**The tragedy of democracy?**

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February 06, 2021

The democratically elected Prime Minister of Pakistan termed holding of elections after every five years a tragedy while addressing a gathering in Sahiwal last week. According to Mr Khan, frequent elections are one of the major reasons why long-term planning could not be undertaken in Pakistan, impairing its steady progress. Mr Khan heaped praise for the Chinese system which allows the ruling party to formulate and implement long term plans. Mr Khan, however, is neither the first nor the only leader to have espoused this idea; dictators in Pakistan as well as elsewhere have used similar pretexts to justify their reigns.

The argument, in a nut-shell, is that frequent election cycles make a government prone to ‘short-termism’. This means that when elected into government, politicians fixate their eyes on the next election and plan only for the short-term outcomes that they calculate will prolong their hold on power. If most or all politicians follow similar reasoning, they will have no incentive to plan for long-term projects. The argument has intuitive appeal; however, the empirical data suggests otherwise. Let’s take climate change as an example of an issue that requires long-term planning. Various studies comparing the response of democracies and autocracies vis-à-vis the issue of climate change show that democracies have done slightly better than autocracies to tackle this issue. Established democracies like United Kingdom, Germany and Scandinavia have taken significant steps to reduce their carbon footprint.

[Biden forms China task force to meet growing challenges](https://nation.com.pk/11-Feb-2021/biden-forms-china-task-force-to-meet-growing-challenges)

Another sphere where the approach of democracies and autocracies can be compared is that of public spending. The intuition might suggest that democracies will spend more on inefficient economic policies and eyewash projects in order to please the masses while an autocrat, being immune to the general will, can spend on long-term outcomes like investment in infrastructure and education. Here again evidence shows the opposite is true. Democracies offer less subsidies on essential goods and invest more on longer-term public goods when compared to autocracies. In democratic countries, for instance, more money is spent on education which is a long-term investment.

Moreover, a cursory look at the global systems reveals that an overwhelming majority of countries that have succeeded in various spheres have done so under the democratic model which entails frequent elections. Western Europe and America, which are leading the world in economics as well as social progress at the moment, are the best examples.

[KP Govt innovates tool to strengthen ADP planning process](https://nation.com.pk/11-Feb-2021/kp-govt-innovates-tool-to-strengthen-adp-planning-process)

The veracity of the statement is also doubtful when one looks at Pakistan’s own experience. We have had three military rulers who remained in power nearly a decade each. What long-term planning did we witness in the eras of these rulers and what was the outcome?

Even if short-termism is a problem that can be associated with democracy, it ought to be ignored as a side-effect in view of myriad of advantages that emanate from holding of frequent elections. The biggest advantage of holding frequent elections is that it is a means of ensuring accountability. Politicians are rational humans just like the rest of us and respond to incentives. Once elected to power, the thought that they will have to go to the masses again in a few years incentivises them to work for the welfare of the masses and to protect and promote their interests. It also gives masses the chance to hold their elected representatives accountable at the ballot. Elected people who fail to uphold their promises and perform poorly can be thrown out through electoral process. Therefore, frequent elections are a useful method of accountability—a goal that Mr Khan apparently champions. Moreover, frequent elections ensure consistency and stability in the system which is a pre-requisite for economic growth.

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To conclude, instead of romanticising autocratic and repressive regimes, our leaders must try to find ways within democratic model to curb the government’s inclination towards myopic and short-term goals, if any. We can learn from Wales that has appointed a Future Generations Commissioner whose job is to ensure that public bodies make policies looking forward into at least three decades. There might be a Future Generations Act for the entire United Kingdom in the future. Therefore, democracy and frequent elections are the way forward and must be appreciated rather than shunned. There are many possible ways to ensure formulation and implementation of policies for long-term progress in the 21st century and fanning autocratic tendencies is not one of them.