**Crisis of Pakistani democracy**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2020-12-30

THE ongoing battle between the opposition and the PTI government has brought to the surface the worst of the prevailing political culture. It illustrates patterns of behaviour that should have little to do with the norms and values relevant to a democratic polity.

The war of words is becoming more and more revolting. The entire effort is to make lies sound truthful and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. This picture raises questions about the future course of the already corrupted democratic political process in the country. The rot appears unstoppable with a worsening crisis of leadership all around. It certainly does not give much hope for change as we enter 2021.

While the country is ruled by a self-righteous and novice leadership perceived as being propped up by the security establishment, the motley opposition alliance seems hardly capable of bringing any change to the existing dynastic power structure that contradicts the very ethos of democracy.

What we are witnessing is a power struggle within the ruling elite in which the faces are interchangeable. Surely some of the smaller groups may have democratic credentials but most parties in the alliance are largely family enterprises. This degenerative political culture has to be changed and replaced with an inclusive and institutional democracy in the country. It is certainly going to be a long struggle.

It may be true that the PDM charter calls for the restoration of fundamental democratic rights and the end of the security establishment`s role in national politics. But how sincere the opposition parties are to act on this solemn declaration remains to be seen. Many of them would readily cosy up to the security establishment when it serves their interests. Our political history is full of such examples.

A number of political parties that form the PDM have been in power in the past and some of them still have strong stakes in the current engineered system. Each one has played the establishment`s game in the past to protect its own interests and may be willing to do so again.

While refusing to talk to the PTI government, some of the alliance leaders appear ready to negotiate with the security agencies. Back-room contactsnever cease. It is not surprising that the PDM is divided on the issue of resigning from parliament.

One can also understand the PPP`s refusal to give up the Sindh government as such a move could sound the death knell for the party whose political clout is restricted to the province.

For over 70 years, the country has alternated between authoritarian military regimes and ineffective elected civilian rule. But there have been no fundamental changes to Pakistan`s political power structure. A small power elite has dominated the country`s political scene under civilian as well as military rule.

The extractive nature of the state`s institutions has prevented the country from embarking on a path of economic and political progress. Despite the economic and social changes that have occurred over the past seven decades, the stranglehold of f amily-oriente d politics remains. A limited number of influential f amilies continue to control Pakistani legislatures.

A sense of dynastic entitlement dominates the country`s political culture impeding the development of institutional democracy. With few exceptions, political parties are an extension of powerful families with hereditary leaders. There is no concept of intra-party democracy. The only change is the transfer of leadership from one generation to the next.

Over the years, families from urban, religious and military backgrounds have also emerged on the political scene, but this has not changed Pakistan`s personalised and dynastic political culture. Studies show that a few hundred families have monopolised the political scene in Pakistan.

Interestingly, hereditary politics have been strengthened under successive military governments.

Dynastic control has dire implications for our political and economic institutions. It reduces the legitimacy of a government, impacts the quality of government policies, promotes patronage and corruption and has negative consequences through the selection ef fect.

Most of these dynastic political groups have actively collaborated with successive military regimes in order to protect their vested interests and receive state patronage. The control of a narrow oligarchic elite and the patriarchal politicalsystem have impeded critical structural reforms that are needed for sustainable economic development and to strengthen democratic and economic institutions.

A major factor contributing to Imran Khan`s political rise has been his slogan against dynastic politics. But after coming to power, not only did he co-opt politicians from dynastic political backgrounds he also established a highly personalised rule. His authoritarian ways have further weakened the state and democratic institutions.

The leadership`s politics of revenge and suppression of democratic rights have strengthened dynastic politics. The government`s so-called crusade against corruption has made the whole process of accountability questionable. The obvious reliance on the security establishment has seriously affected democratic evolution and produced a state of hybrid rule that has further damaged institutions.

The ongoing political confrontation, which is far from over, has also sucked in the security establishment. It is a highly combustible political situation.

Undoubtedly, military versus civilian supremacy remains a major issue that has to be resolved for democracy to be sustainable. But there is also a need to change the existing political culture that impedes inclusive democracy.

Unfortunately, political forces are divided on this critical issue. Of course, the development of democratic culture is not straightforward. It means providing and nurturing conditions that allow plurality and diversity in society. Sustainable development is closely linked to the development of a democratic culture.

The extractive nature of the state institutions has stunted the growth of an inclusive democratic process. Democracy is not about power but about fundamental structural political reform.

The dynastic control of politics and long periods of military rule have blurred this critical distinction. The crisis of Pakistani democracy is rooted deep in the political fault lines perpetuated by an oligarchic elite. A representative democracy offers the only way forward for the country.  The writer is an author and journalist.

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