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**Urgent A grand national dialogue**

Does Pakistan really need a grand national dialogue? Some will say it really doesn’t. Pakistan just needs to be run in accordance with its constitution. Those that want Pakistan to be run in accordance with its constitution is a large and varied group – but it isn’t everybody in Pakistan. If everybody was already in agreement with the wisdom and applicability of the constitution, we would not have an unlimited supply of what are essentially constitutional crises.

Pakistan needs a grand national dialogue because there is a foundational lack of consensus about the rules of the game. Those that have the power to flout the previously agreed rules, such as the 1973 constitution and the 18th Amendment made in 2010, do so with impunity. And this impunity is not new. The youngest adults in Pakistan today were all born during the reign of a military dictator who clearly violated the constitution. He will never be punished for this violation. That this is true is not considered controversial but by a very small sliver of Pakistani constitutional puritans. The question is not whether they are right or wrong (they are right). The question is: what is the pathway to put and end to such impunity? The answer is: a grand national dialogue.

A grand national dialogue is necessary because the governance of Pakistan is predicated on three pillars, all of which are either contested or are being actively violated.

The first pillar is parliamentary democracy, in which the executive is a synthesis of an elected legislature. Neither the office of the prime minister, nor the cabinet can claim their fidelity to this pillar. And this is not an Imran Khan or PTI problem. It is also a Nawaz Sharif and PML-N problem. And most definitely an Asif Ali Zardari and PPP problem too. In short, the claims of parliamentary democratic ideals and the reality of Pakistani democracy are inconsonant. The damage that this does is simple enough to understand: a powerless parliament diminishes the trust the citizen has in her vote and her representative. This diminished trust is cancer for a democracy. Once those citizens start looking elsewhere for trust, tumors like the TNSM and the TTP begin to proliferate.

The second pillar is federalism – which is about securing the citizen and her representation in decision making through subsidiarity – meaning institutional mechanics that privilege intimacy between the state and the citizen. Federal institutional arrangements exist to serve and protect the citizen by ensuring that whatever can be done locally, is done locally, and only the residual needs of the citizen are kicked upstairs.

The 18th Amendment was a step toward solving this decades old problem in Pakistan – but the enduring instinct to centralize power has eaten away at Pakistani federalism. This instinct is personified by the military, but it is as rampant in the family fiefdoms we call political parties, as it is in the GHQ. When federalism fails, or is made to fail, it increases the distance between the Pakistani citizen and the Pakistani state. This distance is the cancer that converts peripheral angst into anti-state and separatist sentiment. It is oxygen for the enemies of Pakistan.

The third pillar is pluralism, in which Pakistan’s Muslim character is defined by inclusion and privilege for Pakistani minorities. Pluralism requires freedom to express and profess faith. It requires the ability to articulate dissent or disagreement. Pluralism is expressly about privilege for those in smaller numbers so that they are never singled out or made to feel like lesser beings in their own homes.

Pluralism is essential to Pakistan’s ability to establish peace and stability at home, and to project its power and its principles abroad. The more powerful Pakistani pluralism is, the more compelling Pakistani diplomacy will be for Kashmiris, for Palestinians, and for all those that seek genuine 21st century global Muslim leadership. A collapse of a pluralistic Pakistan and the domination of a whiny majority that claims to be under attack weakens Pakistan at home and abroad.

These three pillars: parliamentary democracy, federalism and pluralism are the heart and soul of the Objectives Resolution or the preamble to the constitution. They are thoroughly dealt with in the constitution itself. And they have been reinforced by the 18th Amendment. In short, every time there is grand national agreement on what constitutes the rules of the game, it is these principles that are reinforced. Over and over and over again.

And yet, despite these principles having been articulated, rearticulated, agreed and reagreed, the system collapses, either under the weight of incompetence, or at the barrel of a dictator’s gun. What is happening to the system now is not the spectacular collapse of the 1990s, nor the big bang moment of a coup d’état. But it may be more insidious.

We cannot view the state of Pakistani democracy without the global context. The cup of populist majoritarianism is running over, nearly everywhere. The panic amongst global and local elites is palpable. Brexit and Trumpism have manufactured lowest common denominator centrist panderers like Emmanuel Macron, and contested election results, like Joe Biden’s supposedly corrective win in the US.

Social media, more than any single factor, has exposed the shallowness of the neoliberal fantasy. The rich cannot keep getting richer whilst the poor are taxed on basic consumption. If they do, you get Brexit, Trump and Modi. Or you get Macron. So, either genuine populist rage, or the shaven and perfumed compromise that will still pander to the populist rage. Sound familiar?

Pakistan has not fully crossed the Rubicon in part because it is a compromised democracy in which the elites still control almost all the major avenues of power. But they have already ceded one of those avenues. The funeral for Khadim Hussain Rizvi in Lahore demonstrated, above all other things, just how powerful the image of a poor guard slaughtering a rich governor was in the Pakistani mainstream. It showed how a few couplets of Iqbal, and the power of religious invocation can capture the imagination much more potently than #MujhayKiyounNikala or #ModiKaYaar or #SaafChaliShaffafChali. This should alarm Pakistani elite – the generals, the judges, the babus, the industrialists, and yes, the politicians too. The sense of alarm should help push them all to a grand national dialogue.

The problem is that too many among the Pakistani elite still think it is 2016, or 2010, or 2008, or 1999.

Real solutions like a grand national dialogue have to target real problems. The three real problems enumerated above are: one, low trust between citizens and their representatives (so they end up being seduced by extremists that mock the system). Two, increased distance between people and decisions about their lives (so they end up being seduced by separatists that offer alternative models). Three, a lack of pluralism (so that minorities feel insecure in their own country). Targeting and solving these three problems is directly proportional to a stronger, more secure Pakistan that is capable of tackling the numerous challenges to its national security and its sovereignty.

A grand national dialogue is not about securing another decade in power for Imran Khan, nor is it about finding a way to the PM Office for Maryam Nawaz Sharif or Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, nor is it about solemnizing a hybrid regime in which unelected institutions are running the country regardless of who is PM.

A grand national dialogue is about finding a way to protect the Pakistani citizen, a way to safeguard Pakistani society, and a means of strengthening the Pakistani state. A grand national dialogue is about ensuring that this is the order of priority – because it is only this order of priority that will deliver any of the three objectives. A grand national dialogue is about what the pro-democracy crowd claims it wants (true democracy), and what the anti-democracy crowd actually wants (true national security).

A grand national dialogue is about understanding the symbiosis between Pakistani democracy, Pakistani federalism, Pakistani pluralism and Pakistani national security. It must begin. Soon.

The writer is an analyst and commentator.