

The bitterness of dissent in Pakistan

Sunday 10 June 2018, by [SHEHRBANO ZIA Afiya](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2018).

I was introduced to the concept of dissent in the 1980s when I overheard a conversation among my father's friends. They said a group of women had scared Gen Ziaul Haq so much that in a televised address he warned the people not to be misled by these few 200 bourgeois westernised women who were opposing his Islamisation regime. Their half-admiration, and half-amusement at Zia's fear of women, may well have underestimated the Women's Action Forum, but the shrewd general and conservatives were right to fear any dissent, however fledgling.

Womens Action Forum (WAF), of which I am a member, went on to spearhead the main opposition to Ziaul Haq's regime and its discriminatory laws and subsequent military adventures. The point is that dissent is never innocuous, and it should worry the self-serving guardians of the status quo but not those who stand for progress and justice.

Postcolonial scholars and right-wing conservatives oppose enlightenment rights, human rights laws, or modernity for Pakistan and offer religious laws and culture as substitutes. The liberals too, cling on desperately to the compromised heirs of the opportunistic PPP. The defeatist argument is that dissent to achieve equality is too utopian, parochial and ineffective against the powerful establishment, and so, we should just work realistically within the system.

Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.

All three groups miss the point of a new wave of dissent and, therefore, the associated opportunities. Current uprisings in Pakistan confirm that it is not the source, scale or span of dissent that matters but its potential to capture the imagination. It is the depth of subversive promise that makes an idea threatening. It is the unpredictability of causes and the unlikelihood of new subversive actors that creates anxiety and throws the balance of powers off the scale. Usually, these ideas have to do with politics, sex, nation and religion. When dissent speaks in a female voice or with an ethnic minority accent, the anxiety is doubled.

Elected governments are completing their terms. Pulling out the corruption card against them may curb the confidence of the parties but they are resisting and fighting back. This spirit for political autonomy is new and scary, and can no longer be subtle.

Liberals and conservatives are more agreeable on this electoral independence business. Journalists are risking their lives and careers — not to cover ethnic battlefields but to question civil-military relations.

Judicial activism is likely to be a limited form of heroism. It is not in the Federal Shariat Court but the ordinary courts where judges are weeping over a random post perceived as blasphemous or are offended by the appearance of a heart-shaped Valentine's Day balloon. Will we even need an FSC if the ordinary courts compete to protect us from moral and political corruption and save Islam? The tension between constitutional rights/freedoms and moral abstractions are untenable and increasing dissent is challenging such contradictions.

A handful of dissenting bloggers — on the issue of nationalism or religion — trigger anxiety of such overwhelming proportions that one would think they had made constitutional amendments. On the other hand, a law department makes an administrative lapse that would only have meant missing one of the many opportunities to repeat our determined belief in declaring Ahmedis non-Muslims once in five years. Yet, this results in sleepless nights, blood lust, blocked highways and a prescribed witch-hunt.

It was not a glossy Oscar-winning documentary but the defiant Qandeel Baloch who exposed the sham of male honour. She subverted the notion that all victims deserve sympathy because they are always innocent. Instead, Qandeel flaunted her sexual autonomy and represented a post-Zina law moment. Sex is part of national conversations, and sexual harassment is being subverted — from being used as a tool to shame the victim into one that can hold the perpetrator to account.

Dissent is not betrayal — it is the highest form of patriotism because it wants change within. Dissent is an opportunity for an inclusive conversation rather than fearful rejection.

Teaching facts rather than fiction about Pakistan's history, revisiting the 'war on terror' agreement and CPEC's terms and conditions, respecting sexual equality, criticising national leaders, exposing false heroes and seedy celebrities, calling out failed policies ... these are all potentially subversive actions. But suppressing information, silencing inquiry and disappearing political activists will only leave wounds untreated.

Dissent should be considered a form of catharsis towards a more harmonious, consensual future. This can't be achieved by embracing appeasement or scoring points via blame and slogans. There's a bitter sweetness in dissent because it's a painful but peaceful cry of dissatisfaction and demand for change. The sound of dissent is perhaps what was meant in the lyrics of the song by Prince, 'This is what it sounds like when doves cry'.

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P.S.

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