**Lingering in the chambers of darkness**

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Debates have often raged in the country regarding the reasons why Pakistani institutions crumble so abominably under pressure that they stop commanding the respect and trust of the people and instead become the butt of their scorn and jokes.

We are living through such times when no professional outfit manifests even the most minimal level of integrity, transparency, capacity, and efficiency to be recognized as a viable and credible state institution. This is a tragedy that stalks us, yet there is hardly anything that, surviving under the shadows of extreme oppression and suppression, can be envisaged to salvage the harrowing problem. Is it that we are, therefore, destined to live endlessly with our lips sealed and words bartered, with ropes tied around our necks and chains clenching our bodies?

But a more relevant question would possibly be regarding how long we can endure the agony of such existence and what it will require of us, as individuals and as a nation, to break free of this enslavement. It is vitally important because it is in our freedom that Pakistan will gain its freedom and legitimacy as a credible state in the annals of nations. Failing that, we will remain captive in the economic and strategic tentacles of powers that we have sworn eternal allegiance to.

Much to our shame, the tales of a stolen election resonate across the expanse of the world through multiple bitingly embarrassing manifestations. Memes of a variety of kinds mock us for being cheats who are unable to hold a free and fair election. The most recent such occurrence happened in the US Congress Committee on Foreign Affairs where a range of commentaries were read out on the conduct of elections without even one leaving behind a pleasant thought.

The debate was about what and how much pressure was being exerted on Pakistan to ensure urgent remedy for an election process which was stolen in the thick of the night through an operation which continues to date by employing tricks like vote recount with the victory of the favourite party being the sole motive.

It seems we have not learnt anything from history. Each new experiment in the conduct of elections and the role of our institutions has proved to be more gruesome than all such previous experiments and each new venture has caused more embarrassment and pain than such indulgences of the past. Yet we go on as if nothing has happened and as though people will reconcile with electoral fraud just like they have done in the past.

As I said earlier, there is a limit to human suffering and there is a limit to human capacity to take pain. Once that limit is crossed, as indeed it has been, a rebellious streak takes over which propels people into the realm of resistance. We have seen this brewing for a variety of reasons, most notably impoverishment and disenfranchisement. Under trying circumstances, these are the most potent weapons that an ordinary citizen can use to gain control and respect as an inhabitant of a country.

We are currently witnessing such a spectacle unfold in front of our eyes. We have a restive people who refuse to accept the electoral fraud committed on their mandate and they want it to be reversed which the perpetrators are unwilling to do. So, the ground is being laid for a clash to ensue which can wreak disastrous consequences for the country.

We may have crossed many redlines in terms of testing people’s patience, but there may still be a possibility of holding back before doom strikes. But such a prospect has its own demands: that the fact an electoral fraud has been committed should be acknowledged and a credible and transparent remedy ensured to assuage people’s doubts. In the event such a course is not adopted, I fear there may be an uncontrollable outpouring of emotion which may leave us regretting human intransigence and inflexibility in situations that require wisdom and sagacity more than stubbornness.

While institutions are key to steering a country forward, it is also the involvement of the people that renders it possible. Merely the structure of the state minus the will and passion of its inhabitants is more a recipe for disaster than progress. We have yet again arrived at such a crossroads.

Because of internal strife and discord, we have an enfeebled state on the one side and a rebellious people on the other who are enraged at having been robbed of their mandate. But this time around, they are unwilling to compromise for anything less than pushing the orchestrators back and install a government they had elected through the power of their vote. They believe they have no other option. They believe that it is now or never, with the latter not being worth consideration.

My understanding is that this prospect of a clash between institutions can be transformed into an opportunity to breed harmony and homogeneity. This can be done by getting people on board to dictate their destiny, with the state and its institutions accepting their verdict in its totality and giving them a chance to take the country forward by investing in its future with their passion, hard work, and commitment.

Unfortunately, the people of this country have lingered in the chambers of darkness, forever hungry for light to shine through a crevice somewhere. Let the state provide that crevice to its people and allow them to enjoy their freedom and control their future as they do in genuine democracies.

Let the state remove the shadows of darkness that have lingered in the lives of its people. Let it empower them to become sustainable foundations on which a strong edifice of the state can rest. Let oppression and suppression be replaced with understanding and compassion. A state devoid of the support of its people is without power and it loses legitimacy to rule. Let us ensure that we don’t reach that stage because that would be quite irreversible.

What is of paramount importance is that the relationship between the state and its people is rekindled. This cannot happen by usurping their rights. It will happen only if their rights are granted, and the state becomes a caring patron rather than a feared despot.

The state must also not breed hatred. Instead, it must take measures to eliminate all such ingredients from the system and be seen as a benefactor instead of an adversary. People shall win in the end, but a victory overseen by a caring state will be sweeter.

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