

Democracy
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Democracy's century

A hundred years ago there was not a country on the face of the planet that could be called a democracy judged by the rather liberal standards of universal suffrage and multi-party, multi-candidate competitive elections. In 1950, less than two dozen countries were electoral democracies covering a mere third of world population. By the dawn of the new century 140 countries - out of more than 200 - had become electoral democracies governing over 65% of world population. The world has gone from 0% democratic in 1900 to 33% democratic in 1950 and 65% democratic by 2000. The 20th century has truly been democracy's century.

In 1900, Pakistan was a 'colonial dependency'. In 1950, we became a 'Restricted Democratic Practice' perhaps a nation in transit moving towards a wholesome democracy. In 1973, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto gave us a Constitution that guaranteed universal suffrage. In 1999, we marched into the past and were classified as an 'Authoritarian Regime'.

In 1900, India was also a colonial dependency. In 1950 it was classified a democracy and has continued to maintain that status ever since. Some fifty years ago when Jawaharlal Nehru was holding India's first elections

Governor General Ghulam Moham-mad was busy dissolving assemblies and Major General Iskender Mirza was busy conspiring with General Ayub Khan. Chief Justice Munir had put the final nail in our democracy's coffin. No wonder India never succumbed to dictatorships or military rule as have so many other Third World countries.

Have the generals been good for Pakistan? Have the politicians been bad for Pakistan? Both are the wrong kind of questions. The real question is that of governance; what really is the best form of governance or which is the best political system to govern a country. The debate on the various forms of governance has indeed been going on for the last two thousand years. In Pakistan, once again, a tug-of-war is underway between the Pakistani people and governing ideologies. The world outside of Pakistan seems to have reached a conclusion. We are yet to. We continue to debate - generals or politicians?

The world is now left with less than three dozen authoritarian regimes. These include China, Burma, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Algeria and Ethiopia. All authoritarian regimes - with the sole exception of Singapore - are desperately



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poor and illiterate. Would poverty and illiteracy go away if all these authoritarian regimes all of a sudden decided to become electoral democracies?

One thing democracy is not is instant coffee. No one can achieve democracy because it is a process not a thing and every functioning democracy is continuously evolving becoming either less or more democratic. Empirical evidence suggests that not all democracies are prosperous and literate but all prosperous and literate countries are democracies. Democracy, therefore, is not a guarantee to prosperity but democracy remains the essential prerequisite to every kind of human development including national opulence and education.

Consider India, if only for a moment. India is divided like no other country on the face of the planet. Religious, ethnic, linguistic, geographic and communal divisions all run deep. More than a billion people, 28,000 dialects spoken across 28 states and 7 union territories. Fourteen official languages including Urdu, Punjabi,

Sindhi, Bengali, Kashmiri, Gujarati, Sanskrit, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Oriya and Assamese.

On top of all that diversity, for the past half a century there have been at least eight major secessionist movements. Among them: Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front, United Liberation Front of Assam, Dalitstan Organisation, National Liberation Front of Tripura, National Socialist Council of Nagalim, Free Tamil Nadu, Revolutionary People's Front of Manipur and People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak.

India is still one. What has really kept India united? What has kept 800 million Hindus, 120 million Muslims, 25 million Parsis, 23 million Christians, 19 million Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains together? Could it be democracy? India has always been democratic. We haven't been so lucky.

Do we now have a democratic setup? Let us just stick to universal suffrage and multi-party, multi-candidate competitive elections. We don't have a problem meeting the criteria of universal suffrage. We did have multi-party elections but the elections lacked competition in at least three important aspects. First, Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and Altaf Hus-

sain were not allowed to compete. Secondly, whatever competition we did have it was tilted in favour of one political entity at the cost of others. Lastly, and most importantly, the elections were not meant to elect real decision makers (the so-called 'presidential referendum' was not a multi-candidate affair).

Do we have an authoritarian regime in Pakistan? I would not classify post-October 2002 Pakistan as an authoritarian regime (an authoritarian regime is typically defined as a one-party state or a military dictatorship in which there are significant human rights violations). We are not a nation in transit moving towards democracy either (as PML-Q apologists like to claim). We are now some sort of a hybrid engaged in a vicious cycle of what's come to be known as a 'reform game' where a facade of reforms - including elections - is erected, designed merely to prolong the status quo.

Do we want democracy? We really have two choices. First, join 4 billion people residing in 140 other countries who have reached a consensus on the best form of governance. Second, wait for another 50 years to see if any of the three dozen authoritarian regimes do actually produce something worthwhile.