**Irresponsible remarks**

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PML-N LEADER and former speaker of the National Assembly Sardar Ayaz Sadiq has triggered a controversy by stating on the floor of the National Assembly that the PTI government had released captured Indian pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan under pressure of an Indian attack. He said Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi had said this in a meeting of parliamentary leaders in the wake of Pakistan`s shooting down of the Indian aircraft. The statement has created a furore as a result of which the DG ISPR has had to deliver a televised statement denying the former speaker`s claim. The military spokesman made it clear Pakistan had achieved victory over India in this post-Balakot conflict and had released the captured pilot as an illustration of its mature strategic restraint. The spokesman said this gesture by Pakistan was appreciated at the international level.

There is no doubt that the statement by the PML-N leader is irresponsible and it would have been far better had he not made it.

One expects someone of his experience and political profile to have weighed the potential consequences of his words before uttering them in public. These words are now being exploited by India to dilute the impact of Pakistan`s comprehensive domination of last year`s conflict. It also does not behove a senior politician like him to violate the confidentiality of high-level meetings. It is unlikely that the government would have released the Indian prisoner under any pressure. That said, there is no harm in having a public debate about whether this was the right step to take at this moment. A case could be built that Pakistan should have held on to the prisoner for some time. Indulging in such a debate does no harm.

Meanwhile, the government`s reaction to Ayaz Sadiq`s statement is troubling. It is understandable for politicians to exploit their rivals` mistake, but what cannot be condoned is questioning their patriotic credentials. Yet this is what the PTI government is doing consistently. The federal information minister has gone to the extreme of equating the opposition with an `axis of evil` including India and Israel. In line with this unfortunate strategy, posters have appeared in the streets of Lahore accusing Ayaz Sadiq of treason. The government must have them removed forthwith because such crude tactics amount to an incitement to violence. In fact, in recent months the political discourse has degenerated to a dangerously volatile level. Hurling charges of treason against one`s political rivals and smearing them with pro-India labels is wrong at every level. It demeans politics and its practitioners and it opens up deep fault lines that can rupture the system from the inside. It is sad to see that politicians have not learnt lessons from their mistakes of the past and continue to treat politics as a zero-sum game.