**Cricket as a metaphor**

Shafqat Mahmood

Thursday, Jun 13, 2024

The writer served as the federal minister of education in the PTI’s federal government. He can be reached at: shafqatmd@gmail.com

It is amazing how much the varying fortunes of our cricket team matter. In the past week or so we lost a football World Cup qualifier to Saudi Arabia. Does not even register. Our hockey and volleyball teams are beginning to do well. Barely a flash on the horizon. But the pathetic cricket performance in the World Cup feels like a national tragedy.

There was a time when we had much more to feel happy or sad about in sports. We were world champions in hockey and squash. Our athletes were not so bad – especially in the early days. Ghulam Raziq and Abdul Khaliq won Asian and Commonwealth gold medals. We had a swimmer, Brojan Das, from East Pakistan, who swam across the English Channel six times.

Cricket was there, and we occasionally won big like in 1992 to intense jubilation. Or, more often lost. It mattered but there was no sense of doom as it was not the only game in town.

Now it is – and no wonder so much collective ego is invested in it. For lack of other markers, it has become our signature identity. What else is there where we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with major global powers? It is the one arena where we still have the opportunity to make an international mark and when we don’t, it hurts. More than what a routine defeat in a sporting event should.

Among many comments that have been floating around social media after the India defeat, one is repeated often. How can cricket be an isolated outpost of excellence when so much else in the country is in a terrible state? In other words, the state of cricket is seen as a metaphor for the state of the country.

This may be a bit harsh, but it is not easy when memories of another time flood in. I remember president Ayub Khan – forgetting for a moment that he had taken the country over by force – being received at the Washington Airport by US president Kennedy and his wife and much hoopla later throughout the visit. Times have changed and so have the protocols but if one visual image of our status in the world stands out, it is this from 1961.

If this is too early a period and reflective of the global realities then, there are other images closer to our time. The two enduring ones are from late prime minister Benazir Bhutto’s visit to the US in 1989. In one she is addressing a joint session of the Congress, the first and last Pakistani prime minister to do so. And in the other being feted at a formal state dinner in the white house by president Bush. Never happened again.

Some would argue that these images are just a fluff of state-to-state relations and putting too much value on them is naïve, and the real meat is in practical steps that either help or hurt a nation. That’s true – but as any diplomat will tell you, protocol is messaging and rolling out the red carpet is not just a routine. If Benazir Bhutto was given these honours, it reflected the stature of Pakistan and also the high esteem in which she was personally held, as the first woman PM of a Muslim country.

Incidentally, one enduring grouse I have is the way Benazir Bhutto was treated by the then-establishment led by Gen Aslam Beg. While she was being lauded throughout the world as this amazing young woman who had become the prime minister of a Muslim country, she was being actively undermined at home. Here was an opportunity for Pakistan to use her international image as an asset to take the country forward. Instead, she was thrown out of power within twenty months by then-president Ghulam Ishaq Khan, fully backed by Gen Beg.

As national self-destructive actions go, this ranks high. Not only was the most popular Pakistani globally brought down, but her image was consistently tarnished as well to justify this vile act. It did not hurt her as much as it hurt Pakistan because the picture we presented to the world was not pretty. Also, by soiling her perception, we lost forever our best global role model.

Democracy was also a victim. The manipulations that started in 1990 with Benazir’s removal never let anyone following settle down. It started a round of musical chairs, prime ministers coming and going, culminating in the Musharraf takeover in 1999. The so-called decade of darkness was a self-inflicted injury, an own goal that hurt the country and which, some would argue, is still impacting us.

One is forced to go back in history, a journey of nostalgia, to measure Pakistan’s global standing because there is so little now to hold on to. Imagine 1974 and the Islamic summit. Anyone and everyone from the Islamic world were here; kings and presidents and prime ministers staying for days in Lahore. Praying and eating together. And at the centre of all this was the Pakistani prime minister – whom we hanged later incidentally.

It is sad to say this, but can we imagine a similar gathering in Pakistan today? Now we celebrate the visits of lesser stature dignitaries as our great good fortune. Whether anything comes out of it or not is another matter. It almost seems that at times we are being played by promises of these many billions and projects and this number of investments, without any tangible result.

Clearly, the solution to our problems does not lie with someone else. Others have their agendas and we must understand one thing without ambiguity. Nations have interests, not friendships. No one will help us because they like us. Each one has their interests, and they will at best move forward because of mutual interest, meaning only when theirs and our interests match. We have not only to understand this but tame our rhetoric accordingly. Sometimes our verbosity is embarrassing.

It is time we took stock of where we stand and what is the way forward. We cannot just remain where we are now – a nation polarized, economy in doldrums, and institutions collapsing. Where we need stability, we have trouble that occasionally descends into chaos. The centre, in metaphorical terms, is holding but for how long? The process of repairing what is broken must start.

A condition fundamental to all our future endeavours is political stability. That can only come about if issues with Imran Khan are sorted out. Too many institutions of the state are now absorbed in containing the PTI and being damaged in the process – whether it is the courts, the Election Commission or parliament. This must stop because institutional decline is the mother of all failures of the state.

What is done is done. We must begin to move on.