**Digital democracy**

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During election season, our politicians cleverly tap into one of the best resources of our country – our youth. The youth participate vigorously in all the jalsas, knock on doors in the scorching heat, rally voters, and vote themselves.

However, when the election is over, rarely will the youth who got the representative elected in the first place be asked for their thoughts on a law that impacts them. Nor do the youth have a platform to petition for any new law, co-innovate with their representative, debate, voice, or be an active part of the law-making process. Unfortunately, deliberately or by default, youth participation in our democracy is limited to the sole act of voting or protesting at jalsas – swiftly marginalized once their zeal is no longer required.

Digital democracy is a novel solution to ending our youth’s marginalization; it is the answer to the software update our democracy desperately needs, especially in Pakistan, given that 64 percent of the nation is younger than 30. Civic tech, a conglomeration of technologies such as AI and blockchain, can help connect citizens with governments, allowing them to engage with their representatives and constituency to collaborate and play their part.

Our youth sadly do not have mechanisms to participate, deliberate and collaborate on policymaking that impacts them. They must mandate transparency and easy access of information from the government at all levels. This way, we no longer marginalize the citizen to vote only but involve them in the law-making decisions faced by the representative post-elections.

When Uber, a ride-sharing app, came to Taiwan, taxi drivers protested against it and citizens voiced their concerns about various aspects of the app. In a situation like this, elected officials, often aloof from public sentiment or lacking the proper expertise, are tempted to decide in isolation. This tragic disconnect is also true in Pakistan, where politicians are deemed magicians with all solutions and intelligence. However, Audrey Tang, the newly appointed Taiwanese digital minister, held online consultations using machine learning AI technology to “attract consensus” on the Uber issue. The deliberation process spearheaded by citizens eventually led to a set of new legal regulations adopted by the government. The citizens, alongside the representatives, debated, voted, and helped craft a law that allowed Uber to operate in Taiwan.

Rather than acting alone or forming sluggish committees to solve these complex challenges, the digital minister wanted citizens to be partners in a solution; she calls this “crowdsourced policy-making.” Almost all official meetings on Uber were streamed live or recorded, and meeting minutes were uploaded online to update concerned citizens. Digital information access to citizens complemented by civic tech proved to bring speedy and inclusive solutions through informed participation.

Another good initiative is an e-petition platform introduced by the Taiwanese minister, which allows citizens to get an actual response from the concerned ministry once a petition receives over five thousand signatures. This mechanism allows the elected officials and concerned citizens to connect face to face to raise awareness and solve policy issues together through technology.

Beyond the benefits of participation, future governments can use AI and Blockchain to provide citizens information transparency and deliver good governance. In the US and UK, federal agencies use AI to make procurement or social welfare transactions corruption-free. For example, in the UK, the department of work and pensions has a developed algorithm that gathers information from different agencies to warrant if the person receiving entitlement is genuinely deserving. Through blockchain, an immutable ledger, land titles can be dispersed, creating a corruption-free and robust implementation of property rights, a fundamental principle of any democracy.

Even though the rise of digital democracy will strengthen democracy and empower our youth, it still has a long way to go. First and foremost, it is integral that the digital infrastructure goes across societies and communities to avoid the digital divide. Significant work remains to provide access to broadband internet to citizens worldwide. In Pakistan, for example, only 35 per cent of the population has access to the internet. Internet penetration is critical and a barrier to the success of digital democracy.

Future governments in Pakistan need to change how they can utilize technology to strengthen democracy and empower the youth. We must go beyond complaint portals to create space for our youth to collaborate and shape their future. The youth must demand this shift of their new leaders and parties. The youth must strive to voice their concerns, mobilize conversations, petition for improvements, co-innovate, crowdsource new laws, or recommend changes to previous ones. Our youth’s talent and brain power must not go to waste; let’s demand 21st-century solutions to make our democracy stronger and shape our future.

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