

The state of our democracy

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THE current tussle in Islamabad on the Legal Framework Order has left the people in a state of bewilderment. The common man perceives the happenings in the federal capital as a struggle for power between the elite groups with none of them having any concern for the welfare of the masses.

Be it the men in uniform, the ruling party or those in the opposition, all of them have managed to project an image of themselves that hardly endears them to the multitude. This depoliticization of the people is the price we have had to pay for the destruction of democracy over the years both by the military and the political leaders. We have reached a stage where even the intellectuals can't agree on the definition of democracy. If one were asked to describe the attributes of a democratic state we may not even be able to come up with a consensus.

Going by how the issue is debated by the intelligentsia, the key requisites would appear to be a representative government installed through fair and free elections and freedom of speech, assembly, and association. All this supposedly facilitates self-government, which should be the ultimate aim of a democratic order if we are to pre-empt the exploitation of the masses by the rulers. John Strachey, the British Labour Party leader whose brilliant lectures on democracy were published in a pamphlet titled *The Challenge of Democracy* after his death, pointed out that there is no substitute for self-government. Government by somebody else always, in the end, turns into government in the interests of somebody else, he succinctly pointed out.

In that context, Pakistan has not made much progress, even though it has all the outward strappings of a constitutional government. What we basically lack is a democratic culture and a system of in-built accountability. This is essential if democracy is to function effectively. The need is to have a system which keeps the powers of the rulers in check and protects the interests of the people.

Hence it is the accountability process which emerges as the key element in the political sys-

Only two party leaders have spoken up. A People's Party MP, who has asked the government to pay Rs 10 billion as compensation for the damage inflicted, presented her case in such a way that she appeared to be making political capital out of this environmental disaster. How she arrived at the sum of Rs 10 billion we will never know because the party did not carry out an exercise to determine the quantum of the losses. If it did, the public has not been informed about it.

The MMA which is also in the opposition, used the occasion to demand the resignation of the KPT chairman and the federal communications minister. Again the impression one got was that the MMA was out to obtain its pound of flesh. Since no party did its homework it was not in a position to convincingly bring pressure to bear on the government to force it to hold the people accountable. It seems all parties are uncomfortable with the accountability question. It could backfire when they are in office at some future date. They could then become the victim of their own initiative.

It is a pity that our political parties — those in office and those in the opposition — are not working to give democracy roots in the country. The military has succeeded in perpetuating its hold on power it is because no effort has been made to institutionalize and consolidate strong democratic traditions even when this was possible. This calls for a lot of hard work especially if accountability is to have some credibility and is not to be treated as an instrument of victimization of the opponents.

It is still an exercise worth undertaking even in our kind of democracy. For when a parliamentary system is operated vigorously and with commitment, it

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key element in the political system. This alone makes the rulers responsible for their action. But for the accountability not to degenerate into a witch hunt, it is essential that it is an ongoing and in-built process which should take place while a ruler is still in office.

This is not something impossible or unheard of. You just have to look around beyond your horizons to see how accountability works in other countries. It can bring a serving prime minister before a judge to testify in a judicial enquiry and defend the veracity of his statement. Had the British democracy not been underpinned with such a strong tradition of accountability, Lord Hutton, the judge deputed to look into the ministry of defence scientist Dr David Kelly's suicide, could not have summoned Mr Tony Blair and grilled him for over two hours. The implications of the Hutton enquiry will be far-reaching. But before anything else it has established the credentials of Britain's democracy.

Now have a look at the home front to see how accountability operates in Pakistan. A Greek oil tanker carrying 67,000 tonnes of crude oil is grounded off the Karachi coast. The KPT, the agency ultimately responsible for this accident, shows no concern whatsoever. After 18 days the Tasman Spirit breaks up and begins spilling its oily cargo in the Arabian Sea.

Environmentalists, health professionals and people with an iota common sense had been warning of the oil slick's disastrous consequences but the government proceeded to underplay the whole incident. Why? Because by making out the accident as being nothing serious, it could absolve itself of the need to pin responsibility.

It took the WHO in conjunction with the health ministry to declare the oil spill a "massive catastrophe". And still responsibility has not been pinned. Rubbing salt to the wounds of the Karachiites, the government has instituted an enquiry headed by those very same people whose responsibility it was to act in the first place. Will this be a fair enquiry? .

All this is happening when a political structure of sorts is in place in the country. The government is complacent and why should it not be when none of the political parties has pressed for accountability in the matter.

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can mobilize and involve the people. Thus we have assemblies in place but they are not taken seriously and have become theatres of a political tug of war rather than the august institutions where parliamentarians of calibre test their debating skills and monitor the government's policies armed with basic information and an intelligent understanding of issues.

If Pakistan is to have democracy what we need are parties which should make human rights, social justice and the rule of law the central plank of their programme. Their goal should be bringing about a change by putting pressure on the government on these issues. Their MPs are, after all, paid for doing this job and it is indefensible behaviour on their part not to put in their appearance in the few sessions that are held and contribute to the debates.

One has just to recall the pre-1989 days when the Berlin Wall was still intact and socialist dictatorships ruled the roost in East European countries. The pro-democracy movements led by the Solidarity in Poland, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia and the Democratic Opposition in Hungary mobilized the public and ultimately changed the system. True, many other factors also contributed to the fall of autocracy in East Europe but the catalyst role played by these groups cannot be underestimated.

In his pamphlet *The Challenge of Democracy*, John Strachey wrote that a certain level of civilization was essential for the successful working of democratic institutions. He identified this as "a highly literate and a highly intelligent middle class which participates in public life effectively and actively".

The hallmark of this middle class is not its spending power but its education and political involvement. How can such a middle class be created without well organized and committed political parties? Until our parties work in that direction the climate and culture for democracy cannot be created.