

Why democracy falters in Pakistan

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FROM the mid-nineteen seventies onwards several states experienced fundamental political changes best described as the process of democratization. This process which began in South Europe moved on to Latin America and Asia, peaking in 1989 with the collapse of the communist regimes in East Europe and culminating in the disintegration of the USSR.

Such factors have in time contributed to the belief that the resolution of all conflicts affecting the world, ranging from genocide to trade wars, will be best addressed by increased democratization. So it is expected that in the coming years more countries will move towards democracy. As a result of this, Francis Fukuyama would have us believe that history has come to an end for we might be approaching "the end point of man's ideological evolution and the universalization of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

Democratization is claimed to be the solution to the problem of tyranny, but the process itself can also create or exacerbate other problems with which new democracies must grapple. The difficulties that new democracies face include problems inherited from their authoritarian predecessors, as well as others peculiar to democracy. A basic problem concerns the questionable aspects of the electioneering process which forces political leaders to compete for votes.

In many situations the easiest way to win votes is to appeal to tribal, ethnic and religious constituencies. Democratization thus promotes communalism, ethnic conflicts and religious differences. People identify with family, faith and blood and unless the rules of electoral engagement are carefully constructed, politicians competing for office have little choice but to appeal for votes in these terms.

In non-western societies, the introduction of democracy also creates what is describable as 'the democracy paradox' which facilitates the coming to power of groups that appeal to indigenous ethnic and religious loyalties and are likely to be anti-western and anti-democratic.

Democratization also involves the removal of state constraints on individual behaviour, a loosening of social inhibitions, and uncertainty and confusion about standards of morality, thus promoting an amoral, laissez-faire, or 'anything goes' atmosphere, possibly involving an increase in socially undesirable behaviour, including crime and drug abuse and also encouraging disintegration of the family and other bastions of collective authority.

In addition to the problems of social decay, 'the democracy paradox', communalism and those inherited from previous authoritarian regimes, new democracies

try was flush with peoples' representatives regionally and in both the Eastern and Western wings of Pakistan, degenerated in time into the dreadful debacle which cost us half the country simply because some of our elected leaders, in conjunction with the military 'guardians', were not prepared to let the democratic process prevail.

The situation has worsened over the years with the recurring military presence in the political system. This is a military that operates like a state within a state, with an agenda that envisages expansion into all spheres of civil life surmounted by an omnipotence which it aspires to impose over and above parliamentary sovereignty.

Against this background, such democracy as we have had has been fractured, being remote-controlled by the military assisted by the bureaucracy and run by opportunistic politicians better known for their manoeuvring to secure and retain power than for representing the interests of their constituents. To ensure political longevity or even to acquire a sinecure post, their strategies have included splitting up parties, cobbling together new alliances with other splinter groups, crossing and recrossing the floor of the assembly, entering into deals for survival with the military at the cost of party loyalty and currying favour with extremist Islamist parties to get around their weaknesses.

In their time, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Ziaul Haq and later Nawaz Sharif also sought refuge in Islamization to boost their positions. Even the current Musharraf dispensation has relied on the Islamist card to secure its ad hoc arrangements. Such overtly ideological posturing on the part of our secular leaders has put a premium on extremist politics while restricting the already limited public space in which democratic norms and institutions can

party member on charges of corruption. Party accounts are seldom audited despite the requirements of the Political Parties Act." Add to this the fact that at least three populist leaders are based abroad and oversee party matters by remote control.

A damning indictment indeed.

So even if democracy is not the charmed process the advent of which could solve the problems of governance, let it be clearly understood that the military is by no means the alternative. It is in fact the military's presence in the system that has contributed to the misgovernance of Pakistan. The problems of democracy warrant serious attention without recurrent military interventions which disrupt the constitutional process and require it to be restarted from the beginning after each intervention.

Developed societies with political acumen deal with the mechanics of politics and of succession to power by devising and following a code of rules in accordance with constitutional imperatives. This in due course becomes recognized by the voting populace as the game plan for choice of government. To preserve the system and to retain legitimacy, all players have to operate in accordance with the rules of the game.

Even in situations in which the adoption of the democratic format does not provide good governance, as witnessed during the two Benazir Bhutto and two Nawaz Sharif tenures, the problems must nevertheless be tackled within the system and not by the intervention of external elements. After all, if our South Asian and sub-continental neighbours have dealt successfully with such problems, why can't we?

In a recent article, a PPP leader decried the criminalization of politics and governance in Saarc countries by organized criminals, militant extremists and ethno-sectarian groups winning elections through manipulations, illegal practices and the patronage of the establishment. While deploring these developments, we should also keep track of the fact that even where democracy flourishes, organized crime has its own access to the corridors of power whether it be Washington or any other place in the world.

Moreover, on an individual level several criminal personalities have popular appeal, like the late Phoolan Devi, the Indian Bandit Queen-cum-member of the Lok Sabha, or the convicted chief minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav. It is worth noting, however, that while Indian politicians have been as ambitious and mala fide as their counterparts elsewhere, they have not curried favour with the military to achieve electoral success. Their route to power has been through the ballot box, for they are aware of the importance of operating within the system and observing the rules of the game.

This much is clear, therefore, that for democracy to succeed in Pakistan, the rules of the demo-

Political leadership and representation in the legislatures have been the preserve of the elites or their agents. So the choice for the voter even when the ballot boxes are not doctored is limited to following the herd towards the known water holes. This veritable Hobson's choice makes a mockery of the democratic ideal of choosing the best. There is no best in these situations, and often no choice, but simply the incumbent who usually gets his way. In order for a non-elite to succeed in this scenario, it usually takes a

inherited from previous authoritarian regimes, new democracies also face some distinctive new threats to the maintenance of liberal democracy.

Such threats to new democracies generally come from three recognized sources. The first from military intervention in the political sphere, as we in Pakistan have experienced on four separate occasions. In such situations the military leader will chop and change the established political system to suit the specific needs of his junta, thus ending up in an ad hoc arrangement that fails to outlast the perpetrator. We face just such an ad hoc situation today with the LFO implant in the Constitution.

The second threat comes from political groups who win elections, assume power and then manipulate the mechanisms of democracy to curtail or destroy democracy. Such groups are usually committed to anti-democratic ideologies like the fundamentalist MMA which does not seem to understand the spirit of pluralism that underpins democracy as is evident from its governance of the NWFP. Its policy imperatives undermine the role of a constitutional opposition, thus negating the very concept of democracy. "This", according to one political analyst, "is why it is dangerous to have democracy without a sense of constitutional liberalism just as having technology without imbuing the culture of science is useless."

The third potential threat to democracy is what Samuel Huntington calls "executive arrogance", which occurs when an elected chief executive concentrates power in his own hands, subordinates or suspends the legislature, and rules largely by decree. We experienced such a development before the advent of the Musharraf governance when the incumbent prime minister, Nawaz Sharif moved the 13th, 14th and 15th constitutional amendments in the National Assembly making the Constitution and the legislature hostage to the supra-constitutional Amir-ul-Momineen status he endeavoured to create for himself.

Such events have exacerbated the abysmal record of Pakistan's experiments in democracy since its creation. The repeated failures of these experiments have brought about a crisis of confidence in Pakistan's future as a true democracy. To begin with, the Muslim League itself had no democratic traditions to build on after the creation of Pakistan. Thereafter, our solitary experience of the free and fair elections that took place in 1970 under General Yahya when the coun-

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flourish.

The truth is that politicking in Pakistan has been restricted to certain 'elitist' power seekers having personal or ideological agendas. These power seekers belong to specific groups with the means and the money to promote their cause. They include the landed, tribal and religious feudals, the established political families, major commercial interests, the senior bureaucracy, the military, Islamic hardliners, localized ethnic mafias and powerful law breakers and anti-social elements. None of the traditional constituents of civil society, such as the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, the professionals, the middle-range trading communities, trade and labour unionists, the downtrodden masses or even the ordinary folk on the street have participated or been allowed to participate in politics in any meaningful way.

Due to this, political leadership and representation in the legislatures has been the preserve of these elites or their agents. So the choice for the voter even when the ballot boxes are not doctored is limited to following the herd towards the known water holes. This veritable Hobson's choice makes a mockery of the democratic ideal of choosing the best. There is no best in these situations, and often no choice, but simply the incumbent who usually gets his way. In order for a non-elite to succeed in this scenario, it usually takes a freakish turn of events like the against-all-odds election success of an Imran Khan.

A telling commentary on our political system was made recently in Islamabad at an international conference on The United Nations Conventions Against Corruption (UNCAC) by Alan Perry, head of the Public International Law division of Kendall & Freeman, solicitors. He claimed that the political party system in Pakistan was dictatorial and undemocratic. He went on to say, "There is no diplomatic way to put it! Mechanisms for internal party elections are poor and stifle the efforts of younger members and those with less influence from rising in the party ranks. Political parties are personality driven. Two mainstream parties have life presidents. Ethics management within any political party is non-existent. No action has ever been taken against a

This much is clear, therefore, that for democracy to succeed in Pakistan, the rules of the democratic process must be observed and past mistakes revised in accordance with the prescribed norms. Undoubtedly, success in this endeavour will depend to a large extent on the military's willingness to alter its interventionist mindset and to desist from being a player in the political arena.

Furthermore, the Constitution should be revised to reflect its original form subject to adjustments necessitated by changed circumstances. Its fundamental provisions concerning the structure of government and of national institutions, and those defining the distribution of powers amongst identified officials of state and also between the federation and the provinces, should be accorded an entrenched status, so that no executive order or parliamentary motion passed by a simple majority may ever again alter these provisions.

In addition to the outward trappings of elections, parliament and representative government, the success of a democracy is also determined by the extent to which constitutional liberalism permeates the national ethos and conditions different aspects of national life. This will happen when sufficient segments of the populace internalize constitutional liberalism by adopting it as a way of life and conduct their dealings in accordance with the rules of liberal activism.

It is evident that in part, the failure of democracy in Pakistan is attributable to the failure of civil society to play a meaningful role in this context, and that this failure, according to the well known cliché, has so far provided us with the governments we deserve.

As regards the question of the availability of a sufficient variety of bona fide candidates to enable the voters to exercise their right of choice for parliamentary representation in accordance with democratic norms, progress in this regard will take time depending on several factors including, the careful screening of prospective candidates, the development of the electorate's ability to gauge the merits of individual candidates and the disbanding of selection committees of local mafias. Until that time the incumbency of members of the National Assembly will continue to be tinged by the myth of representation.

The question remains, will all this or any part of it ever come to pass? ■

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