**A look at democracy**

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Part - I

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The National Institute of Pakistan Studies (NIPS) at the Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad is a rare centre of debate and discussion where one can speak freely.

When Prof Saeed Rid and Dr Manzoor Veesrio invited me to speak there about the crisis of democracy in Pakistan, I was a bit reluctant. The hesitation evaporated when they assured me that NIPS was unlike many other public-sector institutes where one can only spout an official version of history. The audience had students pursuing research degrees and some faculty members. There was a lively discussion followed by an animated Q&A session that made the exercise worthwhile. Here is a brief recap of what we discussed.

I began by suggesting that one could inspect the crisis of democracy in any country using various lenses. One is of course the academic lens that political scientists, researchers, students, and teachers may use. A good academic lens prevents us from making tall claims about democracy – or about any other political system, for that matter. It makes us careful about our claims and leaves us sceptical about concepts such as democracy. Looking through an academic lens we realize that there can be various interpretations of the same concept including democracy.

For conceptual clarity, we need to read more and keep educating ourselves. We may call this an education in democracy that clarifies the differences and similarities between the norms and values that a society practices and holds dear. Academically speaking, it is possible that a society professes a certain set of values but practises an entirely different sets of norms. The US prides itself in being one of the earliest modern democracies, if not the first democracy in the past three centuries. Academically that may be true, but when you look with some other lenses, it falls short of being a democracy on other accounts

The same academic lens you can apply to China which is a peoples’ republic, or India which claims to be the largest democracy in the world. Be it America, China, or India, all will disagree with you if you academically challenge their levels of democracy. An academic lens also helps us look at democracy as it has evolved historically in various countries. An historical approach to democracy through an academic lens helps us understand what has gone before and how democracy has developed or not developed in certain countries in the past decades and centuries.

To change anything positively, first we need to grasp its intricacies. Plato wrote his famous treatise ‘The Republic’ but detested democracy. He preferred philosophy over doxa – doctrine or dogma. He also explained that we need to differentiate between knowledge and opinion. Still, he used democracy in a pejorative sense as ‘mob rule’. An academic lens shows that Aristotle in his book ‘Politics’ differed with his teacher Plato and thought that democracy was necessary but not sufficient. Aristotle warned that aristocracy – if not checked – may degenerate into oligarchy (rule of the powerful) and plutocracy (rule of the rich).

If you apply that academic lens to understand the crisis of democracy in Pakistan, how correct Aristotle sounds. The word ‘aristocracy’ is derived from arête, meaning excellence. In the Roman Senate of yore, aristocracy was supposed to be the rule of excellent leaders. But first it was overturned by tyrants such as Julius Caesar and then turned into oligarchy and plutocracy. In fact, it was always so. What we call democracy in Pakistan is to a great extent the rule of the powerful and wealthy elite. Oligarchy and plutocracy are not the same, though they complement each other.

In Pakistan, generals and judges may not be the richest people in the country but powerful they are. So there emerges a nexus among the powerful and the rich who co-opt the newcomers who may have fancy dreams. Some may project themselves as ‘thorough professionals’ for a while. But the system then sucks them in and as they become part of the powerful and rich elite, they have little left in common with their own humble background. They are soon weaned away from their innocence and ideals.

Carrying on with the academic lens, we find Cicero who was a contemporary of Brutus and Julius Caesar. He proposed that the ideal government is a blend of aristocracy, democracy, and monarchy. In his ‘mixed state’, a monarch was supposed to be the best man in society that the aristocracy elected in the senate. The monarch and the senate had the support of the common people who should also have a role and voice in democracy. In today’s bicameral model, a lot comes from the mixed government ideal of Cicero.

Discussing all this we realize that an academic lens gives us hope and ability to overcome our fears about the future of democracy in Pakistan and in the rest of the world. The academic lens helps us simplify things without distortion. While trying to understand the crisis of democracy, an academically inclined person or observer is able to disentangle complex ideas and relate them to the world today. Essentially, democracy emerges as a system where it becomes a duty of all citizens to actively participate in public life and state affairs.

Democracy finds itself in crisis whenever and wherever all citizens are not allowed to actively participate in public life. Look at Pakistan today, and see for yourself how many people are entitled to participate in public life; the system excludes many and includes a few. The same applies to state affairs which become a no-go area for most citizens, resulting in a crisis of sorts not only in Pakistan but in many other countries that claim to be democracies of a certain type. Machiavelli wrote his ‘Discourses’ in 1517 (published in 1530) and discussed these issue threadbare.

An academic lens gives us an orientation of all this. We learn how American, British, and French experiences with democracy have gone through revolutions and wars and in that process fought against oppression and royalty. In the England of the 1640s, there was a civil war that toppled and beheaded the king but then Oliver Cromwell who led the war against royalty himself became a tyrant and called himself Lord Protector. The French Revolution that began in 1789 went through a reign of terror.

The American Revolution that aimed at terminating the British royal domination succeeded in achieving independence and establishing a democracy of sorts. Still, if you look at the atrocities that ‘democratic’ America committed against slaves it makes you wonder about its democratic credentials. The same applies to the present-day US which violates international laws, invades other countries, kills millions around the world, and then calls itself a champion of democracy. Academically speaking, the US may be a democracy but looked at through other lenses, you find it deficient in democracy in many ways.

The Soviet Union came into being as a Soviet democracy but ended up as a highly centralized ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ that morphed into a personal fief of Stalin and then of the Communist Party. So the point is not to be dejected and depressed about the crisis of democracy in Pakistan; it is a work in progress like in all other countries. It may not be an ideal system but the alternatives in history have been much worse. The second lens that I suggested was a behavioural lens to look at the crisis of democracy which we will discuss in the next part of this article.

To be continued

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