

# A Society and democracy in Pakistan

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Pakistan was born of a constitutional democratic process. Its people have persistently held on to an ideal of democratic government. Even its military dictators, at take over, had to promise to return the country soon to civilian democratic rule.

And to stretch this promise to as long a period of time (usually a decade) they had to resort to some form of democracy—guided or Islamic—to legitimise their hold over power. Twenty-five years of military rule (out of 46 years of Pakistan's existence) brutalised the society. Even the civilian elite who ruled for the rest of the period had no deep commitment to democratic values, though they used the democratic process to come to power. The people themselves, though committed to democracy do not understand what it means and implies. Democracy is not simply a matter of democratic process. (Constitution, votes, elections, assemblies, political parties, etc.) It is also a state of mind, a mode of thought, a way of life.

Society is intolerant and greedy and is mired in ethnic, sectarian, and factional strife. Greed and strife are not alien to democracy; intolerance is. Extensive competition between differing ideas and interests to capture as much political power and national economic resources as they can is what democracy is about. Thus pluralism and conflict are endemic to democracy.

Under what rules this competition of ideas and interests takes place determines the nature and extent of democracy or lack of it in a society. If it takes place in an environment of peace, tolerance and honesty the society is truly democratic. It is a long haul and a difficult goal. Others have achieved it why can't we.

Some people establish a casual relationship between economic development and democracy. They point out that all developed countries are democratic. But economic development is not a prerequisite for democracy. Even countries at low levels of economic development could be democratic if other variables are present, in particular a vibrant civil society. Many developing countries have succeeded in evolving a culture that encourages an associational social action, political participation, tolerance of dissent and accommodation of competing interests. Why not Pakistan?

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tonomous of state control, better should seek political power for themselves. They should simply react to the political society and try to capture the attention of the state.

The number of people and organisations occupying the civil society space is so large that it is rather difficult to catalogue them.

Civil society organisations may be formal and permanent or informal and temporary; functional, or interest/cause-oriented. These would include neighbourhood associations; professional associations of journalists, lawyers, doctors, teachers et al; student unions; trade unions and labour organisations; women rights groups; farmers organisations; chambers of trade, commerce and industry; environment protection groups; civil rights and human rights organisations; minority rights organisations; independent think tanks; voters education and election monitoring institutions; religious, ethnic and sectarian organisations; de-

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pressed.) A strong civil society helps the inchoate and fragile democratic institutions to survive and consolidate by enabling the conflict of interests and ideas to be played out and reconciled. If there is no strong civil society the conflict of interests and ideas might turn unmanageable and society might go to war against itself. Democracy would suffer. It might even die.

There is a symbiotic relationship between civil society and political society. The civil society also serves as a "large free school". It teaches the aspirants of political power, the future politicians and leaders, the general art of association and articulation of demands. The associational life in civil society stimulates political consciousness of the people and promotes their participation in the political process. This could bring enfranchisement to the traditionally marginalised groups in society like women, poor people, minorities, etc. In a country like ours where political parties are in disarray and political leadership is in disrepute, the role of a vigorous civil society becomes crucial in sustaining democracy and saving the country from slipping under authoritarian rule.

However, all elements of civil society may not necessarily contribute to democracy. Some may even oppose it as a western concoction lethal for the ummah. Some may find authoritarian rule more conducive to their mundane interests as individuals and groups. They may get cooped by the dictator. Pakistan's history proves this.

The initial years of Pakistan saw many organisations of civil society spring up and grow. The print media, labour unions, student organisations, women associations, farmers organisations, business and trade associations, and religious lobbies were active promoting their ideas and defending their interests. It was a civil society in embryo. The culture of command ushered in after Liaquat Ali Khan's assassination and the subsequent Ayub Khan martial law stilted its growth. The restoration of civilian democratic rule under Z. A. Bhutto revived the civil society but Zia's military rule tattered it once again. Zia coopted the business interests and the religious groups and brutally oppressed the "non-grata" groups. Independent newspapers and journalists received particularly harsh treatment. Zia's death and restoration of civilian rule and democratic political structures saw the re-emergence of civil society. The last few years have seen a mushrooming of newspapers and magazines, women action groups, human and civil rights organisations, development organisations, think tanks, ethnic sectarian and religious lobbies, etc. They are all

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To secure and sustain democratic political structures and processes it is essential to construct a vibrant, vigorous, pluralistic and tolerant civil society.

What is civil society? There are the State and the society. The State is the establishment—the institutions and the instruments of power. In society there is the political society. It comprises those individuals, groups and organisations that compete for power, for control of the state at all levels (national, state and local) and in all its dimensions (administrative, bureaucratic, legislative, fiscal and coercive). In a democracy political society includes politicians, political parties, factions, electoral and voters turn-out organisations etc. Between the State and the political society on one hand and the general populace on the other is that complex realm of community life that is known as Civil Society. "The civil society is the sphere of voluntary organised social life outside the state and the political arena where diverse social, economic and cultural groups and actors come together to express themselves; to exchange information and ideas; to form and share collective identities and beliefs; to achieve collective ends and to defend or advance their interests in competition with others." It is essential that these organisations be completely au-

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A strong civil society provides the resources—political, economic, cultural and moral—to check and balance the power of the State and to make it accountable to the society at large. Civil society not only checks the power of the state, but because of its pluralistic nature prevents the State from being captured by any one group or interest. It makes the state responsive to all claims and keeps the fierce battle of claims within the bounds of decency and fairplay. But not all expectations and interests can be satisfied and probably none can be met completely. Faced with pulls and pressures and fierce competition of conflicting interests the democratic state is forced to craft policies that strike a balance. (In an authoritarian/ideological state only some "grata" ideas and interests are promoted, the "non-grata" ones are sup-

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There is no reason to be gloomy about the intolerant, violent and a moral society we live in. In the developed and democratic countries of the world, universal suffrage, education and economic development took place gradually and in parallel.

Pakistan was born with universal suffrage but saw very little spread of education and only moderate economic development. Naturally it has a weak civil society and fragile democracy. But even the western countries at one time were faced with similar crises that Pakistan faces today. They showed wisdom and tenacity; and treated the ills of democracy with more democ-