**Misogyny, of course**

BY M U N A K H A N 2022-10-25

IT is disappointing that former prime minister Imran Khan`s comment about journalist Gharidah Faroogi have been largely ignored when they deserve greater protestations beyond individual tweets of outrage.

When asked at a press conference in Banigala why female journalists are harassed at PTI events, Khan replied that if Faroogi forces her way into tight (read male) spaces, what does she expect? Press bodies should have been swift in their unequivocal condemnation of his comment followed by a call to refuse to cover his pressers until he apologised. Khan may be convincing his social media army that the era of mainstream media is over but without the 24/7 coverage he receives on all channels, including PTV, he would be deprived of oxygen. Pressure tactics can be an effective tool to get leaders to backtrack, rethink strategies and apologise.

Gen Musharraf was met with furious protests in 2005 for his comments made to the Washington Post about Mukhtaran Mai`s gang rape in 2002. He said one needed to understand the environment. `This has become a money-making concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped,` he said.

Not only was he condemned by Pakistani politicians across the spectrum, he was met with protests at speaking events in the US that year. While he claimed to have been taken out of context, he was careful in his language about women thereafter.

Khan and his supporters can learn from this as they often complain of their leaders` words about rape being taken out of context.

He should use clear language that does not trivialise sexual harassment or violence or put the onus of blame on victims for assault.

When he was prime minister and asked about sex crimes, he blamed everything but rapists for the rise in sexual assault.

Unfortunately, the journalist community has too many fissures and factions and can`t put their differences aside and fight for better wages or press freedoms, let alone condemn leaders for promoting rape culture.

As I spend time researching how women journalists are threatened and abused on social media, I can see how platforms, political leaders and employers fall short of creating effective mechanisms to fight the rampant abuse. Women journalists are left to fend for themselves and are reliant on each other for support but that too is lacking because of their highly polarised politics.

The authors of a 2018 Harvard report `Does rape culture predict rape?` found that `rape culture in the media predicts both the frequency of rape and its pursuit through the local criminal justice system.In jurisdictions where rape culture was more prevalent, there were more documented rape cases, but authorities were less vigilant in pursuing them.

Khan is undoubtedly Pakistan`s most popular leader right now. He may not realise he`s using misogyny-laced strategies to delegitimise female journalists like Faroogi.

Rather than respond to her questions, he resorts to gendered attacks to the delight of his supporters. This is a classic move by populist leaders. Populism, like nationalism, is dangerous to women and democracy.

Academic Dr Nitasha Kaul has written about misogyny and authoritarian leaders in several countries and how they `strategically operationalise misogyny in their political projects` A lot of the language used by president Donald Trump during his electoral campaign is not fit to print in this paper. I was on the outskirts of the White House as a graduate student during the inauguration and saw supporters male and female wearing T-shirts with abusive language about hisrival Hillary Clinton.

They booed and chanted `lock her up` when Clinton entered the stage with her husband for Trump`s swearing in. Populist leaders rarely call for showing decency.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks about women as `mothers and sisters`in need of protection but doesn`t say anything about the rapes of Dalit or Muslim women. He was slow to comment on the rape of an eight-year-old girl in held Kashmir in 2018 and did not even censure a BJP minister who said of this crime: `so what if a girl died? Many girls die every day` `Misogyny works for these leaders in ways that helps them to entrench, defend and sustain their policies as strong, and delegitimise challenges to it as feminine/feminist/anti-national,` writes Kaul.

Khan is Pakistan`s most popular leader right now and he must not fall into this terrible pit of othering women he does not agree with. Especially because it can lead to violence.

It`s why journalists must come together and protest vile campaigns against women journalists and create alliances to recognise misogyny for what it is: a crime that should not be tolerated at any cost.  The writer is currently researching newsroom culture in Pakistan.

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