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* **The dynamics of change**

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Across our country, and in many others, there is a general disillusionment with political parties and their actions. We can find this at home with people displeased with the manner in which ruling parties of the past, including the PML-N and the PPP, have conducted themselves as well as the corruption which exists within their ranks. The same sentiments can be found around the world.

We are currently undergoing a phase where political parties are being essentially forced to change. With the PML-N under extreme pressure, its hierarchy has been altered, shifting power to new persons within the party and also to the younger generation of the Sharifs. The end result of this process can naturally not yet be predicted. There is too much that is not clear and too many uncertainties over what the future will bring.

The other mainstream party sitting on opposition benches, the PPP, is also under pressure and may undergo some transformation if members of its top leadership face time in jail or other criminal action. Naturally, we all want corruption to be curbed. We do however need to assess whether this catchphrase is truly as significant as has been portrayed. Of course politicians should be honest, but they also require many other qualities which our leaders have struggled to find.

There is also the question of whether any kind of change forced from the outside is of significance. In the past, this process has simply worked to damage our democracy and the foundations it stands on. Under General Pervez Musharraf, a strong campaign was put in place, targeting both the PML-N and the PPP. Until a deal was struck with the leaders of both, activists of the parties were hounded and badgered, facing pressure to change allegiances and top leaders retreated into exile. But in the end, nothing really changed. The two parties continued to wield significant power, with the PPP – robbed of its leader Benazir Bhutto after her December 2007 assassination – winning power in the country. The PML-N stood just some way behind it and in 2013 replaced it as the party holding office. The old two-party system was back in place, with the new player, the PTI, already poised to make an impact as it did in the 2018 poll.

The question, however, is what these attempts to manipulate or weaken political parties and their leaders did for the country. Did it reduce corruption? Did it produce other leaders better equipped to manage national affairs? Did it change the nature of the party and its philosophy? The answer to all these questions has to be a resounding ‘no’. In fact, in many ways, external actions strengthen parties by making their leaders victims of circumstances beyond their control. The impact of the resultant waves of sympathy have been seen again and again.

This process essentially means that our politics has not moved forward. When parties, the predominant pieces on the chessboard of politics, are interfered with, there tends to be a kind of stalemate. Leaders are not pushed off the playing field by the people but by other forces. This enables them to bounce back when the right circumstances again arrive. The necessary production of new leaders from within democratic ranks does not happen because there is no opportunity for people to discard the old ones. Only if this process of doing away with unwanted leaders through popular will takes place can there be an effective and lasting change within parties. We have tended to prevent this by engineering change within parties or attempting to form new entities which are built to assume positions of power.

The PML-N for now will be led by former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi. However, with two Sharifs already in the position of vice presidents in the party high command, it is questionable how long he will retain this post. Room has also been left open for the return of at least one of the Sharifs, or perhaps even both. Pakistani politics is unpredictable and often uncertain. Winds can blow in many directions all at once. We do need a change in political leadership; we need persons from a diversity of backgrounds to emerge who are able to offer different options to the people. This process is held back when the parties themselves are prevented from reaching maturity and shedding off old skin to emerge in new forms. It is true that this is a long and often painstaking process. But it is one Pakistan will have to endure if it is to embrace lasting change.

Democracy has not always delivered all that people hoped for. That the US can find no one more apt than Donald Trump to lead it is a frightening indication of this. But there is every reason to believe Pakistan does have people who could play extremely useful leadership roles. The problem is that they have no incentive and no laid down pathway to follow. The continued ban on student unions means a traditional nursery for future politicians has been wiped off the drawing board. Other forums, such as labour unions, too barely function. This leaves only limited space within which political players can operate. They are therefore unattached in the sense that they emerge through the mechanics of power which operate in the country and cannot pull others in alongside them to take charge of political parties or play effective roles within them.

The discord currently being experienced within the PTI is an example of what happens even when well-meaning persons set up a political group. Keeping it intact sometimes means the use of suppression, and this enables players both within the party and those based outside it to operate.

For now, many in the country will be watching the future of the PML-N with some anticipation. It is difficult to say what the new party will look like or if it will truly discard its established leaders. The same can be said of the PPP, with Bilawal Bhutto struggling for now to find his political feet and determine what direction he wants to take the party inherited in. There is at the present time almost no room for new parties to emerge or take root. This is despite the fact that there is a huge need for such entities. People would definitely like to see change. This is of course why the PTI, with its slogan of ‘Naya Pakistan’, was elected to power in the first place. Its ability to deliver on this continues to be watched, with some trepidation and growing uncertainty.

The change that has come does not appear to be what people had hoped for. But will their hopes ever be met? Will political parties deliver? They can do so only if permitted to operate in a democratic environment that allows change to be ushered in by people and by party cadres. This environment does not exist at the present moment and has perhaps never existed within Pakistan, and the lack of such flexibility places enormous restraints on the manner in which political events unfold in the country. There can be no expectation of immediate change.

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