**Free choice only in secrecy**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2021-02-11

WHEN citizens were asked to mark the ballot paper in secrecy, that is away from the gaze of other people, it was an affirmation of the timetested principle that a free choice could be made only when one was alone and invisible to fellow beings, as anyone within the sight of other people could not f ree himself of herd mentality and fears, and his ability to freely make a choice was undermined. Thus the whole ritual of making a democratic choice was made subject to the secrecy of the ballot.

The citizens who were granted the privilege of electing their representatives or contributing to community decisions in ancient Greece or Rome began with a system equivalent to today`s practice of open balloting and took a long time to discover its inherent flaws. They realised that the presence of fellow citizens around them af fected their freedom of choice. By and by, they came to the conclusion that a genuinely free choice could be made only when a citizen was alone in an enclosure especially made for eliciting his choice or opinion.

This realisation eventually led to the formalisation of the system of secret balloting that all democracies, beginners as well as those experienced at pulling in popular votes, adopted.

This universally accepted mode of recording citizens` political choices has survived the test of time for several centuries and nobody in any part of the world has found fault with it. Nor has any alternative system been seriously promoted.

Suggestions for proportional representation do not fall outside this system.

Democracies across the globe are extremely keen to protecttheintegrityof their electoralsystems and the core value they prize is the sanctity of a voter`s choice. How a person has cast his vote is a matter confined to himself and those who disclose their preferences are considered immature citizens who devalue their vote by selling it.

Suggestions that the leaders of political parties have a right to know how their members or follow-ers have voted are too preposterous to be taken seriously. The democratic system cannot be rented out to political parties to resolve their organisational problems.

One important reason for guarding the sanctity of the vote is the assurance that it is given without any consideration of return, otherwise casting one`s vote in f avour of a party will be considered a bargain that no upholder of democratic values could countenance.

In imperfect democracies, members of a f amily, especially women, often vote en bloc in accordance with the will of their patriarch. Such attitudes are incompatible with democratic norms which expect each member of a family to follow his or her own mind and select the person to be voted for on the basis of a legitimate criterion.

The earlier forms of showing a voter`s preference, such as raising one`s hands in public, had to be discarded for being extra-democratic as these were considered crude attempts to influence other voters. It has sometimes been suggested that party leaders are entitled to ask the election authorities how their followers have voted. Such ideas deserve to be dismissed with contempt. No party can expect the election authorities to act as its agent for maintaining discipline in its ranks.

Sometimes open balloting is promoted for ensuring transparency which is something of an aberration as the value to be guarded most in a democracy is the authenticity of a voter`s choice.

Democratic norms are not country specific as they are valid for universal application, and states or politicians that try to trim them to suit their own narrow ends only betray their inability to rise to the prescribed standards. Anyone who aspires to follow the democratic path should develop the capacity to run the whole course because a partial democrat is worth nobody`s attention.

That new democracies face a tough challenge inasmuch as they are required to attain democradcstandardsthroughacrashcourse asagainstthe choice of a phased-out af fair that older democracies enjoyed, and they need the guidance and help of catalytic agents and wide-awake leaders who can keep their people on track during the haul that, due to its nature, must be long and quite messy too. The best course for new entrants in the race for perfection in democratic behaviour is to curb the tendency to find shortcuts to the destination or to settle for abridged courses.

In all countries that witnessed the dawn of f reedom f rom colonial bondage as late as the middle of the 20th century, democracy needed affirmative action by the ruling elites whose own appreciation of democratic imperatives lef t much to be desired.

The failure of these elites to rise to the occasion caused these people setbacks from which they could not recover for long periods. Further, much havoc has been wreaked on fledgling democracies by autocrats in pseudo-democratic garbs who try to dictate to their people from their ivory towers and talk more of morality than politics. In Pakistan, democracy has been smothered by a string of political quacks including a dictator who repudiated it on the ground of its incompatibility with the country`s climate. The worst thing that can happen to a country like Pakistan is to receive lessons on democracy f rom leaders that take pride in theirrise as culthgures.

In Pakistan, democracy has failed to take root because society repudiates the concept of equality of citizens and unless this roadblock is dismantled the people`s dreams of a democratic order will remain unrealised. All those who wish Pakistan to prosper under a democratic dispensation must dedicate themselves to the task of creating a climate conducive to the nourishment of democratic ideas and practices, which is impossible without allowing all citizens equality of status.

Let us not dismiss the democratic practices the world has developed through centuries of deliberate effort. 