**Saving democracy**

Abdul Sattar

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When the dark era of Gen Ziaul Haq ended abruptly in 1988, it rekindled the hopes of millions that Pakistan would be on the right track.

Most people thought that political forces would heal the wounds inflicted by the brutal dictatorial regime. They also thought that the next regime would bring an era of peace and prosperity and issues like poverty, unemployment, deindustrialization, corruption, crimes, and lack of housing facilities would be addressed.

Zia’s death paved the way for the first general elections after the controversial polls of 1977. Benazir Bhutto was voted into power; she took some positive steps including the release of political prisoners and lifting the ban on student and trade unions. The country also caught the world’s attention as it welcomed the first woman prime minister of any Muslim-majority country. Her ascent to power created a sense of security among women political workers who were glad to see a woman hold sway in a patriarchal society that was opposed to the very idea of women’s participation in political affairs.

However, this euphoria soon ended with the country plunging into political tensions. Non-democratic forces started creating an impression that politicians were corrupt and incapable of ruling the country. They hatched a conspiracy to dislodge the first democratic government formed after years of struggle. The seeds of disturbance were sown in various parts of the country with urban areas of Sindh being centres of such chaos.

Benazir’s government resorted to sledgehammer tactics to quell the turmoil that was engulfing parts of Hyderabad and other regions of the province. She employed the coercive apparatus of the state to rein in political opponents, but this boomeranged on the PPP-led government, culminating in its ouster from power.

This first government of the PPP after 1977 had little time to deliver. Although the party was in government, it did not have the powers to run it independently. It was surrounded by the hostile establishment and extremist groups. Various nationalist groups also despised her. Contrary to this, the first government of Nawaz Sharif found a conducive environment to serve the people. The country’s elite institutions were sympathetic to it while the religious right was also allied with Nawaz. But he soon ran into trouble with the powerful elements of the state that forced him to abandon the power corridors of Islamabad.

The two successive governments of Benazir and Nawaz spent their time bickering over petty political matters. Both were marred by allegations of corruption and made arduous efforts to appease the religious right and mighty elements of the state. Benazir threw blanket support behind the Afghan Taliban with her interior minister Naseerullah Babar describing them as “our own children” and Nawaz Sharif attempting to introduce the Shariat Bill which could have turned him into what his critics called an Ameer ul Momineen.

The political wrangling of the 1990s allowed non-democratic forces to once again claim that democracy could not work in Pakistan. They repeated what dictator Ayub Khan would say: that democracy was for countries in colder regions of the world. This disillusion proved to be catastrophic, paving the way for the dictatorial regime of Gen Musharraf whose autocratic rule pushed the country several steps back.

The current political situation has also led people to the point of despair and pessimism. A majority of them feel that there is no political force in the country that really cares about them. This is because almost all political parties resort to the neoliberal economic agenda, coming up with programmes that only create more financial woes for people. No political party since 1988 has been able to reduce poverty. Almost 60 million people are currently living in abject poverty in the country. Natural catastrophes caused by climate change are likely to multiply the suffering of those below the poverty line.

All political parties have failed to provide high-quality and free education for the poor. There are many schools that do not have boundary walls, a proper roof or toilet facilities. Some of them do not have water facilities, let alone science or computer labs and playground. Over 20 million children have been out of school for years now, but no political government has bothered to come up with a policy to address the situation.

More than 67 per cents of Pakistanis are bereft of decent housing. Since 1988, the country has witnessed a mushroom growth of real-estate. Tens of thousands of acres of land has been doled out to private developers by both federal and provincial governments during this time. But it occurred to no political government that people should also have affordable housing schemes. From the Sindh government’s scheme of Taiser Town to the affordable housing project of the Imran Khan government – all turned out to be utter failures.

All political governments seem oblivious of the fact that the country is getting heavily indebted with every passing day. No political government seems to have an exit strategy from this vicious circle of loans. Every government comes into power to take more loans to repay the old ones. Amidst this quagmire of debts, bureaucrats continue availing free petrol facility, judges enjoy hefty salaries, and public representatives extract more funds from a crippling economy.

Political parties are urban focused and least concerned about the plight of people living in rural areas and remote towns. For instance, while cities witness 4-8 hours of loadshedding, regions in rural areas face power outages for 18 to 20 hours. People are even dying in the sweltering heat, but no attention is being paid to them. Their demands have no impact on the ruling elite. This is because political parties manage to offer some incentives like releasing development funds near elections to get people to vote for them.

Have people ever heard of any comprehensive plan of any political party aimed at mitigating the hardships of people living in rural areas or remote regions? For instance, which political party called emergency meetings over clashes in Kurram or target killings in erstwhile Fata?

It is perhaps because of these factors that a dangerous disillusion is gripping people who are losing confidence in the ability of political parties to deliver and solve their problems. It is a dangerous sign.

The PML-N needs to know why despite spending over billions on various development projects since 1988 the majority have failed to reap the dividends of these projects. The PTI needs to find out why the country’s health system is still fractured despite the fact that the party allocated close to Rs400 billion into it. The PPP has to reflect upon the poor condition of Sindh where hepatitis, TB and a number of other diseases are playing havoc with the lives of millions.

Political parties need to do rethink their policies before this disillusion becomes deeply entrenched and people start looking at undemocratic forces in search of a messiah.

The writer is a freelance journalist who can be reached at: egalitarianism444@gmail.com