**On a spectrum**

BY H U M A Y US U F 2022-01-10

A NEWS commentator in a televised interview recently called for a 15-year spell of authoritarianism in Pakistan, suggesting that advocates of democracy should be assassinated by firing squads, with their families billed for the bullets. Those who cherish Pakistani democracy floundering and flailing as it is were horrified by the blatant disdain for our political system (and the impunity for inciting violence).

But such opinions, admittedly in a more tempered form, are widely held among Pakistanis. Think of the oft-cited, even though inaccurate, myth of stability and economic growth under past military dictatorships, or the widely held view that the awam are not yet ready for democracy. A 2020 Gallup report on perceptions of democracy cited 2016 survey findings that 24 per cent of Pakistanis believe martial law to be better than democracy. Even among those who profess to prefer democracy, there`s little meaningful buy-in, particularly among the middleand upper-classes that benefit from the status quo.

This partly explains the dire state of Pakistani democracy: rigged elections, a `hybrid` political system (the coinage a euphemism meant to sanitise continuing military control over key policymaking), curtailed media freedoms, suppression of civil society movements, surveillance, unlawful detentions, and draconian anti-terrorism and contempt of court laws that make any form of debate or dissent impossible.

It is the predicament of countries like Pakistan, where open calls for fascism are apparently acceptable, that ostensibly set the stage for US President Joe Biden`s Democracy Summit last month. Ironically, though not surprisingly, Pakistan skipped the event.

Our absence has been attributed to politicking rather than ideology. Imran Khan wanted to reverse-snub Biden, who has yet to make the long-awaited phone call to our prime minister. Pakistan also didn`t want to irritate China, which was grumpy that Taiwan had been invited to the summit, and also (rightly) perceived the gathering to be an anti-Beijing caucus. But the fact that Khan didn`t feel the need to symbolically partici pate in a conference reaffirming a global commitment to democracy is worrying enough.

But forums such as the summit are counterproductive, intensifying the challenge of building wide, vehement support for democracy in countries like Pakistan.

Firstly, the summit`s construct of a dichotomy between democracy and autocracy is unhelpful. This falsely presents governance systems as an either/or choice, as reflected in the toxic news commentator`s remarks as well. The truth is, democracies are ever-evolving, dynamic political systems, with ups anddowns, strengths and weaknesses. A narrative about the fluidity of democratic systems is more productive, leaving space to acknowledge that states may backslide, and so creating opportunities for a revision of values and priorities.

The idea that democracy is a spectrum, rather than a binary, offers constant hope for improvement, which in turn should drive ongoing public engagement with the system.

This engagement is key to staving off misplaced nostalgia for dictatorships during the painful and slow-moving processes of strengthening electoral processes, increasing transparency and inclusion, improving public service delivery, enhancing inclusion, empowering civil society and upholding the rule of law.

Biden`s Democracy Summit was also criticised for its vague criteria for participation.

Countries that did attend were not given clear guidelines for what would count as democratic gains, nor were they given action items or incentives. The lack of incentives for the ambivalent democrats in attendance cameunder particular scrutiny, with many analysts arguing that the summit should have aspired to be akin to EU membership, offering trade deals for democratic pro-gress, or sanctions for failures.

The idea of incentives, such as richer countries footing the bill for poorer countries to work on democratic goals, has the stench of colonial imposition about it. The last thing a country like Pakistan needs is for democracy to be re-cast as a coercive ideology, imposed by a western elite exploiting the country`s indebtedness.

Incentives rarely work, driving a lip service approach to democratic actions. Think of Pakistan`s legislative tinkering in response to the EU`s decision to review our GSP Plus trading status in light of the discriminatory nature of our blasphemy laws, and record on minority rights more broadly. That occurred alongside the mainstreaming by state actors of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan.

The summit did get one thing right: that democracy is ultimately a sovereign matter, one that states must tackle internally, rather than treat as a geopolitical or multilateral challenge. This was clear in the invitations extended to civil society and media too.

Pakistan`s pro-democracy activists must remember that the fight is ours to fight, and we best get on with it. The wúter is a political and integåty úsk analyst.

Twitter: @humayusuf