

The crisis of dem

DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE are popular political notions in today's world. While it is easy for the rulers to pronounce their commitment to these principles, the real challenge lies in making them operational. So, how does one create institutions and processes that reflect the spirit of democracy and participatory governance? The commitment of many rulers is merely rhetorical. Others selectively employ some aspects of democracy to create a façade. Still others hold elections, establish elected legislative bodies and install elected governments but do not empower these institutions and the people holding key position in them. Power is thus exercised by an elite group while a semblance of democracy is created to legitimise its rule. Such 'democracy' is carefully tailored to serve the interests of its creators — civilian, military, bureaucratic or some combination thereof.

Democracy aims at defining the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in a manner that primacy is assigned to the latter. It also has a participatory framework for governance and political management. (The setting up of democratic infrastructure involves three levels: normative and theoretical commitment, the setting up of institutions and processes, and their maturation and sustainability.

The starting point of the democratic political order is a commitment to the principles and norms of democracy. There has to be an unconditional acceptance of the principle of the primacy of the people in the political process. Their consent must be the basic criterion for legitimacy in exercise of state power. The political system must work to promote their security and welfare.

This commitment is made operational through certain institutions and processes. A host of problems crop up at this stage. Invariably, the dominant elite try tam-

per with the processes to protect their personal and partisan interests. They may reject certain aspects of the original notion of democracy. The political heritage and historical identities are often relied on to adopt democratic norms in a selective manner.

(The abstract roots of democracy may be found in Islam and many traditional cultures. However, as a functional system of governance, democracy developed in the West. Therefore, it is easy for many rulers in the developing world to castigate democracy as a Western system not necessarily suitable to the political ambience and genius of the people of their countries. Ayub Khan introduced the system of basic democracies in 1959. In 1961, King Mahendra of Nepal introduced the system of Panchayati democracy, claiming that it was more in line with the Nepalese tradition. President Nasser of Egypt and President Sukarno of Indonesia launched similarly controlled democracies in their countries.

The third aspect of democracy calls for letting the democratic institutions and processes function over time without interruption. Democracy is a process and its institutions and processes become mature and sustainable over time if allowed to function in their true spirit and corrections are made to upgrade them in the light of the experience. Continuity and improvement through experience are the key to stabilising the democratic process. If for reason or another the institutions and processes are disrupted from time to time, democracy cannot grow and the people cannot fully internalise its norms. The traditions of political accommodation and selection of the rulers as well as their accountability through the electoral process cannot be established without ensuring the continuity of the political process. This also enables the competing interests and the ordinary people

VIEW



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to internalise the settlement of political differences through the democratic, especially the electoral, processes.

(Holding fair and free election is an important pre-requisite for democracy. To be credible, the elections must be recognised by most participating groups, as well as independent observers, as a fair opportunity to the people to select their rulers. The rulers' claims in this regard are not enough. Irregularities and violations, if any, should be an exception rather than the rule. Legal remedies must also be available for their rectification.)

To give substance to democracy the electoral process must be accompanied by a number of concrete measures.

These include the supremacy of the constitution, the rule of law and civil and political rights and freedoms for the people. The state must pursue the principle of equal citizenship and afford all its citizens equal protection of law irrespective of religion, ethnicity, regional background or gender. It must also ensure equality of opportunity for advancement in social, economic and political domains and guarantee security of life and property of its citizens in order to make democracy meaningful to them. They must perceive that the state and its governance system are geared towards achieving these goals. There may be shortcomings in these efforts but the over all direction must be towards achieving these ideals.)

There is another threat to democracy. Non-democratic, authoritarian and military rule for long intervals tends to create a constituency for itself as those benefiting under it develop a stake in its continuation. They oppose the introduction of democracy or advocate diluted democracy by limiting the participatory and egalitarian character of the system.

The experience of the developing countries suggests that the crisis of democracy accentuates in the countries

that undergo long or repeated military rule. If senior commanders get used to exercising political power, civilian institutions and democratic processes cannot grow. This is more likely to happen in the states which have disciplined and professional militaries. If they develop stakes in political power, they can use their organisational strength and, above all, the near monopoly of instrument of violence, to assert their primacy. Such militaries also have the tendency to induct their personnel in key positions in the civilian institutions and develop an active role in most sectors of the society and the state, thereby overwhelming the civilian institutions and processes. This retains the military's clout in the polity and the society even if it withdraws from direct power management.

Pakistan is a typical example of atrophy of civilian institutions and processes due to the domineering role of the military. President Pervez Musharraf's plan to concurrently hold the presidency and the command of the army negates the letter and spirit of democracy but it ensures his hold over power and the centrality of the military in the political system. The military has spread out in the civilian institutions and civilian sectors by inducting its serving and retired personnel, enhanced economic, commercial and industrial activities directly or through various welfare foundations that there is hardly any autonomous civilian space available in the polity. The current democratic transition would continue to suffer from poor quality and non-empowerment of its institutions and processes. It is not therefore surprising that political alienation and apathy are on the rise at the common person's level. This further undermines the prospects of democracy in Pakistan.

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