**Democracy in contention**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2021-02-25

DEMOCRACY has been in contention over the pastfortnight or so. The honours sofar have been claimed by both the disorganised democratic camp and the organised, well-oiled establishment.

The duel began with the democrats` success in freeing Nowshera, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, that has been controlled by the PTI since 2013, of its loyalty to the ruling party. The party patriarch was shocked and sacked the local commander, incidentally the defence minister`s brother, in accordance with the practice of firing party of fice-bearers without due process. The government also girded up its loins to resist any further setback. Soon af terwards, it f aced a challenge in Punjab where by-election for a National Assembly seat was to be held in Daska, Sialkot. What happened in Daska had no precedent in Pakistan`s history of electoral contests.

The government agents harnessed to facilitate the PTI candidate`s victory were upset by the opposition`s show of strength and decided to take matters into their own hands. According to media reports, the presiding of ficers were transported to safe places where they could raise the polling rate from 30 per cent to 80pc of the registered voters.

The Election Commission got alarmed at what was happening but the local administration made itself inaccessible. After a night-long rest, the polling staff re-emerged. The Election Commission realised it needed to grow out of the traumatic experience before it could announce the outcome of polling. The government party is confident it has won the contest. It might succeed in securing this particular seat but the cost could be prohibitively high.

Not only regular poll watchers but ordinary citizens too are aghast at what they witnessed in the new style of election management. We have experienced ballot boxes being stolen but the evident hijacking of polling staf f is something new. Is this a rehearsal for a new way to manage the electoral process that Pakistan is going to of fer to democracies the world over? It is possible that the Imran Khan government has serious reservations about the electoral procedures that have evolved in the subcontinent overmany decades and that it wants to design a more open and transparent mode of ascertaining the people`s will. But what the government agents trie d to do in Daska was anything but a foolproof method of ascertaining the people`s will. In fact, they tried to replace the people`s verdict with the government`s wish list. The government`s line of action does not seem to be directed towards broadening democratic choices. Instead it seems to be an attempt to restrict people`s f reedom to make democratic choices.

If the government is serious about ensuring that the electoral process truly reflects the people`s will it can dig out quite a few ideas of reform that have been debated publicly over the past decades. For instance, the complaint that the election system has become a game limited to moneybags is as old as the history of elections itself in our part of the world. In this system, it is impossible to ensure the emergence of people`s representatives from amongst persons of modest means. There must be quite a few persons in the government`s overextended establishment who could suggest better alternatives to the scheme of elections inherited f rom the colonial rulers. The government has every right to set up a task force to devise a new election system and let it go about gaining its objective in an appropriate manner.

However, the fact that the people have become f amiliar with existing electoral practices should be kept in mind. While they may accept certain modifications in procedure it would be wrong to expect them to carry out revolutionary changes in the overall scheme of things.

Fortunately, one can find in the existing literature quite a few things that should figure high on the agenda for change and progress. For example, the demand that the scheme of guaranteeing representation in elected bodies to elements of society that cannot afford to join the electoral race has been an issue of public debate for ages. While space has been created for ulema and technocrats, who even otherwise have possibilities of finding their way into elected bodies, the right of peasants andworkers to represent their huge communities has consistently been ignored. Creation of space for representadves ofpeasants andlabourin the provincial and national legislatures should be the first item on any agenda for improving the representative character of these bodies.

It should be obvious that those who wish to make the system more democratic should first acquire the skill to introduce changes democratically. The people of Pakistan have seen the failure of reforms carried out by executive`s fiat. Such attempts will fare no better in future. The best way to achieve durable change is to ensure that the desire for progress emanates from the people themselves so that they can own the change and assume the responsibility not only for carrying it out but also for guaranteeing its perpetuation.

Pakistan`s journey towards becoming a truly democratic dispensation has been made more than ordinarily dif ficult by a tendency to ideologise trivial matters and trivialise fundamental values of freedom, equality and justice.

A great deal of mischief has been caused by raising barriers to free inquiry that is a prerequisite to any informed debate. It seems Pakistan is moving in a direction opposite to the path of creative thinking. Can anybody deny that the space for freedom of expression, association and assembly is shrinking in today`s Pakistan? The environment has ceased to be conducive for a free debate, without which original thought is impossible. Not only that, the state is moving away from the ideal of welfare and is becoming more appreciative of the idea of increasing its coercive powers. The decision to include the inhuman, cruel and degrading punishment of chemical castration in the list of penal punishments is a clear indication of the government`s weakness for sadism.

The f act is that the path to a democratic dispensation lies in promoting a democratic culture of equality for citizens. But Pakistan`s rulers are taking pride in increasing inequalities on the basis of belief, gender dif ferentials and social class. No wonder democracy has become a contentious issue.