**The polarization menace**

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 “Severe polarization makes democracy vulnerable. In healthy democracies, opposing sides are seen as political adversaries to compete against and at times to negotiate with. In deeply polarized democracies, the other side comes to be seen as [an] enemy needing to be vanquished.” – Jennifer McCoy, Georgia University

The immense challenge today is that the people of Pakistan stand divided along political affiliations, adding a new dimension to the already precarious divide along religious, tribal, feudal, linguistic, and ethnic lines, which is adversely affecting the compounded national integration matrix of the country. Public sentiments are exploited to win vested political mileage while doing little to alleviate people’s suffering when assuming power. The trend fostered by political forces is more autocratic, uncompromising, intolerant, and non-democratic. An egoistic and derogatory attitude towards state institutions, propagating anarchy, has now reached unbearable limits.

There has been a display of political immaturity and bizarre language, geared towards discrediting opponents and state institutions. This plays against national cohesion and harmony. Political commotion and inept dispensations, coupled with rampant corruption, have all ended up creating many socioeconomic problems, especially for our young and educated population.

Socioeconomic disparity has provided dissatisfied elements and their foreign masters an opportunity for exploitation through protracted low-intensity conflict (LIC). The social contract between the state and society is weakening and is impacting our national identity and pride. Successive governments in Pakistan – despite their lofty rhetoric of serving the people – have done little to substantially address the serious issues of national integration and building a harmonious society. The evolving political polarization is dividing the nation on the basis of trivial political bonds, instead of blending the diverse parts of the nation. Egotism, violence, and bigotry are the new norms now threatening the very foundations of Pakistan.

Ideally speaking, the behaviour of political forces is supposed to foster national unity, since they are expected to have access to the grassroots across the length and breadth of the country. Unfortunately, our political forces have now confined themselves to their electoral yearnings. The culture of long marches, chanting slogans against political parties and their leaders, agitating people against state institutions and threatening a bloody revolution if their political demands are not met, is creating anxiety and unrest.

This divide is being intensified through unbridled social media which is furthering a narrative of hate and envy. Anti-Pakistan state and non-state actors are obligingly intensifying this tirade against the state of Pakistan. Even after 76 years, the ideology of Pakistan is still being contested, leading to fissures in society. Unfortunately, myopic religious perspectives fomenting intolerance are adversely affecting societal cohesion as well. Stephen P Cohen says that “the most important struggle in Pakistan today is [how] Pakistan should execute the Islamic identity and character in [the] state’s outlook”.

The accumulative effect of infusing politics of hatred for vested interests was witnessed on May 9 last year when state institutions were physically assaulted by violent mobs at almost 200 different places across the country. The nation stood aghast as news of rampaging mobs spread across the land.

In the face of such grave provocation, the civil and military authorities kept their cool and handled the situation most judiciously. May 9, 2023 was a failed attempt to persuade military personnel to mutiny or desert their duty. But the manoeuvre did not work. The people of the country were shocked at the condemnable events and expressed complete solidarity with the army.

The events of May 9 were widely covered by the international media, with its own versions to twist the facts to malign Pakistan’s armed forces. Similarly, hostile social media accounts played an instrumental role in exploiting these vicious happenings to their advantage.

The events of May 9 were a stark reminder of the politics of hate and acrimony. These events tarnished the image of the country and resulted in further polarization in the face of precarious political, economic and social fissures.

Pakistan’s substantial suffering due to political polarization in the last decade warrants that all political forces must join hands together and agree that no party should take any action that would destabilize the country and pollute the political environment. This only hurts national integration and cohesion of society. While each party can pursue its respective political agenda and manifesto, it should not lead to disharmony, polarization and overall instability in the country. We urgently need to create an environment of homogeneousness, respect, and trust. All the political parties should immediately devise a code of conduct, whereby hate speech, discrimination and use of abusive language should stop forthwith.

It is on the political leadership to convey a message of tolerance, a sense of belonging and trust to the people. There is a need to take proper stock of the situation by identifying and addressing challenges affecting national cohesion and a vibrant and progressive Pakistan.

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