**The art of protest**

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In any country where democracy exists, the participation of people is essential. Ideally, this participation should take place through parliament, with elected representatives putting forward the demands of their people.

Since this does not always happen in Pakistan, or indeed in many other countries, protest on the streets sometimes becomes essential – and in the situation we face today, it is absolutely vital. Pakistan's inflation rate for example, stands in the two-digit figure mark, while – despite government assertions to the contrary – in neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, it hovers at around five percent, or just marginally above that. This is something that obviously disturbs people and disrupts almost every household, notably those of the lower income groups in the country. It is something that should be protested.

One wonders why people do not come out on the streets when they are simply unable to purchase the essentials of life or pay the bills, which we are assured by ministers, will be going up soon so that 'bad' habits of the past can be changed and we can learn to live with even more expensive resources, given that we no longer have enough gas and have badly misused the many opportunities available to bolster our capacity to provide citizens with basic needs.

There are no doubt many other issues that require protest by the people. These include education, health, adulteration in food and a whole plethora of other matters which should be resolved and which are urgently required by the people as matters that must be amended in order to allow them to carry on life and move towards some level of growth. We should note that in neighbouring countries, with Bangladesh being an example that is increasingly often cited, the growth level has been far higher than that of Pakistan and remarkable progress made in social indicators, using NGOs, national savings, empowering women and developing a solid economic policy that has survived despite frequent changes in government.

We have always struggled with protest. The small gatherings that took place to mark the APS anniversary on December 16 was a sad example of this. Surely, the 149 who died at that school, most of them children, deserved more. Surely, we need to do more to better our own lives and the lives of the generations which come after us. Our apathy is severely damaging to ourselves, to our country, to our families, and to people all around us. Yes, we have attempts by student leaders and other civil society personalities to lead protests every now and then but this is perhaps not enough. It is especially not enough given that the state is not willing to talk to those who bring their grievances out on the streets, but instead uses force against even nurses, teachers and blind people seeking their rights, in one case even arresting the father of Mashal Khan.

There is for us an important example from Gwadar. We can learn a lot from this and indeed should learn as much as we can. The protest, led by Maulana Hidayatur Rahman of the JI, was peaceful and included thousands of people. It continued for almost a month, and was supported by women such as the now legendary Mai Zaini from the region, with the elderly woman organising food for the protesters and mobilising other women both to offer them breakfast and dinner and to join the protests. The success of the protest, with the government conceding the right to fishing and the right to basic amenities, the main demands of the protesters, shows how protests, when well conducted, can work in the country. We need to plan other such measures given the desperation of our situation and the desperation of people everywhere. The leaders of Gwadar who used political slogans or political thinking to take forward their protest, but did not turn it into an exercise in political opportunism, need to be admired. We have seen few parallels in recent years.

The people of housing societies and buildings such as Nasla Towers in Karachi need to protest as well. Thousands of them have been denied possession of the property they purchased after scams of various kinds. Similar scams have occurred in other areas and we know of university students who have faced harassment and molestation in their educational institutions. Protests by them are also important. There is a need to protect students from mafias which raise fees without warning and essentially fleece desperate families who seek an education for their children.

The same is true in the healthcare sector. That is also true of many other sectors in the country, including sanitation workers, miners, and workers in all kinds of other fields. These people live in the direst circumstances. But they will have to take matters into their own hands if they are to see any change. It is quite obvious by now that depending on the political leadership will take them nowhere at all. It is also true that the political leadership has been shorn up by the Gwadar movement and its success. The effort made there shows how protests can indeed work and make a difference in the life of people. Of course, we need to see if the commitments made to the protesters will be honoured. But given that the chief minister of Balochistan himself and senior government figures took part in talks, we hope that some of the demands will indeed be honoured.

From this point, we need to move forward. Pakistan needs massive change. The ‘Naya Pakistan’ we were promised has not come about. Instead, people live in desperate poverty, struggling against inflation, which has hit new records and which threatens to continue to rise over the coming years and months. If people forget that they hold power, in the fact that they have the ability to move on to the streets, to occupy spaces, and to peacefully demand their rights, they will never be able to move forward.

We have a poor history of civic protest and far too many examples of oppression by the state. This must end. From Gwadar, lessons can be taken into other fields and people encouraged to bring forward their rights and thereby demonstrate that those who seek them are not traitors or foreign agents, but loyal citizens who seek a better life for themselves and for others who live within their communities. This is something that has to be taken up and expanded across the country where people have lived in a state of desperation and need for far too long without their basic requirements being met by any of the governments they have elected in one poll after the other.

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