Whose values?

BY H U M A Y U S U F | 3/9/2020

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| TODAY is the day after International Women`s Day. By now, the Aurat March would have taken place, hopefully without incident. And Pakistan`s honour would likely have survived a public gathering of women calling for physical sanctity, economic justice and other fundamental rights.  The government supported the march under the condition that its participants raised slogans permitted by the `values of our society, religion and family`. Perhaps now we can engage in more rational discourse and question why the onus was on the marchers to change their slogans, and not on society to change its values? The evocation of values is always problematic. It begs the question of whose values set the gold standard. It is also deceptive because it falsely pits these values as sacrosanct and deeply entrenched in a social or moral framework. In the wake of the Aurat March, we must acknowledge that part of the opposition to the march was fuelled by the current wave of populist politics.  The debate around the march has been polarising: patriarchy vs feminism, values vs rights. But in the context of the global populist surge, such opposition is also about excluding an insurgent, outsider group in order to preserve the supremacy of a (fantastical) privileged majority.  Most recent populist movements have been defined by misogyny. In the US, Donald Trump boasted of grabbing women`s bodies in the crudest terms, and Brazil`s Jair Bolsonaro used rape slurs to demean female political rivals. They could do this because their populist supporters would not cringe. For the left-behind, majority-male working class that supports such figures, the rise of competing groups (women, much the same as immigrants or other ethnic or racial communities) is as much a threat to its status and resources as changing economics and automation.  The threat presented by women results from their growing presence in the workplace and politics, legislative gains, and the success of the international #MeToo movement. Women are seen as a force that can erode the established powers` position, like globalisation and immigration did. But women, unlike migrants and refugees, are not easily distanced. They are in your home, your office, your life. Their ubiquity enhances their peril. But women`s bodies are also the easiest, proximate targets, whether through economic deprivation, domestic violence or sexual harassment.  The impact of this kind of thinking was evident in the opposition to the Aurat March by educated, middle-class, net-savvy male youth and indeed other women. These groups were threatened by the marchTODAY is the day after International Women`s Day. By now, the Aurat March would have taken place, hopefully without incident. 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But women`s bodies are also the easiest, proximate targets, whether through economic deprivation, domestic violence or sexual harassment.  The impact of this kind of thinking was evident in the opposition to the Aurat March by educated, middle-class, net-savvy male youth and indeed other women. These groups were threatened by the marchbecause it fuelled their paranoia about being persecuted.  Populist political discourse thrives on creating narratives of persecution and victimisation for a secure majority group.  Populism grows from the soil of conspiracy theories.Thereisno shortage ofsuchpersecution paranoia in Pakistan: the Indians are out to get us; the US wants to steal our nukes; climate change is a hoax to keep poor countries poor; polio vaccinations will sterilise us. When threats are perceived to abound, nebulous yet omnipresent, the last thing one needs is a feminist insurgency.  Populist tendencies are also homogenising and anti-pluralist, aimed at enabling a majoritarian triumphalism. In Pakistan, it is not surprising that the virulent response against the Aurat March coincides with a top-down strategy to prop up a militaristic national identity, unified under the banner of faith. In this context, uniting against women who challenge the status quo, and terming their demand for rights to be anti-Pakistan or anti-Islam, perpetuates a fantasy of a unified nation and defers threats of fragmentation along with the associated loss of power for the centre, and established vested interests, that would entail.  Populism also welcomes authoritari-anism as an exclusionary method necessary to protect the supposedly persecuted majority. But submission to authority breeds problems. Frustrations arise when you surrender agency to establishments, surveillance systems, or patriotic policing. These produce the desire to participate in the authoritarian system and revel in power. For most people, men and women alike, power is most easily exercised against women, often young and economically disempowered, that are close at hand, whether daughters or domestic servants. That is why when these women ask for the freedom to choose, their request is always first understood as the freedom to escape familial and social `norms`.  Few ideas are as ridiculous as the retaliatory (and inherently sexist)`Mard March` that took place at this time last year. But we must recognise that women will not access justice, equity and safety until the paranoia born of populist politics (along with other patriarchal tropes) is acknowledged and addressed.  Perhaps next year`s debates can focus on the drivers of so-called `values` instead. The writer is a freelance joumalist.  Twitter: @humayusuf |