**Inside the Red Zone: The decisive year**

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As the calendar readies to flip this tumultuous year into the past, there is still hope that inorganic turbulence can give way to a semblance of stability. This hope banks on decision-makers jettisoning maximalist positions in favour of reasoned strategies.

The process of reasoning our way out of these entanglements has to start with acknowledging one simple fact: elections will not solve our political problems till all stakeholders accept them as free, fair and legitimate. If polls are held without the requisite electoral reforms, they will inflame the situation instead of resolving it. The biggest challenge for the year 2023 then is to hold elections that can hold up to scrutiny.

Here’s why:

First, the poisoned political environment has led to a severe shrinking of common space between the government and the opposition. This is a dangerous development because it means there is hardly any agenda item that the two sides can agree on. Democracy provides platforms that constitute such common ground. Foremost among them is parliament. Here even the bitterest of rivals sit under the same roof, are bound by the same rules and locked in the same legislative processes that can resolve political and ideological conflicts. But recent years have witnessed a debasement of this parliamentary platform. Recall the shouting matches during the previous government’s tenure and the near absence of any meaningful legislation during this period. Electoral reforms cannot therefore take place unless the opposition is back in parliament and becomes a stakeholder in how the 2023 elections are held.

Second, constitutional institutions and procedures have been made controversial, thereby diluting their effectiveness as conflict resolvers. This is evidenced by the mockery that the PTI government made of the vote of no-confidence via its deputy speaker; and how it has tarnished the image of the Election Commission of Pakistan just because the institution had rightly called out the Daska by-election for what it was: a travesty. How does the PTI walk back from this maximalist position?

Third, if the present political trajectory of conflict accentuation continues for the next eight months, and if the PTI does not return to parliament, and if the five-year term of the present National Assembly ends on a bitter note, there is precious little that the caretaker government and the ECP can do to organize elections that can lead to legitimacy and stability for the months and years ahead. The first six months of 2023 therefore provide a small window for us to get our act together. After that, it may be too little and too late.

The year 2023 is also decisive for our economy, and perhaps more so for the politics of our economy. A realization is now sinking in among most stakeholders that we need to somehow figure out how to save the economy from becoming collateral damage of our political battles. Never again should any government be able to dynamite the economy for petty political gains. The PTI’s violation of its own IMF agreement that led to wrecking the economy’s balance is the most vivid manifestation of how citizens suffer when politics trumps economics.

The concept of a charter of economy does not allude to all parties having the same economic policies. That would defeat the whole idea of parties presenting their own policies as an improvement on those of their rivals. The charter essentially means agreeing on some basic fundamentals of economic reforms that all parties agree must be undertaken if the economy has to regain its balance. If the year 2023 can see some headway on this front, there is hope for optimism in the post-election period.

Finally, the year 2023 has become decisive in terms of our challenge to defeat the scourge of terrorism. It is a menace we had thought we had overcome. In fact, to a significant degree we had. But some mistakes were made – the assumption that the TTP could be reasoned with being the foremost – and today we are once again faced with a rising wave of violence.

One key component of our success against the terrorists was the coalescing of all stakeholders around the fact that all terrorist organizations needed to be defeated militarily and not to be negotiated with. The heart-wrenching APS massacre brought clarity to doubters and state and society moved in unison to deter, degrade and ultimately defeat the TTP.

But the acute polarization today presents a hurdle towards once again finding the consensus we need to go after a resurgent TTP with our full might. If any lessons were learnt in the past, they seem to have faded from our memories. Nothing could be more tragic. The government and the military leadership have taken important decisions in this regard and it is vital that the opposition lends its full support to the action against terrorists. This is one issue on which political point scoring should not happen. This is easier said than done, as seen by some recent statements emanating out of Zaman Park. The early months of 2023 will prove if we can display the wisdom and maturity to come together against the rising threat of terrorism, or whether our poisoned politics has catapulted us back into the pre-2014 era.

There is one common theme that weaves through all these challenges. It is this theme that is in fact a prerequisite for our success in overcoming such challenges. It is this: all political stakeholders digesting the fact that only collective action can lead to victorious outcomes. The era of zero sum politics should be coming to a close. The PTI chairman’s attempt to paint politics as a battle of good versus evil has led to nothing but poisoning the electorate and injecting hate and loathing among millions of Pakistanis. Faux populism may have mobilized Imran Khan’s base but it has pushed the entire system into a cul-de-sac.

If he continues down this path — which so far seems likely — Pakistan may well be on its way to further instability. But if by some miracle he can read the writing on the wall; if he can recognize the challenges that confront us in 2023; and if he can somehow break free from the prison of his own politics and rhetoric, we may be — just maybe — in a position to get a grip on these strategic challenges.

On this last day of 2022, we can only hope that this year has taught us the right lessons, and that it may provide us the backdrop to launch a fresh effort to heal our self-inflicted wounds. There was a time in not too distant a past when the system was gamed to produce choreographed political outcomes based more on misplaced wishes than substantive plans. The country has paid dearly for such experiments. With 2023 being the last year of the current parliamentary term, it gives us an opportunity to prepare for a new beginning. The story of Pakistan is a story of failed experiments based on failed logic leading to failed outcomes. Time is upon us to write a fresh chapter.

As dawn breaks over a new year, Pakistan’s leaders may want to say a silent prayer that they make the right choices at the right time for the right reasons.

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