**Poverty stricken politics**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2020-12-10

SIT TING before the idiot box the other day, I was marvelling at the speed with which Pakistan Television has reverted to its Ayub period mould as it informed the people about the Pakistan Democratic Movement, the 11-party opposition alliance, as seen by spokespersons of the government, in the following words: `PDM politics not in national interest`, `PDM is dancing to the tune of foreign powers`, `PDM is unable to stomach progress`, `the opposition is a gang of Banarsi thugs` `Tehreek-i-Insaf has destroyed the roots of the decadent and corrupt system`. Since PTV takes notice of the opposition only when something is said against it and usually doesn`t consider worth reporting what it says, one has to go to the print media to get the opposition`s version of the ground reality and it can be summed up in a few words.

The issue is the opposition`s plan to hold a public meeting in Lahore. The second banner headline is the opposition`s warning of a strong response to any interference in its public meeting while greater prominence is given to the government`s warning that however hard it may try, the opposition won`t be given an NRO. This is followed by a warning by the prime minister himself that those providing chairs (on hire) for the Lahore meeting will face prosecution along with the organisers.

Thus the government-opposition debate appears to have been reduced to a slanging match between them. The government apparently doesn`t know how to properly enlighten the people about its policies and the opposition chooses to attack the government on grounds that are not wholly clear to the public. The rules of the game must be revised to provide for a flow of ideas that deepen democracy and give citizens the vitally needed satisfaction of participating in the management of state affairs.

The ruling coalition and the opposition both have a duty to generate and sustain a political discourse that serves this vitally important purpose.

Our people are not wholly unaware of the fine art of political swordplay. The debates in the pre-Inde-pendence central assembly can still be appreciated not only for oratorical brilliance but also for the stock of knowledge drawn upon to put across one`s point of view.

There were in the Constituent Assembly quite a few speakers from both wings of the country, nonMuslims as well as Muslims, who were recognised for the breadth of their vision and persuasive logic.

There were occasions in the West Pakistan Assembly when a tiny opposition could engage far more numerous members on the treasury benches in lively and often meaningful thrust and counterthrust. The difference from the present-day standards was that except for the period when politics was debased by the commandments of the men on horseback, criticism of governments was not equated with rebellion against the state and the label of treason could not be wantonly applied.

What needs to be understood is a simple fact that ascent to authority does not automatically invest any party with a higher rank on the patriotic scale than the opposition.

Matterswouldimprove considerablyif the treasury and opposition benches accepted each other`s rights and respected them as non-derogable values.

Besides, the party in power and the party in opposition share a responsibility to educate the people in the evolution of democratic processes, for no society can aspire to a system of governance higher than the common citizens`level of appreciation.

Unfortunately, Pakistani politics has become violent beyond any justification. The ruling party suffers from a surfeit of self-righteousness and makes the mistake of not only denouncing the opposition members for the sins, real and imagined, of their past leaderships but also insulting their electors. These members, regardless of the labels put on them by the ruling party, are as much entitled to respect as their counterparts belonging to the treasury benches are, as both owe their places in the chamber to a single shared process.

This state of heightened hostility displayed bythe ruling coalition against the opposition is replicated in society, because as an Arabic saying goes, the people adopt the ways of their rulers; the state of hostility between political parties is transferred to the people at the societal level, and mutual goodwill and tolerance are undermined. But it seems the government doesn`t think much of such timetested words, otherwise it would not have ignored the prohibition against trivialising anyone`s names and titles as that is considered as horrible an act as eating the flesh of a deceased brother.

But here we are primarily concerned with the impact of political polarisation on social relationships. The values of mutual respect and fraternal ties are undermined, f acts are unnecessarily challenged and everybody becomes suspicious of everybody else. Some of these unhealthy trends are already visible and the social fabric has become more tenuous than ever. If these fissiparous tendencies are not checked in time a disaster of unimaginable magnitude could overtake Pakistan.

It is therefore in every party`s interest, and in the interest of Pakistan, to lower the temperature of politics and bring political contests and rivalries within the limits of civil competition and relearn the virtues of peaceful coexistence. Politics will get richer and more and more rational and beneficial for all citizens if the golden principle of living and letting others live is honestly followed. Those who try to secure their lives by wishing all others dead are likely to return to dust sooner than others. If for nothing else, the politics of perpetual confrontation between the estranged cousins in power and in opposition needs to be given up in order to mobilise the country`s talent and material resources for winning the war against ignorance, poverty and disease. The present state of disharmony is much worse than living with a malignant tumour for it saps the nation`s energies faster and more thoroughly than any other affliction known to human beings.