**Reaching Out to the Youth**

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Nobody in his right mind would grudge freedom of expression if it is exercised within the constitutional obligations and in conformity with the ethical values of the society as well as internationally recognized principles in this regard. There is no room for dishing out fake news, propagation of false narratives, spreading fissiparous tendencies, creating an ambience of despondency and denigrating state institutions.

The codes of ethics adopted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and media representative bodies all over the world invariably emphasize truthful reporting in recognition of the fact that such conduct by the media can have very negative consequences for society as well as the media’s own freedom.

The advancement in information technologies and the emergence of digital media has exponentially expanded the outreach of media and the impact that it can create because more and more people tend to rely on information disseminated by these media outlets. The social media has outshone all other media channels in regards to outreach and impact. It is mostly the media relied upon and used by the youth all over the world for acquiring information about the unfolding events and comments on them.

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But the dilemma is that social media is proving more to be a nuisance than a blessing, particularly in Pakistan. A political party which has established a vast social media network is regrettably engaged in spreading false and fake news, denigrating state institutions like the Army and judiciary with the specific purpose of polluting the minds of Pakistani youth—who constitute about 60% of the population—to advance their narrow and skewed political agenda. This propaganda often descends into the realm of anti-state rhetoric. Reportedly the government has identified 500 such accounts engaged in this nefarious activity and appropriate action is on the anvil against their operators.

It is probably in the backdrop of this painful reality that the caretaker Prime Minister in the recent past has been interacting with the student community to unravel the falsehood being spread on social media and clear the haze on national issues and challenges confronted by the nation, giving a truthful perspective on them.

Of late the military leadership has also joined in the effort to neutralize the negative propaganda by the vested interests to pollute the minds of the youth and explain the context and rationale behind the developments taking place on the national horizon. A few days ago DG ISI engaged students from different universities and answered questions on the political situation in the country and matters related to security and the role that the Army was playing in warding security threats to the country. It was a very candid and expressive interaction.

On Wednesday the caretaker Prime Minister Anwar ul Haq Kaka and COAS General Asim Munir addressed the participants of the National Youth Convention in Islamabad. The Prime Minister appreciated the role of the Army in fighting terrorism and taking care of the country’s security. He also urged the need for the youth not to fall prey to the malicious and false propaganda by the enemies of the country.

The COAS spoke on the purpose of the creation of Pakistan, and shed some light on the political realities of the country expressing the resolve that Pakistan would never compromise on its sovereignty. However, his major emphasis was on pinpointing negative and false propaganda which was being done through social media outlets against the state institutions. He was right on money to observe that this fabricated propaganda was being unleashed to spread despair and it was imperative for the youth to ignore this and trust in themselves. He also quoted a religious injunction regarding verifying the authenticity of anything told and said before believing it. During the question-answer session, General Asim also referred to the reality of power politics in the country.

Some quarters are looking askance at the initiative by the Army leadership to have interactions with the students on political and other national challenges which they think falls in the jurisdiction of the civilian leadership. Well my answer to them is that the Army is part of the government and when the circumstances demand the exhibition of national unity and neutralizing threatening propaganda against the state as it is now, it becomes incumbent upon all the state institutions including the Army to play their role in response to such challenges. Since the focus and target of the propaganda on social media were targeted at the youth, it was in the fitness of things to engage the youth to remove the created misgivings in their mind. In my view, it was a very pragmatic and visionary move.

The youth are not only an invaluable asset to the nation but also architects of the process of nation-building. They are the trustees of the ideological moorings and propellers of socio-economic development. Their energy, enthusiasm and professional ingenuity can catapult the nation to dizzying heights. For them to be able to play this role it is imperative to equip and acquaint them with the knowledge of their own history, sharpen their inquisitive leanings to judge between wrong and right and bequeath to them a healthy legacy for them to strengthen the national edifice.

With the elections around the corner and reports about likely disturbances in the run-up to the elections and post-election period, it is of utmost necessity to put things in their proper perspective and to erase the impact of false propaganda on the minds of the youth. A misled youth attuned to violent machinations can jeopardize national interests and create rifts within society. Therefore engaging them in frank discussion on national issues and explaining to them the ground realities can go a long way in ensuring a peaceful transition of power as a result of ensuing elections.

*The writer is a former diplomat and freelance columnist.*