

Building democracy

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"Democracy is based on two core principles: participation and accountability".
—Human Development Report 2002

For the last three years, Pattan has been involved in political research and political education program in remote areas of FATA, NWFP, Balochistan, Sindh and the Punjab. We interviewed them separately for survey research and discussed political issues with them in groups. Our respondents were women and men from the very rich to the very poor section of the society. It was of course an eye opening experience. Our teams enjoyed very warm hospitality in a very fearful environment in the FATA areas. In Sindh interior, our teams were received with affection and love but were told bluntly about domination of the Punjab. While, it broke many stereotypes of our research team members, the research journey brought some very disturbing trends to the fore. The most vital was the absence of people from the political processes. Who is responsible for this? A repeated military intervention in political matters or failure of political elite or both.

A majority of political analysts appear to blame military for destroying political parties, while some argue that political elite has never been interested to organising their respective parties. Both seem to be taking a [partisan] political rather than an analytical position in this regard. The dominant opinion of the general public tends to disagree with both the positions. They see military (elite)-civil (political elite) as an anti-poor axis. A large majority also believes that political elite does not want to democratise their parties because it will diminish their control over parties. They also know very well that the same elite are responsible for their deprivation, poverty, exploitation and suppression. This is generally true in rural areas and also in some localities of some cities i.e. Karachi.

Since 1985, six elections were held and five elected governments were sacked. On average after every two and a half year people were forced to suffer a new election. While demagogic rhetoric of the political elite has made people aware of their rights and importance of democracy, bad delivery on rhetoric has lowered people's expectations from them. The people have also been experiencing authoritarian but inefficient governance of the civilian rule. This creates difficulties for people to differentiate between military and civilian governments. In the past, the people have also seen opposition parties encouraging presidents and military generals to overthrow the civilian governments. The people also suffered badly from the neglect of their political leaders. Instead of formulating policies, legislating, discussing and debating in light of their election manifestos, political elite wasted time to finish each other off. The current situation seems to be not different. The parliament had become a battleground since its inception. Threats are thrown at each other. No political party has tried to highlight issues that concern the public. According to a national English daily survey "problems of common man are poverty, unemployment and illiteracy and not the LFO."

Pattan's research data reveals intensely an increasing gap between people's awareness about the importance of political processes and what they expect from the political elite. Their level of information and knowledge about politics and democracy may be very limited and they may not be conscientious about ways and means to bring a meaningful political change but they appear to be able to differentiate between a good and bad political practice. As many as 83% respondents of our study know very well that construction of democracy is impossible without political parties; they (nearly 93%) also know that most of the political parties don't have inner party democracy. They are fully aware of essential characteristics of a political party. They also know very well the importance of the vote. They have been bitten many times in the past and this has lowered their expectations of the existing political elite.

Election is perhaps the only time when people are provided an opportunity to participate in the political process in Pakistan. However, the mirror-image of socio-economic disparities is often witnessed in the form of differentiated participation of citizens both as voters and as contestants. Unabated use of money and muscle power in elections plays a decisive role at all levels of state and society that alienate people away from the electoral process. In many countries and in many constituencies of Pakistan, elections have not only strengthened the stranglehold of "political dynasties" but it has also paved the way for criminals and mafias to join the ruling elite. This makes election a meaningless exercise. Deception and cheating, loot and plunder need not to be mentioned here. Consequently, people further distance themselves from party politics and in some cases even from the electoral processes. This is perhaps one of the emerging challenges to many (including some old) democracies.

This is evident from the falling membership in political parties and declining voter turnout even in the advanced democracies. "In the United States the turnout of registered voters in presidential elections fell from 96% in 1960 to 51% in 2000 and in the UK from 78% in 1992 to 59% in 2001. In France, Italy, Norway and the USA party membership is half of what it was 20 years ago." (UNDP, Human Development Report 2002, P69). In the recent months, this trend has accelerated in countries where there was a serious divide between people and the ruling parties on the issue of Iraq. According to newspaper reports thousands of members of the British Labour Party have either suspended or resigned from the party in protest to Mr Blair's policy on Iraq. Since many political parties don't maintain the record of party members, it is difficult to assess fluctuation of party membership in Pakistan. During our research on political parties, we found that many parties in fact don't have regular members.

Despite the declining participation of citizens, except in Switzerland, in all the "established democracies" on average voters turnout in the last held elections appears to be still reasonable i.e. 73%. The turnout in the medium and low human development countries was 70% and 65% re-

spectively. Many countries which share many political similarities with Pakistan have very impressive turnout rate. In the Philippines, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal — it was 79%, 75%, 80% and 66% respectively in the last held elections. Despite nearly 75 registered political parties, Pakistan forms a bloc of three countries where voter's participation in elections is lowest in the world. Pakistan may fall at the bottom of ladder if electorates were not provided transport on the election-day. According to Pattan's survey, nearly 23% voters would not have cast their vote on October 10, had they not been provided transport by the candidates. Pakistan is facing a very grave situation.

What challenges does this pose to civil society and particularly political parties and the State? What does it mean? What relationship does participation have with the citizens' ability to make their representatives and officials accountable to them, and how does it effect citizen's perception about institutions?

According to a recent survey "In Pakistan only 30% have high or mild level of trust in political parties, as opposed to 73% for the military." This is not peculiar to Pakistan. A similar trend exists in countries where political elite has failed to respond to people's needs and aspirations.

Unless, political parties perform as they are expected — as a true democrat and present themselves for regular and transparent accountability — people's participation will continue to fall. Sadly, it appears that most of the political parties seem to be reluctant to address this issue seriously. The reason, political elite is reluctant to develop membership based political parties appear to be due to the fact that a meaningful participation of party members in decision making will (a) enhance understanding and capacity of the members to question leadership and thus (b) diminish the control of the elite over political parties. This is perhaps not acceptable to them. But without the people's support, political elite will always have a very little or no room to negotiate with the establishment and to keep military away from interfering in the political arena in future. They also start looking towards foreign powers for support. Consequently, they become vulnerable to foreign pressures when in power and international bodies. A party worker in Islamabad condensed very complex civil-military relations in one line: "The political elite will get as much democracy from the military as much they will give to party workers and the people of Pakistan." Only people's participation and organised and democratic political institutions will guarantee political stability, prevent military intervention in politics and a pro-people governance. The political elite must take confidence building measures to bring people back to the political processes and in this regard, they must formulate policies to bridge gap between the poor and rich; and reduce poverty, unemployment and wasteful military-civil spending. This is a clear-cut working agenda for parliamentary parties in the first year that is articulated by our survey respondents. LFO stands no where as far people are concerned.

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