken an upright stand, the massive bloodshed and blockade of cities in Punjab would have been averted this time.

This situation would have not arisen at all if the government had not tried to hush up the matter or politicize it for a scoring point against the opposition

The deadlock with TLP was further aggravated when the government, instead of rectifying its previous mistake, resorted to issuing conflicting statements and browbeating the protestors. It was when the handling of the situation went beyond the capacity of Punjab police and Rangers were called in that the powers-that-be intervened and manoeuvred to avert any catastrophe.

“One thousand percent,” was the answer of Bashir Qureshi, one of the mediators from Karachi along with Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman, when asked by media whether Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa had any role in effecting the deal between the government and TLP. In fact, the Army’s role was overtly made felt when a picture of Mufti Muneeb and two other mediators, including Bashir Qureshi, with the Army chief, was circulated on social media right when negotiations with TLP were underway.

It was rather embarrassing for the government to involve Mufti Muneeb in the process after the latter used the virtually abusive language of ‘piles in the mouths of’ federal ministers, Sheikh Rashid Ahmad and Fawad Chaudhry.

There were even speculations on social media that Fawad Chaudhry and Hafiz Tahir Ashrafi, Special Representative to the Prime Minister on Interfaith Harmony, were sent out of a meeting of Prime Minister Imran Khan with the mediating team of clerics on demand of the latter.

Frankly speaking, the government overtly mishandled the situation as ministers issued conflicting statements and even negated each other’s positions.

The government’s weaker pedestal was also evident from the press conference at which the agreement with TLP was announced; the stature and tone and tenor of Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman appeared far greater than Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Assad Qaisar and Ali Muhammad Khan present on the occasion.

Instead of Qureshi or Assad Qaisar, who should have dominated the presser as they were federal ministers, Mufti Muneeb appeared as the main speaker.

Even Qureshi finally realized his weaker position and when Muneeb prolonged his typical-styled discourse beyond limits, he had to intervene, snatching the mike from the latter and presenting a list of other mediators to show that Muneeb was not alone to broker the deal.

The perturbation of Mufti Muneeb was quite visible at this point. Later electronic media quoted him as saying that even the deal was not between TLP and the government.

While the demand for expulsion of the French ambassador, for whatsoever reason it might be, was, by no mean, acceptable for the state, the other terms and conditions, accepted by the government manifestly show that the government has surrendered to TLP.

No Muslim can compromise on the sanctity of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) but even an Islamic state cannot concede submission to a vigilante group on the matter of foreign policy.

Even this situation would have not arisen at all if the government had not tried to hush up the matter or politicize it for a scoring point against the opposition by agreeing to refer the matter to the parliament.

Some occasions are not for playing politics. In a democratic dispensation, governments need to collaborate with opposition parties, particularly on matters of national importance. There have been precedents when the ruling party and the opposition have taken a joint position on some issues. Ever since its inception three years back, the present government has treated all opposition parties in a despicable manner, never taking them into confidence on any issue.

In countries like ours, no political party or leader can claim to be a sacred cow. Even if they are, they have to recognize the existence and role of other parties. That is the spirit of democracy.

The open intervention of the inner state in each and every matter also proves detrimental to the capacity-building of political leaders.

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