

Pakistan: Rule of fear and symbols of hope

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Events of the past few weeks have once again demonstrated the anxiety and fear etched in the unconscious of our state. Whether it is the arrest of organizers of the PDM's Multan rally or a brutal crackdown on protesting farmers in Lahore, it is clear that the space for dissent continues to shrink rapidly. We ourselves experienced the high-handedness of the Punjab government when the district commissioner of Lahore issued a notification for my detention in the aftermath of the Students Solidarity March.

The event is held every year to mark student mobilizations demanding higher education budget, student unions and an end to sexual harassment on campuses. Interestingly, negotiations took place between the organizers and the district administration prior to the protest to set the protocols for the event. Yet, the news of the detention orders and a series of raids to arrest me after a peaceful protest only showed the irrelevance of civilian administration, highlighting the widening gap between those in government and those who actually wield power.

The haphazardly written notification claimed that I was a “symbol of frightens” who was a threat to public peace. Apart from depicting the falling standards of civil servants, the notification demonstrated the nervousness being felt by those in power over the growing discontent in society. Our lawyers, among them Hina Jilani, Asad Jamal and Salman Akram Raja, defended us in front of the honourable chief justice of the Lahore High Court past Tuesday. The chief justice suspended the orders and termed them unconstitutional, giving human rights activists a reason to be jubilant despite the pervasive gloom.

Now it is time to analyze what this panic from state officials means for our political future. As psychoanalysts remind us, the task of ideology critique is not to provide easy answers but to try to grasp the questions that shape our context. Today, we must resist the temptation to provide knee-jerk responses to immediate crises, and shed more light on the ideological, political and economic deadlocks that are fueling the current crisis in order to reframe the questions that haunt our society.

The first and foremost crisis that our polity faces is the collapse of any recognizable political project that could act as a binding force for disparate interests. The policy of Jihad or Islamization no longer has official or popular legitimacy after years of religious-based violence that tore our social fabric apart. The desperate attempts to catch up to the West through economic growth also appears to be a mirage as free-market orthodoxy faces political and intellectual challenges even in Western countries. The recent declaration by former ISI chief Asad Durrani that India no longer poses a threat deprives us of an external enemy that for too long acted as a cement for Pakistani nationalism. Finally, the spectacular collapse of hopes attached to Imran Khan's ‘Naya Pakistan’ has furthered the sense of cynicism that, beyond the aesthetics, the new is a more punishing and incompetent version of the old.

Without an inspirational past or a future path to orient our actions, the country's imagination is now imprisoned in a perpetual, uninspiring present. Hegel described how nations fall into repetitive customary rituals when they are longer in tune with the spirit that originally emanated their

existence. As a result, they either entertain impossible desires for a return to a glorious age or foolishly project repetition as a rupture from the past.

The result is that such societies, even when claiming to be guided by some higher purpose, are completely beholden to particular interests. The incongruity between thought and action also means that universal principles no longer hold sway over institutions as the rule of might replaces the rule of law. For societies experiencing such moral and spiritual death, tyranny of the armed few replaces any notion of a social contract that could create social cohesion among the public. Fear and absolutism become the only sources of unity, with emphasis on order substituting the quest for legal protections.

The current situation in Pakistan resembles the notion of a moribund society as proposed by Hegel. This is the reason why one witnesses excessive paranoia among the state apparatuses against any dissenting voice. Whatever lies beyond the customary language of patriotism and praise for those in power is no longer acknowledged as belonging to the same polity. The designation of internal opponents as foreign threats is one example of how this fear plays out in the public domain. Claude Levi Strauss, a French sociologist, once explained how ghosts symbolize the unacknowledged elements within any social formation. They can only appear as terrifying specters since the system does not have a language to comprehend their existence.

Strauss was perhaps explaining the term 'symbol of frightens' as a category that belongs to a dysfunctional state apparatus no longer able to acknowledge the decay it presides over. It means specters, ghosts and foreign agents will keep proliferating in a society with pervasive discontent whereas the only response by the state will be clumsy and often whimsical attempts to wipe them out. Notice how the present regime is not only scared of forces in the present, but is also aggressively rebranding the past. The entire history of democratic resistance – including that of students, women, workers, farmers, journalists and others – has now been dismissed as a ruse for 'dynastic politics' and 'corruption', an incredible form of suppression that shows that even the past is not safe from a regressive order.

Another important element of our crisis is that there is a lack of new ideas across the political spectrum. The charter of the Pakistan Democratic Movement is one that deserves support regardless of the political actors comprising the alliance. This is especially true since the current ruling party also advocated the same principles while in opposition. Yet, the question remains: how will any party run a state apparatus that is now completely geared towards eliminating the remaining traces of citizenship and rights in our polity? More importantly, how does a government respond to the grotesque inequalities in wealth that shape the experience of millions of struggling Pakistanis across the country?

The lack of a clear socio-economic program also shows that there is a growing dissonance between the political debates on TV and the experience of millions of ordinary Pakistanis. For example, since the first lockdown began, hundreds of thousands of workers were laid off across Punjab. While trade unionists demanded job protection, the Buzdar government recently responded by ending labour inspections, making workers even more vulnerable. Yet, the desperation and abandonment felt by the working class did not register in national politics, highlighting once again the growing gap between politics and the socio-economic spheres.

Despite the gloomy situation, one can return to Hegel for some necessary optimism. The German philosopher suggests that even in times of decline, the Spirit continues to work silently to produce new ideas in sync with the battles raging across society. The upheavals and struggles of the past are never lost and provide the raw material for thinking beyond the deadlocks of the present. After every experience of an end, there is a new beginning guided by novel ideas and a reinvigorated spirit that

provides a sense of purpose to the people.

In the longer view of history, the failures of the current regime might inadvertently be clearing the grounds for the emergence of suppressed ideas backed by new forces. The realignment of independent students, workers, ethno-nationalist and women rights movements demonstrate that a new world is latently germinating in the womb of the old. While these movements are 'symbols of frightens' for a disoriented state, they are becoming symbols of hope for a society desperately yearning for a new beginning.

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