

Challenges to democracy

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Democracy, as a political system in which the people's will is the basis of government authority and democracy is a way to achieve a complete range of human rights, has varied understanding and meaning for the people in Pakistan shaped by their experience of democracy. For the poor, women and minorities who have been marginalised and excluded from democratic processes and structures, democracy simply means the rule of the powerful and tyranny of the majority.

Democracy in Pakistan continues to face daunting challenges because political forces and concerned citizens are not addressing some of the critical issues the democratic development is facing in the country.

One of the major challenges to democracy and democratic development is related to the over-developed nature and role of the institution of army in politics. At the time of independence we inherited centralised state structures from the colonial power of the British who needed a coercive and centralised administration to sustain its imperial rule in the subcontinent. Military and civil bureaucracy was over-developed in the post-colonial state of Pakistan. Moreover, the political forces that were leading the independence movement had a weak social and organisational base. In the newly established state of Pakistan, political forces got themselves entangled in factionalism and power struggle after the demise of Mr Jinnah in 1948 and Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951. The political government of Muslim League was unable to develop a political system for the nation-state of Pakistan.

As Hassan Askari rightly points out in his book "The Military and Politics in Pakistan", civilian governments facing a host of internal problems of refugees influx, communal riots, law and order situation and the external real and perceived threat to its physical security from India were unable to deal with these problems through civil administration and kept on inviting military to solve internal and external problems. Therefore, instability of political forces during the early period of newly established country led to an increased military role in political decision-making. In 1951 after the assassination of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan army emerged as a powerful and autonomous contender of state power. Due to highly organised and sophisticated nature of the military as an institution and its strong connection with America as compared to the political elite, the military was in a position to assume direct political control through the imposition of martial law in 1954. Since then the military has been ruling the country directly or indirectly through the civilian governments. Initially armed forces

forged a partnership with civil bureaucracy to run the country. However, now with its expanding corporate interests, military want far greater share and direct control over the state apparatus in order to protect and promote its vested interests in the country.

Another critical issue faced by democracy is the fragmentation and distortion of its meaning in Pakistan. The representative and participatory aspects of democracy are completely disconnected. There is an over-emphasis on representative aspect of democracy which is related to elections, political parties, legislatures etc., while the participatory aspect — popular participation, effective public control over the policy agenda and distribution of resources having central place in public discourse of democracy — has been ignored by the political parties.

In order to understand why political leadership agreed to follow the rules of the game set by the military and continued to create and recreate the gulf between the interconnected representative-participatory aspects of democracy, we need to understand the nature of our political parties which are central to the system of democracy and generally represent the peoples' interests.

In Pakistan, the mainstream political parties are dominated by men from elite classes and represent the interest of their own class. In order to perpetuate their own class interests, the political leadership of mainstream parties did not establish inner-party democracy that can potentially pose a threat to their unchallenged individual power within party structures. Therefore, mainstream parties led by political leaders from feudal and rich background do not make efforts to develop their party infrastructure. There are hardly any party chapters that exist today at the union council or village level.

At best one can find some party offices at the district level. Political parties increasingly made compromises on pro-people agendas in order to share state power with Pakistan army and protect their own vested interests. Therefore, no civilian government in the history of Pakistan made any serious attempt to diffuse the power base of political elite through the introduction of land reforms and redistribution of resources in the country. The Pakistan People's Party's introduced land reforms, however, they could not be implemented. The failure of political parties to articulate the interests of the masses created alienation and frustration among party workers belonging to the disadvantaged sections of society. Lack of popular base, deepened the dependency of self-serving political parties and political leadership on the local political elite and the establishment in order to enter the corridors of the state power.

The non-representative nature of ruling classes — civil and military bureau-

cracy and political elite — has led to the over centralisation of power and authority. Exclusionary politics has become the dominant feature of governance processes and structures in Pakistan. The ruling elite, all-powerful without any accountability to the people, become a reason for poor governance and institutional decay. Massive corruption, undue interference in the judicial affairs, media and intelligentsia by the authoritarian civil and military governments only deepened the crisis of political legitimacy in the country.

Also the continuity in policies that are essentially anti-people during civilian and military rule has created alienation among the masses. They have lost faith and interest in the electoral process and representative democracy that repeatedly reinforced the class interest of rich by bringing them back to governments rather than diffusing the power. The popular discontent is reflected in sharp decline in voter's turn out in each successive election from 63.42 percent in 1970 to 41.8 in 2002.

Representatives and voters do not seem to share similar concerns. All of us witnessed with great alarm that the post-2002 election negotiations among various political parties confined to the issue of power-sharing between the civil and military rulers. The Legal Framework Order (LFO) became the only and the central issue. No voices were raised regarding economic or other social welfare policies that have been adversely impacting the majority in this country.

Use of money and muscle power is another barrier for the substantive democracy to take roots in Pakistan, as they hinder the middle class or professionals to enter politics. Despite the introduction of electoral reforms prior to the 2002 elections to curtail the use of money in politics, no change was visible. With existing nexus between politicians and criminals, it is near to impossible for the middle class to pose any challenge to the monopoly of the traditional political elite of the country.

The challenge that face us today is how to move from representative democracy towards substantive/participatory democracy. How do we ensure an effective role of middle class, marginalised groups such as women, peasants, workers, and minorities in the formal arena of politics? How do we confine the army to barracks and make the state more responsive to the needs of the masses? These questions sound immense in our socio-political reality with weak civil society movements. Each one of us who wishes to see democracy flourish needs to contribute to combat the challenges faced by democracy in Pakistan.

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