



COLD FLESH (THANDA GOSHT)

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Pakistan seems to be getting ready for its twelfth general elections, to be held in February 2024, with the expectation that these will bring back some level of political normalcy that may then lead to some economic stability. In short, stability in all forms is a key requirement for the state. However, why should change be expected in the absence of a much-required metamorphosis? More importantly, can change and stability be expected at a time of almost total institutional collapse and rampant political necrophilia? The polarisation in society is visible but sadly depicts not just lack of choices but a dearth of ideas. The common man, unfortunately, is fumbling between different dead ideas and ideals, making the environment smell more of Argentinian Peronism than a vibrant democracy.

The one thing that has changed in Pakistan is its demography and circumstances. It is a predominantly over-populated country of young people confronted with multiple crises including climate change on the one hand, and a lack of imagination on the other. In the last 76 years of existence and seeming contestation between civil and military governments, there has been an absence of genuine regime change. The one system that has prevailed is an authoritarian-bureaucratic polity where the scenes or backdrop changes but never the season. The only shift that seems to have caught attention is the rebirth of populism after almost 50 years. From Bhutto's populism of the 1970s to Imran Khan's populism recently – the personalities and what they represented may be different, but populism has produced the same kind of clichéd

politics – excessive faith in personalities rather than a comprehensive move toward building a sustainable sociopolitical software to keep machinery of both state and society functional and vibrant. Populism can generate hope in the short-term but ultimately gives rise to dogmatic politics. In Pakistan's case, populism tends to create space for the military and its age-old cliché: the state is under threat and will be rescued by the only thriving institution – the armed forces.

The establishment lacks the imagination to even consider the fact that populism cannot be fought through traditional means of putting a leader in jail and depriving his constituents, or voters in general, from the opportunity of free and fair elections. The mantra that the old Pakistan with its better sheen and results can be brought back through manipulating election results to get rid of the populist is a fallacy. In fact, the way in which the political deck of cards is being reorganised reminds one of Saadat Hassan Manto's short story, *Thanda Gosht* (Cold Flesh) – how can there be excitement when the entire gameplan stinks of morbidity? There is no introspection that the emphasis being placed on the expectation that current machinations will somehow automatically take the country back to its over 5 percent GDP growth rate is far too excessive.

There are two issues here. First, this political engineering is as problematic as those in 2018. More importantly, instead of washing out the populist residue, which the management of elections are expected to achieve, the

tragedy will deepen. While the PTI does not have the capacity to organise a Tahrir Square kind of shakeup of the establishment, its support base and onlookers will be in the constant pain of living in a political system where their opinion means nothing. The fact is that populism cannot be destroyed by force but by allowing it to fail and self-destruct. The challenge has to come from within the system itself, not imposed. Mao Zedong took the Chinese people through several painful experiments which is what finally led to the realisation for Deng Xiaoping and the Communist Party of China to alter their course. The vote-of-no-confidence (VoNC) or building a new narrative that exposes personal acts of the PTI leader – corruption and sex scandals – will have no effect on changing the mind of the supporter or skeptic at large. Nor would massive purges within the ranks, which took place after May 9th, change popular thinking within certain segments of the establishment. The political battle will continue to appear as forcibly driven by the army echelons and create disbelief in the political system. This means that the political process will never be able to stand on its feet, which, in any case, requires developing institutional capacity – which the political parties and parliamentary system lack both the will and expertise for. The fact is that the current political party system has become innately dependent on ‘political martyrism’ syndrome – the leadership does not take responsibility for its inaction and transfers responsibility of a poor political system on non-parliamentary forces. Not that the accusations are incorrect, but they do not necessarily explain the lack of political institution-building, developing cadres, multi-layered leadership, and a solid political program. Political parties telling stories of their suffering and sacrifices is stale and unfit to fight populism. The establishment, on the other hand, remains a direct beneficiary of political inaction and will justify acute hybridity more than ever.

Second, there is no possibility of a managed government taking the country back as if through a time tunnel to the comparatively better days of 2016/17. A two-front political war cannot be fought and won. The battle against a populist and poor economic condition cannot be fought and won at the same time. Socioeconomically, Pakistan is at an inflection point where the ongoing crisis requires deep reforms, which any political party in the game will find hard to undertake if it simultaneously has to fight populism. Or, at least, political parties will try to use ‘the fight against populism’ as an excuse not to conduct deeper reforms. Unfortunately, Pakistan lacks a team of thinkers that can conceptualise a major shift in economic planning just like India did during the early 1990s. However, the crisis of necrophilia is that key players cannot think beyond traditional ways. The alternative that is sought is to get the establishment to play a larger role in economic planning. The army’s increased footsteps in agriculture are in reality a dangerous misstep that may bring short-term financial dividends but will greatly damage the society, politics and economics at large. On the backdrop of history of

patronage politics, the military turning into a contractor will prove dangerous in deepening patronage networks whilst harming the political culture. It is important to mention that the manner in which the current caretaker government is being used to increase hybridity and involve the military in all vital changes, from public asset reduction and privatisation to enhancing the tax base, will certainly bring the country closer to ‘martial law by other means’.

Perhaps Pakistan’s political class lacks the realisation that it is dealing with a security establishment, which, since 2012/13 is training its men in non-military issues. Even foreign participants in National Defence University (NDU) courses have picked up that political and economic management instruction is part of the training. While such instruction is not likely to make them understand the complexity of situations, it does develop an arrogance of partial knowledge and an assumption that they could also run the affairs of the state. The danger to the polity cannot be averted unless both political and military stakeholders agree on a robust civil-military dialogue. This is not about a military dominated national security workshop where civilians are brought together to learn about the dominant perspective, or a conversation with retired officers. This is about a long-term dialogue between serving military personnel including different ranks and a combination of civilian players including politicians and civil society that assists each in understanding the other’s perspectives – to be held at a parliamentary forum. The effort ought to be more genuine than the national security workshops organised by the Senate standing committee on national security which tend to represent the military’s interests more than the civilians. These dialogues can serve as one of the many pathways that could help Pakistan deal with its crisis: they are part of the series of reforms that are badly needed.

While economic reforms are much talked about, Pakistan badly desires reforms in institutional balancing, especially civil-military relations.

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