Who benefits from the chaos?

Shahram Azhar   Wednesday, September 03, 2014

The first casualty of war is the truth: the current political impasse has brought this fact to the fore in more ways than one. One need only survey the multiple private media sources to gather a sense of the numerous versions and ideological persuasions of the political stakeholders in the current stalemate.

In our political discourse there is the tendency to view political players – parties and institutions – as monolithic entities. For example, a key question during this crisis – like every other crisis – has been to ask 'where does the establishment stand?'

However, as this crisis has shown, such a 'unified' entity either does not exist at all or it is at best only a useful, rough approximation of the reality. Such expedient analytical simplicity gives many observers the opportunity to view events as being 'scripted' and effectively strips civil society of its political agency and ability to alter the course of events.

The reality, as it has unfolded itself in the last three weeks, appears to be much more nuanced. It is clear that there are fractures, not only within the established political parties, but also within the omnipotent 'establishment'; alliances are fluid, as is the situation that continues to evolve.

The lack of a resolution to the current crisis, then, is not caused by the lack of an agreement between the various contesting parties and stakeholders but also because of a lack of 'internal' agreements within the establishment.

What is the nature of these internal rifts? The scope of these fractures spans the purely ideological domain (the degree of Islamism versus 'secularism'), to the sphere of foreign and economic policy. Years of ideological and policy vacillations by the 'deep state' could not possibly have shaped a unified entity. The result is that we are left with an internally fractured 'establishment' that is currently in an uneasy marriage with mutually conflicting ideologies and aspirations.

How do these splits display themselves in any given political crisis in Pakistan? During a crisis, these rifts rattle the political equilibrium, which has been precariously unbalanced in favour of military dictatorship owing to the peculiar post-colonial history of the country.

Every crisis gives competing groups the opportunity to shift the political bargain in their favour. Unlike consistently democratic countries where power struggles are articulated within the domain of 'constitutional' norms (what Lenin called 'bourgeois democracy' for short-hand), in Pakistan every political crisis generates speculation over the legitimacy of the constitutional order itself.

Hence, the current crisis – like all crises in Pakistan – has reopened the debate on democracy and dictatorship. While it is impossible to predict the future course of this 'unscripted' mess it is absolutely clear that the sections of the ruling elite that have historically favoured dictatorships at best or 'managed-democracies' at the very least have decided that they must rise from their slumber and win back the terrain that they had lost to the constitutional order since 2007.

The regaining of this terrain is not just impeded by the various political parties in the parliament, sections of the private media, and the judiciary and civil society but more importantly by sections within the establishment who do not agree that conditions are ripe for an all-out assault against the current system.

What would it take to convince them? It would take more political discord, more violence, and more mayhem.

The persistence with which the anti-democratic forces are pursuing this goal is remarkable: while the government conceded to every single policy and electoral fraud related demand of Tahirul Qadri and Imran Khan the only demand that the government did not accept is the resignation of the prime minister and the dissolution of parliament; a demand that would be tantamount to a complete 'annexation' of Pakistan's democratic system.

Moreover, it is important to ask why the Islamabad and Punjab police completely crumbled in the wake of the onslaught of a few thousand protesters a few days ago. Remember that it is precisely the same police that had effectively routed and dispersed a much larger crowd of anti-Musharraf protesters with relative ease.

Amidst the pompous bravado of TUQ and Khan it is easy to forget that the bureaucracy, of which the police are a part, is deeply unnerved as it is precariously placed between the possibility of an actual political transition that would leave their careers permanently crippled and the execution of the policy-mandate that it is delivered by the democratic government. It is this, and not some deep commitment to morality, that explains the resignations that have been tendered recently.

The end result of the entire situation is that while the anti-democratic forces have decided that they are not going to leave without anything short of a complete victory, hundreds and thousands of Pakistanis – political workers and policemen – will be consumed by the narrow power struggles of the ruling elite who do not play by the rules and do not settle for a draw.

Clearly the game-makers want this political impasse to continue; the longer the stalemate continues the greater will be the chaos in Pakistan and the greater the chaos the greater will be the returns to the people who ultimately benefit from the facade of 'security'.

The current political crisis is nothing but a concrete case study of the broader problem that impedes Pakistan's democratic system and institutions. As Hamza Alavi had pointed out, the reason why post-colonial countries like Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh are unable to sustain democracy is because of the inability of the democratic framework to articulate the power imbalance between the 'state' (army) and civil society.

In addition, the scope of 'civil' political organisation is also severely constrained in terms of its ability to penetrate the broadest sections of the masses; for instance, an infinitesimally small percentage of the working population of the country is unionised and the representation of this 'silent' majority within 'democratic' institutions is negligible, if not completely absent.

Thus, while the sphere of 'civil society' is restricted to begin with – owing to the existence of the over-developed state – where it exists it is dismally unrepresentative of the political and economic aspirations of the wider, working population. The solutions to the recurring political and economic crises of the country, therefore, lie in expanding the scope of political representation and organisation to these working people who will not be convinced of the necessity of 'democracy' as long as the scope of the democratic net does not extend to their lives.

The question then boils down to the imbalance between the establishment and civil society, on the one hand, and the disparity of political representation within the institutional apparatus of the latter.

As long as that balance is not radically altered every crisis will lead to chaos and each time chaos is created there will be outcries for 'security'. As a result, irrespective of the superficial advances that are made in the domain of constitutionalism and rule of law, in the final analysis the political power that grows from monopolisation of force – regardless of the means through which it is acquired – will push the political system back to its praetorian equilibrium unless that power is challenged by people's power.

The writer is a PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Twitter: @ShahramAzhar