**[Creaky democracy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1626656/creaky-democracy)**

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SINCE 1973, Pakistan is set on a journey to achieve a workable parliamentary democracy. The 1973 Constitution has been so sacrosanct that even the two military dictators we have had since 1973 (Gen Zia and Gen Musharraf) did not completely abandon it but adapted it to suit their interests. We have bragged about our democratic achievement by quoting the PPP government’s handing over power peacefully to the PML-N in 2013 after completing a full five-year term — the first time in the country’s history.

The landmark was repeated in 2018, when the PML-N handed over the government to the PTI. Our premise as a nation has been that democracy in this country will take root once we repeat this cycle a few times.

But is that a correct premise and do we really have democracy in the country? The three major political parties are all ‘owned’ by three individuals or at best one individual and two families. Can anything in the party move without the consent of Asif Zardari in the PPP, Nawaz Sharif in the PML-N and Imran Khan in the PTI? Can any of these parties exist in their present legal form without these three individuals/ families? Obviously not.

So where is the democracy? If the founding pillars of democracy, ie these political parties, are run by ‘dictators’/ owners, how can the edifice of democracy be built upon them? It pains me to say this but the truth is that there is more democracy in the army, where a COAS has to take his corps commanders along in any major decision. That is why many a prime minister goofed up in trying to pick a ‘safe’ army chief, because ultimately the chief does what the rank and file of the military want him to do.

The ECP must ensure that intra-party polls are held.

The only exceptions are the army chiefs who actually take over. They establish complete control over the army by replacing their peers with officers significantly junior to them; but even then they can’t completely ignore the mood of the rank and file.

So what future does a democracy, which is presently a game of musical chairs between two families and one individual, have in Pakistan? A democracy where the country’s future is in the hands of children of owners (like royalty), regardless of their suitability or experience. There is an eminent chance of this country of 220 million, a nuclear power with its myriad existential problems, being led by a former housewife with not a day’s work experience or a pampered young man, again without a day’s work experience.

In democracies of developed countries, leaders are selected through a well-defined political process within the political party. The system allows only those who show the ability to command through their skills, talent and experience to go up. Family lineage is left for the titular royals of these countries.

In our system, there is a provision in the Political Parties Act 2017 where political parties are obliged to hold party elections to ensure that only the most popular members go up, regardless of family ‘entitlement’. Challenging the position of the ‘owner’ of a party is considered so far-fetched that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is quite happy to receive a certificate from each political party under Section 209 of the law, informing them of the date of the intra-party election, the names of the elected office holders and a notification to that effect. How these elections were held is not their concern.

Section 208 of the Act lays down the basis of party elections; it states that all party office-bearers shall be elected; all basic members shall constitute the electoral college; and all members of the electoral college should be given equal opportunity.

If we are to have political parties, which are not family-owned, this is the time for the ECP to assert itself and ensure that party elections are held as fairly and transparently as is being attempted for general elections.

Mercifully, no amendments to the law are required, because that would be impossible to get done as no political party leader would want to change the status quo. In view of the objective under Section 208, all that ECP has to do is to make rules to lay down the procedure for conducting party elections. Under the new powers given to the ECP it does not have to get the government’s approval to make rules.

The only way genuine intra-party polls can contribute to the development of democracy in Pakistan is if the ECP conducts these elections. After all, how can you have democracy in the country if party leaders are a product of rigged party elections or selection?

Taking inspiration from Western parliamentary democracies in form and not in substance will ensure that our leaders keep running for refuge to these Western countries. Unless this is what our leaders want.

Resultantly, all parties (with the exception of the Jamaat-i-Islami) which are owned by an individual/ families follow a blatant selection process, without even pretending to be democratic.

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