

SOUNDS OF SILENCE: WHISPERS BY PAKISTANI CIVIL SOCIETY

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*A politically stable and economically vibrant Pakistan is the key to the peace and prosperity in the south Asia. It is the economy that Pakistan need to concentrate as the current and future problems lie there. To do that, “ **Pakistan may consider shifting the goal post from India as the ‘Most Favoured Nation for Terrorism’ (MFN) to ‘Most Favoured Nation for Trade’.***

With the din of cacophony of a violent and a controversial elections over in Pakistan, the allegations of malpractices by the defeated political gladiators have occupied the media space ever since the results have been announced. The winners are preparing for their victory speeches to convey right nationalistic symbolism to the masses they have been chosen to rule. The high decibel pronouncements to kiss and make up with the enemies within and outside the territorial boundaries, and uphold the tenets of Islam would be the expected sound bytes at the start of a new inning, albeit under watch of the umpire.

It is all so predictable as such a scenario has been witnessed by the world earlier, and it is not the last one either. The army narrative being the only constant in the Pakistani landscape, the new incumbents would be expected to follow the brief, lest they are weeded out of the political system as has happened in recent past in run up to elections. The democracy in Pakistan is best described as a rubber stamp with its inscriptions engraved by the Pakistan army. **Imran Khan, as he stands on threshold of being the civilian head, would find it difficult to charter a different course in case he intends to seek elbow space to deliver the what has been the undeliverable so far.**

Looking at the trends in social media, Pakistan seem to be showing signs of taking baby steps of political awakening. The electoral results are reflective of quest for review of the power sharing matrix, as indicated by public support to two political parties known to have resisted army directives by almost half of the voters. This phenomenon cannot be ignored by the establishment and would, surely, take its cognizance in steering the destiny of the country who stands is on the verge of economic collapse and strategic compromises with potential for intrusion even in their sovereign space.

There is another significant phenomenon this time which has made the political analysts sit up across the globe. **The Pakistani civil society seems to have rejected to accord legitimacy and intrusion in the socio-political space to the organizations linked to terrorism.** Not a single affiliate of the infamous terror outfit JUD, aka LeT has been elected in the Pakistan general elections. As per media reports, only 1,71,441 votes have been garnered by the radical outfits amongst almost 200 candidates out of more than 50% of 100 million registered voters. Statistically, it accounts for less than half percent of their popularity as against the perception of mass following of anti Indian hardliners with terrorist strains. It is not a news that they have been rejected by the civil society, but what surprises is that it has happened despite their perceived patronage by the military establishment. Is it by design, or default is a matter of speculation.

Apropos, **the silent civil society of Pakistan has spoken up clearly and loudly that they reject the culture of terrorism and their perpetrators.** What is also significant is apparent dilution of religion as a motivator by Hafiz inc spreading hatred against India and other non Islamic dispensations across the world. Pakistan army narrative to use Islam to keep the Pakistani society in an emotional bind, in otherwise a country afflicted with fratricidal tendencies, seem to be under public scrutiny. These small yet significant symptoms are indicative of the clarion call by the civil society yearning to break free from the restrictive political confines imposed on them.

The Pakistan is believed to be on the verge of bankruptcy with financial reserves left for merely three months of her survival as reported in the media. Therefore, Pakistan may need international financial bailout which seem to be difficult given her current economic buoyancy hyphenated with the impact of Pakistan being in grey list of FATF. It is reported that IMF is under pressure of the US to extend loans to Pakistan for their development projects. The credibility of Pakistan is certainly under question by the international financial bodies.

The US, who have been patronizing Pakistan all these years, has already suspended financial and military aid due to their complicity in support to Taliban and Haqqani network in Afghanistan. Saudi Arab and few other co religious countries seem to be an option, but their benevolence is linked to perpetuating their radical Islamic agenda which is proving to be counterproductive to Pakistani interests.

As regards to China , they believe in extending loans to their client countries with political strings attached and not providing aid like US and EU countries. Though there are reports of China likely to provide aid to Pakistan, but its purpose in all probability would be taking care of Chinese interests. The Chinese CPEC scheme has not taken off as yet and believe to be under cloud due to security situation in the Af-Pak region. As a result 50 odd Eurasian countries cannot participate in the venture as their goods have to pass through restive Afghanistan. It, obviously, has impacted the expected high transit revenues for Pakistan which could have revived their fortunes. On the contrary, the burden of repayment of existing Chinese loans is looming large further making dents in Pakistani economy.

Coupled with the financial crisis is the external as well as internal security situation which is of their own making in their anti India obsession and complicity in Afghanistan affairs. The Pakistan army narrative of Kashmir and its linkage to religious war has created a medieval mind set amongst the youth from poor strata of society instead of empowering them through modern education. Moreover, their false perception of their capabilities to cede Kashmir through deceit and duplicity by using non state actors and military force combine has become their nemesis. It is a non starter dream of Pakistan army in face of superior conventional capabilities duly backed up with a credible nuclear deterrence and a strong Indian economy.

It proves without doubt that it is simply a self seeking bluff of Pakistan army to retain primacy in the matters of governance to cover up the professional failures of military leadership having lost all the wars and their accountability for it .Accordingly ,it is a matter of concern as the Pakistani exchequer and national resources are diverted to support the huge security establishment which refuses to relent from self destructive intransigence. **The civil society probably is seized with this situation going by the social media debates, but seem to be helpless due to fear of being branded as an anti national and reprisals, if they raise the hackle.**

There seem to be a silver lining on the horizon looking at the US response to recent Pakistan elections. It speaks of need to empower the democratic institutions of governance alongside freedom of speech of the media in Pakistan. **It obviously indicates that US , probably, does not see the role of the army in the matters of political affairs and prompting to restrict their activities within mandate of an army in a democratic set up.** Moreover , it is

a clear hint that US would link these political structural reforms to the financial assistance to Pakistan in future, if it so happens.

China is the most affected country with the deteriorating economic and security situation in Pakistan as it impacts adversely on their aspirations of economic expansion through Pakistani geographical space. The Chinese worries have further compounded with the ongoing trade war with the US hyphenated with the emerging military ante in Indo- Pacific region wherein their 90% of their trade is conducted. It is likely to impact on their competitiveness in the price sensitive global markets wherein China has clear edge over her western world rivals as of now. Therefore, **there are fair chances that even China may suggest Pakistan to mend their ways and make up with India to ease the security ante with her arch rival.**

Imran Khan needs to prove his own stability in the political alleys of army directed establishment first before embarking on his agenda of "New Pakistan ". **India with her strategic patience would always be supportive of anything sensible and constructive which can improve the political environment.** The problem with Pakistan is psychological as they keep looking at the rear mirror instead of looking forward through a broader glass in front. It is the economy that Pakistan need to concentrate as the current and future problems lie there. To do that, **Pakistan may consider shifting the goal post from India as the 'Most Favoured Nation for Terrorism' (MFN) to "Most Favoured Nation for Trade"**.

Pakistan surely stands on a defining movement as of now with opportunities coming their way through external push, albeit more coercive than accomodative. The new political dispensation if given appropriate structural support from within and catalytic support from outside, it has potential to gradually resuscitate the falling nation back on her feet. A politically stable and economically vibrant Pakistan is the key to the peace and prosperity in the south Asia. However, **till the time Pakistan is stable, conducts herself in a mature and sensible manner over period of time, the idea of thaw with them can wait.** Engaging Pakistan later at appropriate level as the time goes by would not be a bad idea.

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