**[Clashing realities](https://www.dawn.com/news/1830125/clashing-realities)**

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HOW to restrain a powerful, overweening and tyrannical state is the key challenge we face today. The institutions of restraint on executive excesses are the rule of law and democratic accountability. The mood of discontent is writ large as we witness the politics of hubris and humiliation. The powerful have rigged the system to perpetuate their privileges. The toxic brew of hubris reflects a dystopian saga.

However, to govern a democratic society requires contending with disagreement, said Michael Sandel in *The Tyranny of Merit*. Politics, for some of us, in the words of Ben Ansell, “signals the distasteful, venal conniving of politicians”, but fundamentally, politics “is about how we make collective decisions”. It is important to manage “inevitable disagreements”. This is why “we can’t avoid politics or wish it away”, Ansell writes in *Why Politics Fails*.

Elections have winners and losers, but their legitimacy through a fair process is crucial. We have the police and armed forces to protect us, but who will protect us from them? We need to answer this question. We have often looked for arbitrary alternatives through ‘strong’ military rulers who could get things done, but those were ‘false gods’. We need solutions within a constitutional framework. “While politics is imperfect, it may be our last best hope to reach common ground,” says Ansell, identifying five areas to focus on: democracy, equality, solidarity, security and prosperity.

The deep state’s behind-the-scenes [political engineering](https://www.dawn.com/news/1757425) may be a tactical win for the string pullers, but it reflects their much larger strategic failure with regard to our democratic future. To the declared winners went the spoils, leaving the declared losers with the burning sensation that the election was illegitimate, and the stolen mandate could not be accepted. What happens when the will of the people is violated? A classic example was the 1936 victory of Spain’s left-wing party that the disgruntled right-wing politicians conspired to overthrow, resulting in the [Spanish Civil War](https://www.dawn.com/news/1269941) and [Gen Franco’s 36-year rule](https://www.dawn.com/news/637209/francos-remains-stir-debate-in-spain-35-years-after-death). In Pakistan too, the military has ruled, cumulatively, for more than three decades, due to political infighting. We cannot afford another gridlock leading to misadventure.

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According to Frank Bruni, “We live in an era defined and overwhelmed by grievances, by too many peoples’ obsession with how they’ve been wronged and their insistence on wallowing in ire.” He correctly avers that “the ascent of identity politics and the influence of social media … were better at inflaming us rather than uniting us”, and promoting “a self-obsession at odds with community, civility, comity and compromise”.

Bruni calls it “a problem of humility”, in his forthcoming book *The Age of Grievance*. He talks about character and how a society holds itself together. “It does that with concern for the common good, with respect for the institutions” and says that “governing, as opposed to demagoguery, is about earning others’ trust and cooperation.” Tolerance shares its DNA with respect as it “recognises that other people have rights and inherent values even when we disagree vehemently with them”, Bruni concludes.

In Pakistan’s context, institutions like courts, law enforcement and intelligence agencies have lost the trust of the citizens. This is simply a failure of governance because of institutional hubris. The institutions of restraint, that promote the rule of law and enforce accountability, stand exposed. The police, to my mind, is the worst culprit, or a toothless victim, which has acted as an instrument of persecution wielded by conniving, cruel, shadowy and unaccountable elements of the deep state. When exposing a crime is treated as committing a crime, it is nothing other than tyranny. “Beware of tyrants who tell you to live in a permanent state of fear,” says Alex Jones in *The Great Reset* (2022). But what can you do? “When small men begin to cast big shadows, it means that the sun is about to set,” said author Lin Yutang.

Charlie Baker, a former Massachusetts governor, in his 2022 book *Results* says that “snap judgements — about people or ideas — are fuelled by arrogance and conceit. They create blind spots and missed opportunities”. The lesson is clear: We need humble, rather than haughty, politicians. Accordingly, humility can be a bulwark against absolutism, and an antidote to the present era of grievance. Angry democracy, according to Nobel laureate Prof Daniel Kahneman, is a “nasty world of critiques, replies and rejoinders”, whose “aim is to embarrass”. We need to follow the advice of author John Maxwell: “you must be big enough to admit your mistakes, smart enough to learn from them, and strong enough to correct them.”

Let us start by admitting our failures. In the recent elections, we messed up counting votes; we [manipulated results](https://www.dawn.com/news/1819362#:~:text=PTI%20says%20ECP%20'exposed'%20rigging%20by%20uploading%20allegedly%20manipulated%20Forms%2045,-Published%20March%205&text=The%20PTI%20has%20alleged%20that,45%20from%20polling%20station%20no.) and cobbled together a coalition of politicians who lack legitimacy and moral authority. However, all major political parties and their leaderships have gained power with overt or covert support of the establishment, that includes the deep state. Almost all of them have been the beneficiaries or victims of the machinations of the power brokers.

The present dispensation is the product of the project of political persuasion pursued by the establishment. The leadership of the PTI, PML-N and PPP have all faced incarcerations and persecution.

The only way forward for them is to sit together and evolve a new charter of democracy and governance that entails civilian supremacy over military matters, parliamentary oversight after providing a legal framework for the operations of the intelligence agencies, independence of the judiciary, administrative and operational autonomy of police and law-enforcement agencies, as well as the civil services.

We must abandon the impoverished mode of political engineering and follow the advice of Cass Sunstein, professor of law at Harvard: “Asking how a disagreement might actually be resolved tends to turn enemies, focused on winning and losing, into teammates, focused on truth.” Let the truth be our saviour.

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