**Deterrent Value of Democracy**

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The title of this article might raise a few eyebrows because the term “deterrence” is considered the exclusive domain of the strategic community, at least in Pakistan. However, I do not intend to challenge any authority on the subject, and only look at whether the term “deterrence” or any of its variants can be deployed in another domain of state affairs.

In fact, without proper valuation, no strategic terminology carries any value in its application, and this valuation must be based on sound footing: credibility, capability, capacity, communication, intent, impact, and probabilities of a positive outcome.

Democracy is a core value of the United Nations and the institution supports the concept by “promoting human rights, development, and peace and security.” The other elements of democracy that the UN promotes include “good governance, monitors elections, supports the civil society to strengthen democratic institutions and accountability, ensures self-determination in decolonized countries, and assists in the drafting of new constitutions in post-conflict nations.”

Interestingly, the term democracy did not appear in the Charter at the time of its foundation in 1945, yet it opens with, “We the People’s,” clearly indicating the practice of its fundamentals. However, my concerns are from the viewpoint of institutional acceptance of the fundamentals of democracy in developing countries.

The weakest element of democracy remains the respect of the people by state institutions.

The UN also does not insist on any particular form of government except its adherence to the core principles of democracy.

The respect for peoples’ choices by state institutions comes only when the (elected or otherwise) governments give importance to their voices. However, if the people are treated as voters only and not equal participants in governance, then public opinion is not given any weight.

The events across North Africa and a few states in the Middle East during the Arab Spring (2010-2013) shocked a number of nearly permanent regimes in otherwise peaceful and stable states. The most dominant cause remained the large-scale dissatisfaction of the majority of people even when massive human rights violations were not reported before the outbreak of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. The Tunisian uprising was a clear reflection of a state’s disrespect for its people, and hence, led to the unfortunate incident of self-immolation by Mohamed Bouazizi. Initially, the incident did not appear too great but soon became a game changer. Consequently, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali tried to offer certain concessions to the people, but it was too late. Ben Ali (1987-2011) had to abdicate power and fled the country he had ruled for over 26 years. New elections were held, and a new constitution was promulgated in 2014, and Tunisia started its march towards true democracy.

Egypt was next in line to fall to people’s power. In fact, I happened to visit Cairo only a few months before the popular uprisings against the government of Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981-2011). The streets of Cairo were filled with tourists and the country appeared to be running at its normal pace. The only negative thing I observed was that people would not talk about the government or its performance.

The events and happenings followed by the Tahrir Square gatherings are now part of recorded history. The lesson learnt points towards the need for respect of the people’s wishes not only by the leadership but also by state institutions if democracy is to be practised in its true sense.

The wave of change did not remain confined to Tunisia and Egypt only but reached Libyan shores also before large-scale public demonstrations in other Middle Eastern countries. Syria and Yemen remain engaged in a bloody civil war to date.

Back to Pakistan, perhaps

For instance, a common person’s treatment by government departments including the police and judiciary remains a cause of serious concern. However, the people of Pakistan hardly react to such maltreatment or unkind behaviour by the state organisers.

In my opinion, a tamed democracy cannot match the essence of democratic values as envisaged by the UN Charter which insists on people’s participation, good governance, and accountability of state institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that people’s voices and choices are respected by those responsible to manage state institutions in line with the spirit of a public servant’s role in serving the citizenry. It is incumbent upon the state that it cares for the well-being of the people in the true spirit of the core values of democracy.

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