**A failing democracy?**

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The political enterprise of Pakistan, led by the Sharif-Zardari-Maulana conglomerate, is not working. Well, it’s working to the extent that (in theory) we have a government; however, judging by any credible measure of public acceptability, this government neither enjoys the confidence of the majority of our people, nor that of our friends and allies, nor that of (dare I say) our state institutions.

According to numerous recent polls, carried out by domestic as well as internationally credible organisations, public confidence in this government is dwindling in the low 30s percentile. Put another way, almost seven out of ten Pakistanis who are eligible to vote, do not repose confidence in the legitimacy and functioning of the incumbent government.

And yet, empirically, this government was formed through the stipulated constitutional process (vote of no-confidence) and enjoys a simple majority in the Parliament (174 votes).

In the circumstances, it is important to ask why, despite constitutional legitimacy, the incumbent government enjoys so little political and moral authority across Pakistan.

In order to answer this question, it would be pertinent to revisit the philosophical underpinnings and virtue of a democratic dispensation. Democracy—the least worst form of government, in the words of Sir Winston Churchill—derives its legitimacy from three fundamental principles of self-rule: 1) that the people have, through a transparent and legitimate process, chosen the guardians of their freedom; 2) that these representatives adhere to minimum societal standards of moral and political integrity, in personal as well as political conduct; and 3) that the legislative and administrative decisions of the democratic enterprise shall be geared towards the well-being of the constituents (who are the real custodians of political power).

Let us attempt to assess the incumbent government, and its democratic legitimacy, on the touchstone of these 3 democratic principles.

There can be little cavil with the fact that the incumbent government (for whatever motivation) came to power through a constitutional process. In this regard, from a procedural perspective, a vote of no-confidence was moved against the former Prime Minister Imran Khan, in accordance with Article 95(1) of the Constitution, and thereafter passed by ‘a majority of the total membership of the National Assembly’, in accordance with Article 95(4) of the Constitution. Upon removal of Imran Khan as Prime Minister, the incumbent Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was duly elected to office, through a majority of the total membership of the National Assembly, in accordance with Article 91(4) of the Constitution. And yet, despite enjoying a majority in the National Assembly, the incumbent government has a crisis of legitimacy in terms of public acceptability and confidence.

How is it possible that a government, which enjoys parliamentary majority, is facing such a dearth of public confidence within the first few months of coming to power? Why has the parliamentary majority not translated into public majority, despite all institutional efforts to this end? Can our democratic ‘system’ bring to power a government that has no (or little) public acceptability? And if so, can we claim that our democratic ‘system’ is working, if a majority of people have no confidence in the ‘elected’ government of the time?

Well, there is a simplistic way of bridging this seemingly insurmountable crevice between political reality and societal reality: the incumbent government is a riff-raff coalition of 14 political parties, held together with duct tape and institutional glue. At the grassroots level, the supporters of these many parties are ideologically and politically at odds with one another. The mullahs of Fazl-ur-Rehman do not support the liberalism of Sherry Rehman; the socialists of PPP cannot get behind the capitalists of PML-N, and the separatists of PTM and Mehmood Achakzai are inherently at odds with the institutional glue that holds this fragile coalition together. As such, at its core, the political supporters of this coalition have trouble identifying and ascribing to the collective ideology of this unchartered ship of State.

And to top it all, these parties did not seek a collective mandate from the public, and instead came to power through the age-old ‘cancer’ of horse trading. As such, any possibility of political or moral legitimacy, that this government may have had, does not exist. This is a constitutional government, yes—but it is not ‘democratic’ in the spirit of having a collective public mandate.

Depending on political proclivities, people may believe that either the Sharif family, or Zardari, or the Maulana maybe an acceptable choice for Pakistan. However, there is virtually no one in Pakistan who would unabashedly accept that a combination of these politicians has any possibility of bringing about a progressive transformation in our country.

Why?

Because each one of them, at various occasions in our political history, have made such incorrigible moral and political compromises, particularly under pressure from the West, that no one truly believes that they hold the key to a democratic revival in Pakistan. In fact, when seen collectively, these politicians debunk the age-old promise of democracy, which insists that the democratic process, over time, will weed out the corrupt and the incompetent from the system.

Finally, given the track record of this particular group of politicians, it is tough to argue that public policy decisions—administrative or legislative—will be made in the interest of public welfare, instead of unabashed protection of personal fiefdoms. Can anyone really claim that these legislations were for ‘public welfare? Were they done for the benefit of the people at large, or for protecting the corrupt fiefdoms of the few?

Democracy is a frail mistress. It functions less on the basis of the constitutional systems that underwrite it, and more on the moral authority of its participants. And the current government—though democratic in procedure—is entirely devoid of moral authority. If this kind of system continues for too long, we will soon start to hear whispers against democracy itself. That it doesn’t work. That it doesn’t deliver on its promise. That it has been highjacked by a group of corrupt elites, whose only ambition is to enjoy the impunity of power.

Before that happens, we must do a course correction. And if needed, write a new (better) system for democratic rule in our country.

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