**From hero to villain**

[Saleem Qamar Butt](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/saleem-qamar-butt)

August 26, 2023

[Opinions](https://www.nation.com.pk/opinions), [Columns](https://www.nation.com.pk/columns)

It is said that “Every search for a hero must begin with something that every hero requires – a villain” (Robert Towne). The kingmakers and power brokers in Pakistan understand this quote better than the rest of the world. From 1948 to the present date, in Pakistani politics as well as in other fields like the economy, business, sports, science and technology, arts and literature, religious scholars, bureaucrats, judges, generals, and humanitarians, we have sadly been witnessing the frequent swap of roles between heroes and villains. Sometimes through visible means but mostly orchestrated by invisible hands and for dubious reasons. “The hero of today is the villain of tomorrow, and vice versa” is obviously more valid in Pakistan than “One man’s hero is another man’s villain” – as one could perhaps say in the pre-partition sub-continent about Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Nehru, or Gandhi.
Among the list of countries that have changed the maximum number of prime ministers and presidents since 1947, Italy, France, Greece, Turkey, Japan, and Pakistan are quite prominent, albeit for different reasons. Pakistan has undergone several changes in both prime ministers and presidents, largely due to political turbulence, corruption charges, and military coups. The outgoing leaders were always tagged as villains, while the incoming ones were welcomed as heroes, following the tradition and history of the sub-continent, especially in Punjab.
Nevertheless, we have proven Winston Churchill wrong who had said, “To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often”; because Pakistan has unfortunately remained one step forward and two steps backward regarding improvements in governance, economics, security, and political stability.
Not to forget the military’s rule; military coups in Pakistan began in 1958 when FM Muhammad Ayub Khan overthrew and exiled President Iskandar Ali Mirza. Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has spent almost three decades under military rule (FM M. Ayub Khan, 1958–1971, General Zia ul Haq, 1977–1988, and General Musharraf, 1999–2008). Dozens of books and hundreds of psychological studies could be quoted to provide ample knowledge for understanding the drift from virtue to villainy or why a society so conveniently and repeatedly turns their heroes into villains. However, in my view, an in-depth analysis of Pakistani political history from 1948 to the present date can be more instructive than any other foreign theory.
Considering the limited words and space of an opinion piece, it suffices to provide only a few pointers for readers to engage in deeper exploration and exercise their own judgments without biases, misperceptions, and propaganda influence. The often-derailed political system can be attributed to a host of reasons, but mature people understand that from the very inception, the wealthy power-hungry elite with a history of serving colonial masters jumped into the political arena without adequate personality grooming, no merit system for induction in politics, lacking higher education or experience, and with the mere capability to buy votes with ill-gotten money. Through the exploitation of ethnic, linguistic, religious, sectarian, and clan cards, they made it impossible for the common man to enter politics, while maintaining their hold on the same elite/parties (as evidenced by the list of former prime ministers) over the past 76 years, even during so-called military rule.
Although the so-called establishment receives the most criticism for bad governance in Pakistan, with the introduction of the latest term “hybrid governance,” fast-forwarding to a forecast of praetorian rule by some political analysts, we need to evaluate individual and collective contributions and failures in making Pakistan a success story like Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, or China in the same period.
As charity begins at home, a few points to ponder: How many of us groom our children as the Japanese or Singaporeans do? What is the respect and status we give to our teachers? What is the budget, curriculum, and state of our educational institutions, including religious seminaries? The destruction of the institutions of mothers and teachers, loss of pride in our own culture, and detachment from genuine religious values and practices are the root causes of most evils afflicting our society. And the strategy of the ruling elite remains to keep it that way, perpetually staying in power, as a below-par educated or illiterate crowd is far easier to dissuade, mislead, and regulate, just like a cattle herd.
The rigidity of mind is mostly due to the lack of proper grooming, pitiable education, and a weak knowledge base, which result in extremism, intolerance, and terrorism. This in turn helps so-called politico-religious cults to amass crowds and remain part of the powerful elite as second fiddles.
The poor character building is revealed so starkly in every walk of life in Pakistan, with a few exceptions. Therefore, the political leaders or managers we elect, select, or who are imposed upon us are, in fact, reflections of our own characters and deeds. However, as an unfortunate custom, we prefer to point fingers at others and ignore the four fingers pointing at ourselves. Pakistan perhaps has the highest number of people performing Hajj and Umrah every year, also engaging in superficial religious practices. However, following religion in its true letter and spirit remains largely absent. The ills afflicting our society, individually and collectively, in clear violation of the basic teachings of the Holy Quran, are heartbreaking and detrimental to the society and integrity of the country.
Telling lies, intrigues, conspiracies, backbiting, jealousy, hypocrisy, cheating, stealing, bootlegging, sycophancy, bribery, other forms of corruption, rape, arson, kidnapping, smuggling, unjust profit-making, breaking trust, non-adherence to traffic rules, bad tempers, ill manners, uncleanliness, disloyalty, and prioritizing self over national interests are vividly visible in every nook and corner of our land. In my view, the cumulative backlash of these prevailing evils in our society is the primary reason for social unrest, political turbulence, and a very fragile and poor economy, despite the enormous natural resources Pakistan is blessed with. The poor security situation persists, despite being the only Muslim country with nuclear capabilities.
Every country and society has its own problems, and none is trouble-free. Nevertheless, based on international surveys, Pakistan’s position in indexes related to poverty, hunger, education, health, justice, human resource development (ranking 155 out of 184), industry, science and technology, exports, achievements in international sports/Olympics, and above all, the political, economic, and security situation does not present a favorable image. Rather than attempting to break the mirror in vain, we should focus on genuine individual and collective improvement, as opposed to merely posturing on social media. Only then can we hope to produce, support, and promote more heroes in all fields in our beloved country and reduce the prevalence of villains. “The only difference between a hero and a villain is that the villain chooses to use power in a way that is selfish and hurts other people” (Chadwick).
We cannot afford to continue turning our heroes into villains, pushing them into oblivion by those in power and by a misguided crowd that follows them. Lastly, please do not let this simple and straightforward expression act as a mirror to the blind. Pakistan Zindabad!