**The Democratic Delusion**

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508 AD: A mob of over 6000 angry Athenians gathers to write down the name of the politician that they wish to exile from the region. Not quite how you would expect an article on Pakistani politics to start? Well, interestingly enough, these are the humble origins of the democracy we claim to practice today. “Demokratia” in Greek when translated literally – means “people power.” Of course, Ancient Greece had some barbaric twists included in their initial concept. However, observing the scenes unfold on the 9th of May 2023, the unavoidable question that rose was – are things more civilised in the “democracy” that is modern-day Pakistan?

The arrest of PTI chairman Imran Khan was merely the latest chapter in Pakistan’s labyrinthine story of actions labelled to be for the sake of preserving democracy. Khan’s political rivals celebrated jubilantly on Twitter as the premises of the High Court (a vital organ of the democratic process) were torn apart to seize him. One wonders if those looking favourably upon this chain of events remember their concern when arrests were carried out at the behest of the late General Musharraf in 1999. Back then, they lit the pyres and rightly so, we collectively mourned the demise of democracy. This time, although the same set of principles appears to have been violated, they dance on the grave instead.

So what exactly are the pillars that support the democratic theory? Well, free access to sources of information is certainly one of them. However, in the wake of the arrest, civilians found themselves engulfed in an all too familiar digital darkness as reports flooded in regarding a state-imposed restriction on platforms such as Twitter. Further to this, many mainstream media outlets failed to display visuals of civil unrest across the country. This is reminiscent of the famous quote from American poet Gil-Scott Heron: “The revolution will not be televised.” The only difference is that this time, the masses have cameras in their hands too.

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With one pillar successfully knocked over – eyes turn to another that is equally vital in times like this: the right to peaceful protest. It is worth noting that the emphasis here should be on the word “peaceful.” Registering your discontent with the state of political affairs in your country should not be synonymous with burning down houses and schools, regardless of who occupies them. Equally condemnable, if not more so, are the reports on social media of indiscriminate police brutality on those out in the streets. Thus, a cycle begins in which protests morph swiftly into their ugly older brothers – riots and clashes. As a result of this, the concept of a peaceful protest also crumbles to dust.

A well-documented reason behind this current volatility of the political climate is the uncertainty behind election dates. PTI has demanded that the public be given their democratic right to vote 90 days after the provincial assembly dissolution. The federal government has refused on various grounds. The reasons presented have ranged from a lack of funds to difficulty in providing the appropriate security for the polls. The two sides during this time have consistently had one thing alone in common: both claim that they are protecting the sanctity of the Constitution. The decision on the correct constitutional interpretation must of course be left to the Supreme Court of Pakistan. However, if we have enough security to provide “protocol” to our elite and simultaneously send sizeable paramilitary squadrons out for political arrests then surely a brief election can be guarded reasonably well? A further point here is slightly philosophical. Our political leaders from both the government and the opposition claim to cherish democracy deeply. Strangely enough, despite this, the word “election” itself seems to have become the bogeyman for many leadership figures with a former Prime Minister even claiming that the Pak rupee would hit the 500 mark against the US dollar in the case of early provincial polls.

Speaking of elections, while voters are certainly entitled to cast their votes however they please, in a modern democratic system, the underlying idea is that the public is well-informed and opts for who they think is best for their welfare. For Pakistan, this is not entirely true. A former president recently stated his desire to see his son as Prime Minister of Pakistan during his lifetime. Prior to this, his late wife and her father had of course both also served as Prime Ministers. Statements, which propagate nepotism, are perhaps not inherently dangerous to democracy. However, this entitlement radiating out from our political dynasties is certainly terrifying. What makes them comfortable enough to say such things with confidence? The “traditional” voter base would be your answer. In many parts of Pakistan, there is an inherent benefit to our politicians to keep voters away from intellectual liberation. This means that portions of the public will be unable to soundly evaluate which elements of a manifesto are desirable and where past governments have failed to deliver. The votes will instead be underpinned by elements such as which party their family members usually vote for or sadly who is offering the best discount on “Roti, Kapra aur Makaan.”

The latest display of authoritarianism shows that Pakistan’s oscillation between democracy and dictatorship must cease. For this to happen successfully, we must stop weaponizing “democracy” against those who disagree with us. The next step is to acknowledge that historically, our marriage with democracy has been a toxic relationship at best. And while the suggestion here is certainly not to file for a divorce, it would be beneficial to register for some couples’ counselling sessions as soon as pragmatically possible.

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