**Our bourgeois democracy**

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The failure of the PTI in extending help to the people and the recent price hike in petroleum prices by the Shahbaz Sharif-led government has put a question mark on the future of democracy in Pakistan. The policies of our so-called democratic parties have also created doubts about the success of bourgeois democracy in Pakistan.

The intervention of non- democratic forces in the political affairs of Pakistan is said to be one of the major factors leading to the failure of democratic governments in the country. Even during democratic dispensations, an area of influence continued to exert pressure on elected governments directly or indirectly.

Jihadi and sectarian organizations were pampered and bankrolled, emerging as a major threat to democracy and democratic leaders with some of these even claiming to have assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and more than 700 workers of the Awami National Party. Such outfits also targeted the democratic constitution of the country, advocating a totalitarian system with a touch of theocracy. Their terrorist activities made it nearly impossible for democratic parties to run election campaigns in an atmosphere free of terror and intimidation. However, political parties did not give in to their pressure and defying all odds continued the struggle for democracy, making history by ensuring the transfer of power from one civilian government to another in 2013.

It is also true that whenever a dictatorship was thrust upon the country, the US and the rest of the West showered bounties. For example, the military regime of Ayub Khan received generous Western aid while the dictatorship of Gen Zia witnessed a pouring of dollars into Pakistan. Though Gen Musharraf did not come into power with the blessing of the Western world, because the cold war was already over, he was also greeted with American dollars.

On the contrary whenever a democratic government was voted into power, it usually ended up facing sanctions. People still remember the Pressler and Brown amendments. However, does all this mean that democratic parties should be exonerated from all blame?

It is true that the dictatorships in Pakistan were very brutal in nature – no one can forget the Zia years with its draconian laws empowering the state to incarcerate people without any crime, and torture journalists and political workers who dared to challenge his authoritarian rule. It can be argued that the French feudals of the 17th and 18th centuries were tyrants who treated their people like chattel, and the British monarchs and princes had unbridled powers to suppress people. Then how did the bourgeois class succeed there, fighting this bunch of tyrants, bigots and barons? Did they just fight for their own petty interests or in the process of a long struggle also agreed to help the hapless who were being pulverized by the feudal elite, arrogant monarchs and the rigid clergy.

The Western bourgeois class allied with peasants and workers to defeat the feudal aristocracy, forces of the church and power-hungry kings and princes. An undeclared compromise between the capitalist class and the working classes of Europe ended up helping people access quality education, decent housing and free medical treatment. The business community of the European continent, which was leading the democratic struggle, gave its nod to progressive laws empowering workers to form unions, grant social benefits to them, improve the conditions of factories and workplaces and reduce their working hours.

On the contrary, the Pakistani feudal and capitalist elite do not want to extend any assistance to the people. Most of the factories and industrial concerns are owned by our politicians or their friends who are very active in the democratic struggle of the country. But most of these companies cannot tolerate the very name of union let alone permitting the workers to form one. This includes the factories and industrial concerns owned by the Sharifs. Less than five per cent of the factories have unions – and that too in many cases a pocket union.

A number of brick kilns across Punjab are run by PML-N leaders and other party people. The treatment meted out to the workers working at these places is an open secret. Even the orders of the Supreme Court could not help them get their constitutional rights. PPP leaders or feudals close to the party have been accused of diverting water to their lands, depriving poor peasants of Sindh of the much needed natural gift to cultivate their land. As far as sugar, wheat and other cartels are concerned, the leaders of all political parties have been exploiting this country's people.

Despite differences, the PPP, PML-N and PTI and all other parties want to follow the same economic models. All parties want to come up with an economic policy that renders thousands of workers jobless. All bourgeois organizations announce amnesty schemes for large businesses. All political leaders introduce clever plans to whiten the black money of the super rich. Shehbaz Sharif and a few other bourgeois leaders might brag about mega projects, creating an impression that they are like the Western capitalist class that shared the benefits of development with the poor, but they tend to forget that the Western bourgeois sacrificed some of its own interests to win the battle against the monarchy, the clergy and the feudal aristocracy.

They shared a certain percentage of their profit for the general welfare of the people, establishing a network of social security that provided decent housing to common people, quality and free treatment and free education at school or in many cases at the university levels. They managed to create a society where the state looks after its citizens from cradle to grave while our bourgeois democratic class wants to squander public money on enriching their families and cronies, avoiding progressive taxation and doling out bailout packages on the elite.

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