

Theatre of politics | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi July 25, 2022

Since its inception, Pakistan has been characterised, to be undergoing a ‘delicate turn’

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On July 19, 2022, foreign minister Miftah Ismail appeared in an interview with renowned journalist Gharidah Farooqi in which he was seen waxing lyrical about the PDM coalition’s preparedness to remain on the path of ‘difficult decisions’ to uphold the interests of Pakistan. When asked whether this would continue as the general elections drew closer, he responded by asking whether it is worth leading the country into default simply in order to remain in power. “To hell with such elections,” said the fiery politician — triggering widespread celebration from Twitteratis — breathing a sigh of relief at the apparent tilt towards transparent, respectful, non-populist discourse. Is there more than meets the eye?

Readers of these pages are undoubtedly familiar with professional wrestling: most famously the World Wrestling Entertainment, or WWE. They are also probably aware, one would hope, that despite its genuine entertainment value, the entire program is a lie — scripted in advance to maximise viewership. This is, of course, in line with the incentive structures of the media industry in which ratings are prime currency and determine ad revenues. What most are probably unfamiliar with is the specific logic of pro-wrestling and how it perforates across several other spheres — not least of all the political.

Kayfabe is known within the pro-wrestling world as the elaborate system of deceit around which a particular endeavour is based. Wrestlers, for instance, are not competitors in the strict sense but collaborators within a closed circuit. They are perfectly aware of their ‘opponent’s’ next move, and have a specific response planned ahead of time in order to foster a broader performance for the audience — a theatrical act, in other words, that is assumed by spectators to be genuine but is, in fact, carefully choreographed.

This is not all. Preserving kayfabe is a complex art in itself, whereby occasional truths are strategically injected into the act every so often in order to keep the audience at the edge of their seats in anticipation. From a zoomed-out perspective, a process of layering can be observed in which a routinised alternation between reality and fiction takes place, but only at the behest of the puppet master, who in this case is the WWE’s board of directors.

A ‘worked shoot’, for instance, is when it appears as though the fourth wall has been torn down and the stars have broken character to engage with their fans in a sincere manner. Naturally, this too is part of the screenplay and serves a function — shock, novelty,

controversy, what have you. Over time, this structured layering blurs the lines between reality and unreality in which the audience eventually gets to the point that it does not matter, one way or the other, as long as they are deriving some sort of thrill from the experience of tuning in.

As anyone with close friends or family members that occupy the corridors of power knows all too well, politics functions in a virtually identical manner. Individuals from opposing political parties will adopt toxic, adversarial, and dehumanising stances toward one another in public, only to then dine, party, and fraternise behind closed doors.

In his book titled '*The Power Elite*', Sociologist C. Wright Mills describes this phenomenon. He highlights that these are tightly knit groupings that spend countless hours mingling with one another in exclusive spaces — expensive colleges, clubs, foreign embassies, luxury hotels, remote resorts, and even each other's personal residences — to exchange important information, hunt for potential spouses for their children, and leverage network dynamics to uncover business opportunities and preserve their privileged status in society. Pakistan is no exception to this, as revealed in a comprehensive study of the KSE-100 by PIDE, in which it was discovered that the vast majority of individuals occupying positions in the executive boards of the corporations listed belonged to 31 primary families. Hardly a coincidence.

Since its inception, Pakistan has been characterised, at any given moment, to be undergoing a 'delicate turn' in which the masses cannot be attended to unless bigger concerns are first addressed. With IMF conditions once again being justified with the same rhetoric and ordinary people brought to their knees as a consequence, the nation applauds a man that purports to have 'no choice' but to execute them at any and all costs — all while an annual Rs2.7 trillion is extracted from the economy by elites, as per UNDP. Pakistan is indeed a welfare state for the rich, in the words of activist-academic Ammar Ali Jan.

Miftah Ismail's 'Pakistan First' framing is hardly new. In fact, it could be argued that every finance minister that preceded him pledged allegiance to the same idea at one point or another, creating a smokescreen of alarmism and urgency to justify policy directions, however harmful. In the age of postmodernity, where symbols, rituals, and performances carry more weight than actual substance, does it even matter? Or have our standards fallen so low following PTI's abysmal showing in government that it is now a moment of great joy when a politician is capable of gracefully accepting potential defeat in an election cycle — something considered the bare minimum in healthy democracies across the globe?

With over 22 million children out of school, 31% of university graduates unemployed, basic infrastructure crumbling in major cities, families unable to meet their household expenses as inflation continues to soar, temperatures in certain regions so high that lives are being lost, and men in uniform enjoying lavish privileges thanks to their massive corporate empires, the people of Pakistan are somehow expected to put aside their real material concerns and root for further inroads from imperial institutions. PDM is a coalition of parties that were responsible for creating the very conditions that made someone like Imran Khan possible. These are the same individuals that, not too long ago, hurled vicious insults at one another and laid the blame for the country's problems at each other's feet. But what has changed, precisely, to prompt the citizenry to wipe their slate clean and give them a fresh start?

In the words of Noam Chomsky, "The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum — even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the

sense that there's free thinking going on....”

Miftah Ismail may be a wonderful person, but he is under the thumb of the same establishmentarian politicians of yesteryear who, together with landed elites, industrial tycoons, bureaucrats, security agencies, and other loci of power, form the political economy of Pakistan. Everything that is said on live television is carefully strategised beforehand, not with the purpose of generating a ‘win’ but to continue to remain in the arena via the consent of other participants. None of this has to do with being good or bad. The power elite, including all three mainstream parties, are one big team, and you and I — fortunately or unfortunately — are simply not part of it. We could, however, present a unified front against them if we really wished to do so.

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