**A lot to answer**

BY S H A H Z A D S H A R J E E L 2020-11-15

THE season of rallies is upon us. There has been a lot of talk about mid-term or early elections by the opposition political parties and the media. Even Prime Minister Imran Khan, though dismissive of the demand, has alluded to it with caveats. It does not matter when the general elections are held between now and 2023; the country will likely remain in election mode.

This gives the electorate a wider-thanusual window of opportunity to assess what the major political parties have been promising in their manifestos through the past few elections, and demand that each one of them presents a new and precise road map to take the country out of the morass.

The media and civil society must help the layperson unbundle the rhetoric that litters the election manifestos. It is not rocket science for us to come up with a brief list of questions concerned with the big picture as well as the most basic needs and rights of the person on the street.

The electorate should simply refuse to be entertained by the spectacle of `Kaun Banega PM` (who will be prime minister).

Let us not care who among the Sharifs it will be; Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari or his father; or if the Pakistan Democratic Movement proposes to form a broad coalition filling the Prime Minister`s Office by turns, like the Chief Minister`s Office was in Balochistan between 2013 and 2017.

What we should demand is that each party announce its finance minister for the next administration. If they dare come up with tried and tested loyalists of the ruling f amilies or the imported types, we must be ready with their scorecards from their past stints in power.

The incumbents will be skewered by the price hike that the common folk are getting crushed under for as long as they remain in office. We must also ask everyone delivering thundering speeches at rallies, presenting themselves as saviours, as to how exactly they propose to bring the prices down? We must help the electorate to not get misled by tall claims about price management committees and bogus comparisons between price control mechanisms run by deputy commissioners or nazims. The voters must know that no number of across-the-board subsidies will get them even short-term relief, that every rupee of subsidy comes from their taxes and mostly helps the well-to-do.

One big consensus Pakistanis must arrive at and relay to those who cannot wait to `serve us` is that anyone who so much as utters inanities like `we inherited these problems` or `70 years of mess cannot be cleared in five`, will be considered to have resigned. This should apply to the currentlot as well in case they are re-elected. They know exactly what they are getting into while presenting themselves for public office; they better be ready to roll up their sleeves and mop up the collective mess even if it means remaining on all fours for the entirety of their term. No more hiding behind the `baggage-f rom-the-past` excuse.

Imagine for a moment each and every one from amongst the power wielders during a televised debate, facing an anchor who just does not let go till the man or the woman in the hot seat explains how exactly the circular debt of the power sector will be paid off.

You think this is being too harsh? Let us give them MCQs instead. How about a onetime payout like the last government did? Well, it came back in no time with a bigger amount of debt. Do nothing and hound the IPPs about fudging production costs, and arm-twist them into renegotiating sovereign contracts to reduce capacity payments like the present government has done? Look where it got us; the circular debt stoodover two trillion rupees by October.

The incumbents and their challengers must present new manifestos for the next general elections to let the public know the following: what stroke-of-pen reforms will be undertaken in the first week in office? What will be done toreduce the defence expenditure to create jobs, to enrol 22 million-plus out-of-school children, and provide education that meets the demands of the knowledge economy? What mother-and-child nutrition plans will be rolled out to prevent stunting that af fects almost 40 per cent of Pakistani children? What judicial, tax, electoral and anti-corruption reforms will be undertaken? What about the missing persons, holding local government elections throughout Pakistan, and addressing the grievances of Balochistan, erstwhile Fata, Gilgit-Baltistan and Karachi? A similar questionnaire can be formulated on the external policy front but that is a subject for a separate piece. Pakistanis must be informed by all the hopefuls how all this gets done in the first month, quarter, six months, and so on up to the two-year mark. If movement in the right direction is discernable by the start of year three, fine, else it will be r ally time again.  The writer is a poet and analyst.

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