
From politics to responsible statecraft

Posted by Zia - 2008/04/13 15:12

THE February 2008 election results have given Pakistan's political forces the parliamentary authority required to become the principal managers of national affairs.

They have acquired substantive, even if not total, state and government power. Popular support they do enjoy. The future of Pakistan now depends on how they exercise the power that they wield and the future of Pakistan's political culture and the Pakistani political ethos on how popular support is channelised.

Will the next few years witness the evolution of greatly needed responsible statecraft or a continuation of cliquish, non-institutionalised and indeed flawed decision-making? The cost of irresponsible statecraft has also been the derailment of the society's journey towards economic, intellectual, spiritual, cultural and political progress. Blundering parochial statecraft guarantees dehumanisation of the collective – of society. Hence the challenge that the coalition government faces is a huge one. It shoulders the responsibility to pull the people and the country away from the brink of multiple crises. Early signs are encouraging while the growing challenges underscore the need to move ahead on streamlining business of state and government, at a rapid speed.

What are the positives? Political power is seeking to address the divide and the alienation through politically credible steps including dialogue and inquiries. The Balochistan Assembly has passed a resolution calling for talk with the alienated political leaders declared enemies of the state and hounded by the previous regime. Similarly, on April 1, the NWFP Assembly adopted a unanimous resolution condemning CIA director Michael Hayden's statement that al-Qaeda operatives are in the Afghanistan-border area. The Assembly sought negotiations with the militants. Clearly, democratic political power is seeking to project peoples' concerns regarding Pakistan's security and sovereignty.

There is, along with all this positive, also the chaos that must accompany return to democracy. The chaos comprises of populist passion, an excitement about the future, an urge to settle scores with past blunderers and those who caused sufferings, the need to comfort through state patronage the loyalists wronged in the past, the decision to keep a circle of loyalists around the pivotal seat of power. The worst of this passion was the physical assault on a former federal minister, Sher Afghan Niazi, in Lahore and on Sindh's former chief minister. Irrespective of his highly questionable, intolerant, ill-mannered and illegal ways, his manhandling must be condemned. The PMLN and the PPP leadership's decision to hold a prompt inquiry to take action against those responsible for the assault is reassuring. Democracy's forward journey does not mean aping the ways of those who have been criticised. The Lahore incident though appears more complicated involving crowds from reportedly the legal and non-legal community. There is however the question of discipline of political forces.

And this is where the political leadership is very crucial. It needs to 'lead from the front' in establishing new ways of tolerance, discipline, patience and above all making competence and integrity the indispensables for key appointments. It is when only political and partisan considerations become paramount that democratic chaos can devour the virtues of democracy. In Pakistan, where for decades we have blundered along the path of democracies and dictatorship, people are seeking the strengthening of democracy's virtues.

The overall early trends of the coalition government are the following. In the area of political reconciliation encouraging steps have been taken, on matters of governance it is too early for comment or conclusions and on constitutional amendments concrete are awaited following correct promises made in the Murree Declaration. Then there are the special challenge areas. These areas would include peace and security in the tribal areas, ways to lessen on people the impoverishing impact of inflation, timeline for steps towards responding to the political, development and security demands in Balochistan, etc.

The initial steps, including statements and Awami National Party (ANP) dialogue with a section of the Taleban and in Balochistan, the PPP leadership's dialogue with the leadership of the Baloch National Party (BNP). On April 1, a comprehensive internal security briefing was given by the army to the leadership of the ruling coalition and relevant cabinet members. A blue print, with stakeholders from input society, politics and the state institutions, outlining well-planned and systematically executed steps needs to be drawn for all the special challenge areas.

For a government that has come in with the promise to run an efficient, respected and effective state and facilitate for the citizens peace, progress and prosperity, the need for institutionalised decision-making is crucial. In a coalition government especially collaborative and participatory decision-making is indispensable. The virtue in this necessity is that a methodically conducted participatory decision-making process ensures that all aspects of an issue are carefully examined before policies are made and decisions are taken.

An illustration of unintended and often politically awkward consequences of anything less than carefully thought-through decision-making is what followed Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's March 29 first policy statement in the parliament. Moments after his announcement that the legal framework for the tribal areas the Frontier Crimes Regulation would be

withdrawn, it was decided that instead of withdrawing it, it will be reviewed by a committee.

The principle cause for faulty decision-making by successive Pakistani governments has been circumventing the constitutionally laid out institutionalised decision-making procedures in the constitution and the Rules of Business. The third round of PPP-PMLN in power can ill afford to circumvent these procedures; too many challenges, a zero margin of error and a closely monitoring independent media means blunders and even mistakes will invoke unbearable costs. Executive power too cannot be exercised outside the laid down constitutional, legal and institutional disciplines.

There are effective institutional tools available to 'get it right' in policy formulation, policy implementation and in monitoring. With its commitment to make the parliament powerful, the coalition government must ensure that the parliamentary committees begin to responsibly and wisely exercise the constitutional authority invested in them to oversee responsible exercise of state and executive authority. The ruling coalition, with the right vision for a democratic Pakistan laid down in the May 2006 Charter of Democracy (COD), to succeed at responsible statecraft, must function within these frameworks.

Meanwhile, as Pakistan embarks on its latest democratic journey, the words of Pakistan's Quaid i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah -- Unity, Faith and Discipline -- should stay relevant. The need for unity, 60 years hence, is no less but now national unity is required around two cardinal objectives: of making food, services and justice accessible to all citizens and to establishing internal security. Beyond personal faith, we must have common faith in our ability to succeed in achieving these objectives even if we may have differing routes for achieving those objectives. Discipline, too, is an indispensable for those who exercise authority and those who support authority. Both exercise and support of authority must occur within the discipline of the constitution and of a legal framework. That alone is the guarantee against populist dictatorship.

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