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## Let us become — proudly — bayghairat

A curse upon honour! It brings to a nation nought but militarisation, conquest, conflict, and the pain of war.

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Pakistan's current and aspiring political leaders can rarely give a public speech these days without invoking *ghairat* (honour) in some shape or form. Rather than present plans for reducing unemployment or providing electricity, they talk about shame and honour. The ultimate insult '*bayghairat*' (without honour) is sometimes hurled onto an opponent. Adrenalin levels shoot even higher when they speak of America and "breaking the chains of slavery". The more morally and intellectually bankrupt a leader, the louder he thunders about *qaumi ghairat* (national honour).

This time-tested formula has worked wherever a people have been dispirited and dejected. For example, Hitler's meteoric rise to power, culminating in the most destructive war of history, came from appealing to the collective *ghairat* of the German nation and to the alleged cowardice and corruption of its rulers.

Hitler's famous Munich beer hall speeches were followed up in *Mein Kampf*: "A nation without honour will sooner or later lose its freedom and independence... a generation of poltroons is not entitled to freedom. He who would be a slave cannot have honour." Translated into Urdu, these lines are exactly what one hears on TV these days from men like Imran Khan and Hamid Gul.

The real implication of *ghairat* hit me for the first time some twenty years ago. A group of seven senior military officers, then studying operational matters at the National Defence College, had come to meet me at the physics department of Quaid-i-Azam University. Nuclear weapons were new at that time and, quite sensibly, they were keen to learn technical details from every available source. Although Pakistan did not officially acknowledge possessing such weapons then, the process of inducting them into the forces had already begun.

We had a good discussion on everything from blast radii and firestorms to electronic locks and PALS (Permissive Action Links). The officers took copious notes and appeared satisfied. As they prepared to leave I asked what circumstances, in their opinion, would warrant the use of nuclear weapons by Pakistan.

After some reflection one officer spoke up: "Professor," he assured me, "they shall be used only defensively if at all, and only if the Pakistan Army faces defeat. We cannot allow ourselves to be dishonoured." Around the table, heads nodded in agreement. Significantly, the calculus of destruction — that cities would be obliterated on both sides — was not what mattered. *Ghairat* did.

The same question put to Indian military officers would probably elicit the same answer. Historically, honour has driven armies to fight battles. Even as the officer spoke, my thoughts wandered to The Charge of the Light Brigade. During the Crimean War of 1854, wave after wave of honour-charged British soldiers rode their horses into the mouths of Russian guns which, of course, promptly mowed them down. Tennyson later immortalised the slain men in his famous poem: "All the world wonder'd. Honour the charge they made! Honour the Light Brigade."

The honour-driven Japanese samurai were even more extreme. As agents for various lords, shoguns, and the Emperor, their duties involved keeping peasants in line as well as fighting wars. Honest and dedicated, they were a model for ordinary Japanese. When a samurai lost honour, he could save his dignity only through hara-kiri (cutting open his belly). The last days of World War II turned samurais into suicide bombers who (unsuccessfully) flew planes into US aircraft carriers. Their actions ultimately brought the atom bomb to Japan.

A curse upon honour! It brings to a nation nought but militarisation, conquest, conflict, and the pain of war. On the other hand, where reason has defeated honour, the results have been spectacular. For example, in the ashes of WW II lay two thoroughly defeated and dishonoured nations: Germany and Japan. Had they remained stubbornly defiant, they would still be squatting there today. But, overcoming pride and honour, the vanquished accepted defeat and made peace with the victors. Today they are among the most advanced of nations, and major aid donors to Pakistan.

Vietnam is another amazing example. After 20 bitter years of war it won but was devastated. American B-52s had flattened its cities, while napalm and Agent Orange had devastated its villages and jungles. Yet, tossing aside honour and vengeance, Vietnam today reaches out to its former tormentors and invites their companies and investment. It is a country with a future.

Compare the *bayghairat* Vietnamese to Afghanistan's *ghairat*-obsessed people. Proud and unconquerable, they had earlier fought off the British and the Soviets; soon the Americans will too be gone. But, post-2014, what awaits them? Only more blood and sorrow, and yet another civil war.

Anthropologists tell us that honour is a concept that originated in herding societies because a tribal man's animals and women were protected from other tribesmen by a code of honour. But then, as tribes amalgamated and merged into the larger stream of civilisation, differing notions of honour led to strife. Traditional societies of the present era, in which honour plays a larger role, are relatively more violent than modern ones. The ease with which men kill their wives and daughters for sexual misconduct is but one example; there are scores of others.

Still, there are some in the West (see *Sacred tribal values* by J Gold & C Kammen, 1998), as well as here in Pakistan, who call for a return to tribal values. Perhaps one must hear them sympathetically because not all of what they say is bad. They hark back to the days when life was simple, good could easily be separated from bad, there was a spirit of community, and science had not made us into "One Dimensional Man" (in the words of the German philosopher Herbert Marcuse). They are nostalgic about what the world looked like centuries ago, all without having seen it or being aware of the downsides. Alas, they imagine false utopias.

A culture of honour is fine for the herders of goats and camels, or those who live in unpolicable mountainous areas. But a culture of honour is disastrous for us, a nuclear-armed nation of 180 million people who want jobs, electricity, and the fruits of modernity. So, to hell with the fakery of meaningless honour! Instead, let us create a culture of law and reason, of compassion and tolerance. Let us become — proudly — *bayghairat*.

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