**[Charter or barter?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771486/charter-or-barter)**

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IT is observed that the two parties that signed a compact for the Charter of Democracy in 2006 have seemingly now ‘signed’ one for the barter of democracy with unelected forces in order to regain power through controversial polls.

The PPP and PML-N have odd ties with democratic evolution. The harm they have done to it far exceeds the good. But, reflecting on our limited democratic gains, the good they did while in power in the 1970s and then from 2008 to 2018 far exceeds that by all other civilian and khaki regimes combined in 65 years. It includes the 1973 Constitution; the 2010 devolution; holding the only smooth transfer of power between two fairly elected regimes via our fairest polls; accommodation after polls in letting the PTI and BNP rule KP and Balochistan, even though with some dicey effort the PML-N may have ruled both; major electoral reforms in 2010 and 2017 empowering an interim caretaker system to thwart rigging by incumbents; more freedom of rights than under most of our other regimes, etc.

One can make a much longer list of their wrongs even in these eras. But that won’t erase the pluses above or the fact that they are much more than those by all our other regimes, for example, the more limited pluses of PTI’s KP local bodies and 2002 reserved assembly seats laws. Democratic evolution doesn’t mean immediate good governance. Their actual governance and delivery even then were very poor. Still, the limited evolution is critical as lasting good governance came globally only after prolonged democratic evolution.

But the PPP and PML-N have undone much of that now and returned to their 1990s form. The fair polls norm ended in 2018 under the PTI. But the two parties undid the neutral interim system via poor nominations for key posts and, it is feared, will collude with other actors to hold far more dubious polls. Their record on political accommodation and human rights was even worse than the PTI’s. Devolution and the Constitution have survived but are regularly flouted by not just the establishment but also these two parties, the PTI, the ECP and other institutions. Hence, it is hard to see a quick path back to civilian sway and democratic evolution. Even civilian sway may only allow illiberal quasi-democracy as the PTI and PML-N both rule autocratically.

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So, a clueless nation is back to square one, left to ponder why democratic evolution is so elusive for it. But Af-Pak, closest and long linked to autocratic Central Asia and Middle East, lags behind, partially due to the links. Some see promising social change that may serve democracy: for example, the expanding urban, youth and middle-class numbers and the use of social media. But this is a futile hope as the trends are actually strengthening the status quo and vacuous nationalist, ethnic or religious populist groups. Demographic and technological trends don’t result in progress directly but only if harnessed by positive change agents, of which there are limited signs.

All our bases of power — economic, political, social, legal, informational and military — are monopolised by elite factions who compete for bigger pieces of state power. The most intense recent political struggles have been between elite groups: the military, the courts, traditional elitist parties and new populist parties representing new elites. Even worse, the [biggest challenge to the status quo comes from TTP extremism](https://www.dawn.com/news/1760382) followed by Baloch groups who have real complaints but unluckily use militant strategies instead of peaceful ones.

Beyond them, the worthier left challenge is still embryonic due to state repression and people’s attraction to reactionary rather than rational the­mes. Democra­tic groups break the suffocating hold of elites on all six power bases by building strong social, informational and political power. The left still has a long way to go to capture even those power bases due to constant repression. Thus, we may be in for a long and ruinous era of k(h)akistocracy.

It’s unclear if we will return to elected rule soon. The PDM and ECP have wrongly delayed polls to draw new delimitations. The Constitution mandates those under new census results if they change provincial seats in the National Assembly, which the last census hasn’t. Many are singing praises of the interim cabinet and egging on the establishment to prolong its influence to ‘save Pakistan’. But teams deliver if they share a common vision and work history under a natural, strong leader. It is naïve to expect a disparate team of even top experts to deliver with no clear ideology or shared vision. Our destiny lies in quickly holding fair polls to return to elected rule despite all its flaws.

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