

We are all ordinary people

ATLE HETLAND

EN ROUTE

Last week, the Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg became world-famous overnight after his election campaign stunt being filmed as a taxi-driver while chatting with his passengers. One of them, an old woman discovered who he was, and she told him that she was not happy with the government allowing people in top posts being paid millions of Norwegian Kroner in salaries. The PM tried to explain and justify it. But the woman maintained that it was not right. She was respectful enough to the PM, but she also knew that she was right. And, I believe the PM, too, agreed with her, in principle if not quite in practice.

The PM represents the Norwegian Labour Party (AP), and the general election is coming up on the 9th of September. He is running neck and neck against the Conservative Party (H) whose candidate for PM is Erna Solberg. Stoltenberg's party works for greater equality amongst rich and poor in society, well, as any party should do. Good that an old woman reminded Norway's most powerful man of it – in an oil-rich land with just about five million inhabitants and a GDP per capita almost twice that of USA's.

Urdu and English language papers and TV stations in Pakistan and elsewhere picked up the story. Some friends told me that they thought it was good to see that even a PM could do a common man's job. It reminded us that we are all ordinary people, and we are all important and extraordinary, too.

Yes, it was just a campaign stunt. And maybe Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif did something with more direct impact in his 'taxi stunt' last year when he established a taxi scheme in Punjab, making new taxis available at manageable monthly installments?

Today, newly-rich Norway can pick and choose what it wants to do, and it can buy anything that money can buy. It is a luxury position, and I am sure Pakistani politicians would have liked to have some of that freedom.

Yet, it may not be all that easy to know what we want to do when all options are open. The old woman in the PM's taxi reminded us exactly of that.

I have already mentioned the importance of working for reducing differences and inequalities in society – and that includes, rich and poor, white and blue collar workers, men and women, Muslims and Christians, educated and illiterate, darker-skinned and light-skinned, rural and urban, young and old, and whatever it is that human beings like to use to make divisions among people.

In the West, including in Norway, there are growing inequalities, especially economic inequalities, but also social, cultural and religious differences. A Muslim immigrant has many hurdles to overcome in order to succeed, and if she is a woman, or a black, that adds to the hurdles similar to the extra hurdles that non-Muslims in Pakistan have, or someone who doesn't have the right family and class-ties.

In Norway, Hadia Tajik of Pakistani-heritage is the Minister of Culture and has been given the second slot, after the PM, on Labour's list for parliament. She came from humble beginnings and is truly an ordinary but also an extraordinary young woman. Former PM, Gro Harlem Brundtland, has suggested that she could well see her as Labour Chair and even Norwegian PM in future.

Money is good to have if you want to make changes in society, but it is not the only thing needed. With money, we can for instance have taxi-schemes to get disadvantaged poor people a step higher on the social ladder. We can give free education and health services for all, and many other things. We can have public campaigns to inform and the debate issues. We can have ‘positive discrimination’, such as stipends and other support for disadvantaged. Some improvements cost a lot of money, other things nothing at all.

Last week, there was one such positive case in Pakistan; it was a negative incident leading to a positive action, placing Pakistan en route to a *softer society*. I am referring to the case in Islamabad where a man lost his mind, swinging a loaded pistol and shooting in the air, with his wife and children as shields so that police could not apprehend him. I am glad that the Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Khan did not lose his mind, too. He did the right thing, telling the police note to shoot to kill. I don’t think there were security lapses at the road blocks.

The way the case was handled put Pakistan on the right track, and it made it more like Norway! The tragedy was very sad for the perpetrator Malik Sikander and his family, not for the TV viewers who watched the drama for several hours.

I hope the sad incident can lead to further debate about how to create a softer and more inclusive society, and we should also discuss mental health issues more openly. Perhaps I should add that I assume the perpetrator didn’t have any plans behind his actions, just that he lost his mind.

And then, I was less happy, to say the least, when I last week saw in a newspaper that the government plans to carry out executions of persons who have been on the death row, which has not happened since the democratically elected governments succeeded the military rulers. I believe that capital punishment is wrong, irrespective of crime, and that no state or person has the right to take somebody’s life. We should discuss how the judicial system, law enforcement and prisons can be modernized. Furthermore, we should discuss how the military’s role in the society can be reduced.

Back to the Norwegian general election; a religious party (KRF) in that country drew attention to the fact that ethical and belief issues were not central in this year’s campaign. Earlier, such issues were often key for voters; important issues were related to women’s rights in general and the right to abortion in particular; the right of women to be pastors and bishops was central; the right of same-sex couples to register their partnerships was a major political issue; and even whether religious leaders should preach that the stories in the Bible should be taken literally, or if they should rather be taken figuratively. To a certain extent, the latter has been a theme in this year’s election campaign, especially since a researcher at the conservative Faculty of Theology (MF), Hilde Brekke Moeller, recently suggested that Jesus may not have lived at all. Yet, she said, his message still remains the same, thus not shattering her faith.

It is important to discuss non-material issues in election campaigns and at other times, in Norway, Pakistan and anywhere else. It is important to question old truths, ways and means. Non-material issues lie at the bottom of our decisions – whether we have a lot of money and just a small population, like Norway, or if we have less money and many people, like Pakistan.

The most important job is to make a land softer with greater equality and opportunities for all. Not even PMs are always right, not even the Norwegian one with all his oil-money. Well, the latter doesn’t really count as for being right or wrong.

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