**Dharna politics**

BY N I A Z M U R T A Z A | 11/5/2019

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| THE JUI-F`s dharna and warning to the prime minister to quit have divided opinions about the motives, tactics and utility even among liberals. Some think it may strengthen civilian supremacy. Others like me oppose it given the use of the faith card and possibly strong-armed tactics even though the PTI too used similar tactics earlier.One can better analyse this dharna by distilling lessons from past dharnas (street protests) globally. Dharnas where huge crowds choke main cities for weeks have replaced armed revolutions as the main tool for ending autocratic regimes in recent decades.They are often called revolutions too. But major armed revolutions didn`t just topple regimes. Crucially, they changed regime types/systems too, eg from monarchy to oneparty rule or democracy and/or from capitalism to communism.Equally crucially, they also upended the old-order security apparatus propping up autocracy. But even then they couldn`t quickly improve governance by much. Even after the French and US revolutions led to democracy, governance improved slowly over decades, even centuries, via social movements. Elsewhere, armed victors even set up long, brutal and inept regimes (eg China and Russia).Short dharnas recently have toppled many infirm autocratic regimes sans prolonged armed struggle given the growing power of media, decreasing global tolerance of autocracy and global economic linl(s. But autocratic regimes whose economic might and security apparatus remain intact, eg China, can still suppress them, even armed revolts.Even successful dharnas have a mixed record in producing fundamental systems change. Earlier protests, like the 1979 Iran and 1989 East Europe ones, did do so. In Eastern Europe, there was a one-time governance gain too. But sans the rise of strong social movements later, governance hasn`t reached Western Europe levels.Elsewhere, the gains were even more limited. Dharnas in Egypt toppled Hosni Mubarak to establish democracy, but not the underlying security apparatus, which then upended democracy. Other dharnas replaced one weak civilian regime with another, with few delivery or human rights gains, eg Ukraine. In Lebanon, recent protests ended Saad Hariri`s government. But there is talk now of it being replaced by a Hariri-led technocratic regime.The organisational traits of leading dharnagroupsinnuence theirsuccesslevels.The best hope is when progressive coalitions of ordinary citizens, eg student, teacher and peasant unions, lead dharnas and are organised enough to continue as social movements even after autocracy ends. But such cases arerare. Where protest groups soon disintegrate after victory, they end autocracy but not misrule. Protests led by conservative forces rarely deliver broad gains. Finally, protests to overthrow elected regimes are usually termed anti-democratic and must instead focus on changes in specific policies via nondisruptive tactics.Pakistan has seen many failed armed struggles but also a few gainful street protests which overthrew Ayub and weakened Zia and Musharraf. But they had many minuses. Even where led by ordinary citizens, their coalitions were weak and didn`t survive to press for social gains later.More critically, they only toppled overt facades but not the deep state which soon regained power.Other dharnas had retrogressive aims.Where does Maulana Fazlur Rehman`s dharna fall on this canvas? The first minus is his dodgy ideology. His is also no progressive coalition of ordinary citizens that could continue to press for social gains. And he targets thefaçadenotdeepstate structures.One could also object saying he aims totopple an elected regime. But this is a gray area given the serious doubts about the 2018 polls. So the EU election mission report and credible national entities allege serious pre-poll rigging by the security apparatus.Recent government moves suggest to many a plan to weaken the opposition, civil society and media and establish an autocratic oneparty regime. Some say there is even a parallel move to entrench personalised rule in a critical state institution.Past struggles have made overt autocracy unlikely. Thus, there seems to be a move to establish a covert one behind a thin civilian façade. Such moves must be resisted, but not via the JUI-F dharna. A coalition of progressive civil society groups along with opposition parties must openly call for civilian supremacy. The tactics must be democratic, eg raising the issue in the media, intellectual hubs and parliament, while upping the pressure gradually if sections of the establishment remain bent on perpetuating autocracy. Pakistan`s deeply fractured society can afford neither overt nor covert autocracy. The writer is a Senior Fellow with UC Berkeley and heads INSPIRING Pakistan, a progressive policy unit.murtazaniaz@yahoo.com www.inspiring.pk Twitter: @NiazMurtaza2 |