

Alternatives to democracy

"ISLAM SUBSCRIBES TO DEMOCRACY BUT IT does not advocate a democracy that would allow a majority of non-Muslims to decide the fate of Muslims. We cannot accept a system of government in which non-Muslims merely by numerical majority would rule and dominate us."

When one looks at a statement like that it appears quite weighty and serious. But change a few terms and it begins to appear much less robust. See what happens when one takes it across the social spectrum. We believe in democracy but we cannot accept a system of government in which merely by numerical majority;

1. Bengalis would rule and dominate non-Bengalis;
2. The illiterate would rule and dominate the educated;
3. The poor would rule and dominate the affluent;
4. Men would rule and dominate women;
5. The dark-skinned would rule and dominate the light-skinned;
6. Right-handers would rule and dominate left-handers.

It is a quick descent. And the logic crumbles because the worldview inherent in the formulation is incompatible with the fundamental premise of democratic governance.

Democratic governance rests on the principle of one-person-one-vote and on the unqualified acceptance of the individual as a unit of decision-making free to decide according to his or her best judgement. It is incompatible with a world in which governance is a zero-sum game between mutually-exclusive groups whose leaders convince or intimidate their members to vote in accordance with real or presumed group interests. It is also incompatible with a world in which groups actually do oppress each other.

Based on that definition, one cannot talk of democracy in the same breath as talking of some groups dominating and ruling over other groups. The latter conceptualisation is alien to democracy and belongs to a pre-democratic world.

Thus, for example, it would seem bizarre to say that Republicans dominate and rule over Democrats after the recent US elections and would now proceed to oppress them after their triumph. No, the Republicans represent a platform that a majority of the electorate chose to support. A loss of support for the platform could lead to a Democratic victory in the next elections. But the Democrats are then just as unlikely to dominate and rule over the Republicans and exact revenge for their previous oppression.

These are Republicans and Democrats not Hutus and Tutsis. The Republicans and Democrats belong to the democratic world. The Hutus and Tutsis belong to the pre-democratic world. They have to settle some very fundamental differences before democracy can begin to function in Rwanda.

One has only to take a look at Iraq to see the nature of the democratic problem in situations where groups and communities dominate individuals. Everyone believes in democracy but the Sunnis are averse to accepting a system of government in which non-Sunnis would rule and dominate them. And the Kurds are reluctant to accept a system of government in which either the Sunnis or the Shias would rule and dominate them. And given the history who is to say that the fears of either are not genuine?

Democracy cannot function well in situations where people feel unprotected as individuals and seek security in the membership of mutually-exclusive loyalty groups. But democracy is not the only system of governance available. In situations where groups constitute the primary units they can conceivably arrive at some understanding amongst themselves that would allow peaceful co-existence within a territorial state.

This proposition is not unrealistic. Prof CM Naim mentions in his book *Ambiguities of Heritage* (City Press, Karachi, 1999, p. 62) that before 1947 the nationalist *ulema* had in mind a future constitu-

VIEW



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In the short run, Pakistan is in a very deep hole. The entrenched loyalty groups would continue to jeopardise any emergent democratic order; the severe and multiple fractures would jeopardise any political contract; the absence of a conflict-resolution mechanism would jeopardise investments in employment-generating growth and lead to further fractures. The alternatives do not appear very promising

Muslims and the Jews of Medina.

In recent times, such a pact was made between the three dominant communities in India in 1943. The pact provided for a sectarian system in which the Christian, Sunni and Shia communities reached agreement on a division of power that would minimise conflict amongst the three groups. An agreement along similar lines is one of the options being considered for Iraq at present.

A very similar pact was reached between three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia in 1969. There the parties representing the three communities were the United Malay National Organisation, the Malayan Chinese Association and the Malayan Indian Congress. After race riots in 1969, the benefits of the pact were explicitly stated by Tunku Abdul Rahman: "The Malays have won for themselves political power. The Chinese have won for themselves economic power. The Indians have won for themselves economic power. The blending of the two with complete goodwill and understanding has brought about peace and has coupled with prosperity to the country."

This is the underlying bargain on which Malaysian unity rests. And it is also the reason why the electoral outcome is always a foregone conclusion. One can call it a pragmatic solution in a situation where the underlying antagonisms were not conducive to 'true' democratic governance. One can look at the same period in Indonesia where the absence of a similar pact resulted in much worse consequences for the ethnic Chinese population.

One can now return and take a fresh look at the situation as it exists in Pakistan today. It is as bad as Rwanda but it is not all that much worse. And perennial optimism and pious hopes for realistic prospects are dim, given the existence of entrenched and antagonistic loyalty groups, frequent unqualified transfers of power that a function

tion of India based on a pact between Muslims and non-Muslims on the pattern of the one between the