**Beyond rage and emotion**

Husain Haqqani

Thursday, Nov 02, 2023

Pakistan’s political discourse is characterized by emotions, more particularly the emotion of anger and rage. At any given time, Pakistanis are angry over real or perceived injustices at home and abroad, over the behaviour of the world’s major powers, and over their own helplessness.

They are enraged by the scheduling or delay in elections, arrest or trial of their preferred leader, release from custody of the leader they dislike, lack of respect for their religion and religious sentiment by others, or expression of too much religious sentiment by people of other religions. Anger is also the usual Pakistani response to unemployment, rising prices of various items, and falling value of the country’s currency, the rupee.

Keeping people angry has been the preferred strategy of some political leaders since Pakistan’s inception. In an era of social media, real reasons for people’s anger can be augmented with disinformation and fake news. It is bad enough that someone is suffering in prison or that innocent children are being killed in Gaza. A few artificially enhanced images can further enhance the outrage if it is forwarded enough times.

Anger is a natural and understandable emotion, but it clouds judgment. An anger-prone individual often loses friends, is avoided by family members, and seldom gets his/her way at work. How can collective national anger, perpetually fed by an outrage machine on social media, help a nation overcome any of its problems?

There are those who say that collective anger is a good thing because it can motivate people to overthrow the existing order and bring about a revolution. But there have been few revolutions in human history, and each has brought a new set of problems. The French revolution of 1789 was followed by violence and chaos and the Russian revolution of 1917 led to communist excesses. Iran’s 1979 revolution may have gotten rid of the Shah and his secret police but that has been replaced by the Iranian clergy and its totalitarianism.

The better way forward for nations might be a cool-headed assessment of self-interest, choosing who might advance it, and then encouraging incremental change. Unfortunately, that is not easy. The sharp-tongued orator often prevails over the sensible policy recommender. Populism is more appealing to the disenfranchised than a set of rational ideas.

Soon after independence, Pakistan’s founders decided that the country’s military and economic needs would be better served with a cold-war alliance with the West. But the national passion favoured the dream of pan-Islamism. Religious passions, always easy to arouse, have held Pakistan hostage since 1947 and their intensity has only escalated over time.

Pakistan’s sixth prime minister, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, from Bengal, came under fire for suggesting that an alliance of Islamic countries would not enhance Pakistan’s security needs and for advising Pakistanis against confrontation with India. After him, most Pakistani leaders have chosen only to play to popular emotions favouring militarism and militancy even though these brought no advantage in enhancing national security or prosperity.

It is easier to get applause for promising ‘a thousand year war’ or ‘looking the superpowers in the eye,’ along with claims that God is on our side. Who would shout and cheer for the person wondering, ‘But do we have weapons and materiel to fight for more than a few days’ or saying, ‘Doesn’t looking someone in the eye require having the same height?’

Videos of horse riders in a Pakistani city, carrying Palestinian flags, or men promising to go and fight alongside Gazans ‘only if the government allows us to go’ get more forwards and shares on social media. Fewer people want to listen to a balanced analysis and none of those forwarding such videos pause to wonder how the horse riders from Malakand will actually get to Gaza and how they might fare against modern weapons.

Research shows that words like ‘ghairat’ (honour) and ‘jazba’ (spirit) are used more frequently in Pakistan’s national discourse than in the politics or media of any of the other 193 member countries of the United Nations. It is not that other nations lack honour or spirit. It is just that their public figures talk about something other than pressing people’s emotional buttons.

It seems that changing Pakistan’s discourse is a prerequisite for changing its course. The country must analyze its predicament and go beyond emotion and rage to look for solutions. For example, the preoccupation with emotive issues has created a dichotomy. The country has become increasingly dependent on donors whom Pakistanis love to hate but whose assistance is crucial in maintaining an expansive national security state.

Pakistan is, of course, not the only nation where rhetoric trumps cold calculation of national interest. In 2015, Greece had elected Alexis Tsipras as prime minister for making defiant statements against Germany at a time when his country most needed German support in getting out of a debt crisis.

The popularity of Tsipras rose with his grandstanding but bank deposits in Greece fell, further aggravating the country’s economic crisis. Defiant statements won Tsipras applause from his fellow countrymen but the net impact of these statements on the national economy was negative. Eventually, the government led by Tsipras had to implement those very austerity measures that he had opposed to get elected. He was not re-elected.

Compare such emotion-based decision-making with the conduct of East Asian nations, including China and South Korea. After years of describing the US as the centre of global imperialism, the Chinese Communist Party had no qualms about partnering with the Americans from 1979 to 2016 to modernize China’s economy. The South Koreans built a self-sustaining economy with a cumulative aid input from the US of only $15 billion since 1950 by avoiding confrontation with America and by cooperating with erstwhile enemy Japan. Pakistan received $40 billion in bilateral US aid over the same period but donor funding served as a substitute for revenue generation while wars and calls to jihad have deterred investment.

The writer, former ambassador of Pakistan to the US, is Diplomat-in-Residence at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi and Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington DC.