**Leaning to the left**

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It is commonly perceived that Pakistan’s politics revolves around two or possibly three major parties. These of course are the PMLN, the PPP and the PTI though the latter has been somewhat stripped of its status with the removal of its symbol and the resultant need for all its candidates to contest as independents.

We can also say with a degree of certainty that all these parties are right-of-centre or at best centre. It is widely said that Pakistan’s politics has never involved leftist ideologies or leftist thinking. But this is not entirely correct. In the 1970 elections – the first major democratic elections in the country’s history – the three main contestants, the PPP, the National Awami Party and the Awami Party of then East Pakistan, were left-of-centre parties.

These parties had mass support among people and large-scale followings with questions of religion and nationality not posing huge challenges to their existence on the national landscape. This changed after the era of General Ziaul Haq who did everything possible to move the country to where it stands today, with its social and political environments polluted by extremist ideas.

Lately, we have seen a degree of change. There are a number of extremely small, but still somewhat significant, left parties on the landscape, formed mainly over the last decade or so. They include the Awami Workers’ Party, founded in 2012, after two major left parties merged, and organizations such as the Haqooq-e-Khalq Party of Ammar Ali Jan have joined the ranks of these parties.

There are also other groups which follow similar lines of thinking and align correctly with the political left across the world. This would include the civil rights movement called the PTM that arose in the past few years from the Pashtun regions in the country. The question of course is whether the miniscule followings these parties have will change as a new generation of young people takes over the bulk share of the population and moves into more central roles in the handling of political matters and other structures around which the country revolves.

In real terms, the question is whether young people will move further to the left or to the right than their parents or stay along the same track. At present, the general pattern of voting is for entire households, entire ‘biradris’, or entire clans to vote for the same party or group.

The voting pattern for these parties and others similar to them in Sindh and Balochistan will be interesting to watch, and so will the vote for independent candidates such as Jibran Nasir who is once again contesting an NA seat from Karachi. The manner in which these parties fare will be significant for the country’s future. We stand today at a point in history where it is essential that the issue of how wealth is distributed in society and how taxes are imposed become the centre of the political debate.

We badly need to at least tighten the gap between the wealthy and the poor. This gap has grown wider over the years, largely as a result of the policies pursued by political leaders, notably those of the 1980s and 1990s. The direct taxation of land and wealth is one way to narrow the gap provided that the money brought into the exchequer is then used to uplift the poorer sections of society.

Indirect taxation such as GST, favoured by the IMF, does nothing to solve the problem or to alleviate the issues of those who stand at the bottom of the economic ladder. In recent years, the plight of these people has become worse as inflation hits new records and Pakistan’s currency continues to depreciate. The entire system is in fact near collapse.

The issue then is what will replace this fractured system and how this transformation will take place. The left has shown its ability to improve the lives of people in countries such as Bolivia and Cuba as well as in other parts of the world, including some African and Asian countries. In Pakistan, left-wing politics faces extremely significant challenges since people wrongly believe that the left stands against religion and religious values, with an inability to distinguish between a stance for secular leadership and a leadership that is poised against religion and all that it brings with it. This needs to be clarified by leftist parties.

The efforts of some of these groups have been commendable. The Haqooq-e-Khalq party, for example, is doing a significant amount of work in Lahore’s Qainchi constituency. The work includes setting up clinics, testing whether line water is potable, building sanitation systems and other related work which can best benefit the impoverished population who lives in this part of Lahore. Other groups such as the Awami Workers’ Party have also done their bit in bringing about changes in the lives of the admittedly small number of people they can reach and for whom they hold some kind of meaning. It is difficult to say if this work will bring about rewards for these groups in the coming election.

A great deal depends on how the youth, popularly known as the youth bulge of South Asia, is going to cast its ballots if it comes out to vote at all. It is widely held that young people tend to vote for the PTI even though it is difficult to say how its 70-year-old leader can be seen as a leader of the youth. But there are very few statistics to prove this to be entirely true.

To some degree, the PTI of course holds a cult-like fascination which particularly draws in the youth. But there is also outcry against some of the actions of the party and some of the messages it sends out. At the same time, there appears to be some revival of the left on university campuses and in other poorer places where young people meet. The Progressive Students Collective and other groups have played a part in this, bringing in new messages for their peers and for others who choose to listen.

Of course, more needs to be done. The left has traditionally suffered as a result of the dislike for its politics by those who hold a major proportion of power in the country. These include the rich and the powerful in various quarters of society. It will take a long time for any change to be made. It is unrealistic to expect any real change in the coming election or any major reversal in the pattern of their results.

It is also difficult to see many candidates from left-leaning parties taking their places in parliament. At present, we can count the number of seats such parties enjoy in parliament on the fingers of one hand. But in the future, change is possible and this is what these parties as well as other groups affiliated with them should be moving towards in Pakistan’s murky political battlefield.