**[The middle muddle](https://www.dawn.com/news/1426131/the-middle-muddle)**

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So much has been written and said about the rise of the ‘middle class’ and it being the motor force of the PTI that after the [July 25 poll outcome](https://www.dawn.com/news/1422874), it is necessary to pen some thoughts on both the politics of tabdeeli and its purported middle-class base.

Let’s begin by setting the record straight: the middle class did not bring the PTI to power. Pakistan’s established electoral arithmetic — delimitation of constituencies, inducements made to voters, and the antics of the establishment — is such that gathering a critical mass of entrenched ‘electables’ is still the most effective route to power. This is what the PTI managed, and why it is now about to form the government.

It is true that the ‘middle class’ has been an important piece in the PTI’s evolving political puzzle, with many commentators noting the growing influence of a salaried, tech-savvy and relatively independent-minded segment of the population on the shaping of political discourse, particularly in urban settings where social media platforms are prominent.

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According to the narrative in vogue, this youthful segment may not yet be organised enough to sway constituency-level electoral outcomes, but it has helped build an ‘alternative’ that challenges the entrenched interests that have long dominated Pakistani politics.

I agree that the political field is changing, due to the rise of new information technologies in general, and demographic changes more specifically. It would be incorrect, however, to limit discussion of these structural shifts only to the 2010s. The so-called ‘TV revolution’ that kicked off at the turn of the century preceded the PTI’s rise, and created a captive ‘middle-class’ audience watching established politicians taken to task on talk shows from the comfort of their living rooms.

Indeed, the notion that the ‘middle class’ has only recently become a player in Pakistani politics is not true. The middle-class motif emphasising meritocracy and rule of law along with demonising ‘corrupt politicians’ has animated many a dictatorship in Pakistan’s history.

One can trace this narrative back further; in 1835, Macaulay announced that the British would actively cultivate an educated, enlightened class of Indians to promote modern education, government and rationality. The Raj, of course, never resolved the contradictions of establishing an idealised modernity in India whilst also sustaining entrenched classes, castes and biradaris, especially in rural areas. Such contradictions have also stood out in the ‘modernising’ projects of Pakistan’s establishment, during dictatorships and otherwise.

The point is that the ideal of an educated, law-abiding and meritocratic society with a mythical ‘middle class’ as its primary subject is far from a novel one. Certainly, the present ‘middle-class moment’ is substantively different from those that preceded it. Most crucially, the middle class, although still vaguely defined, is much bigger, youthful and politically conscious than before.

While colonial administrators and military dictators were more interested in cultivating the allegiances of what was a far more elite segment of society than the term ‘middle class’ implied, in today’s Pakistan the term actually captures empirical reality to a far greater extent, at least in so far as being ‘middle class’ represents an aspiration as much as a determinate status in society. Indeed, it is this aspiration that drives the ‘middle class’ to try and shape political debate and even practise rather than simply be held hostage to status quo.

Yet this increasingly well-informed, critical-minded and youthful ‘middle class’ should know that its forbearers have been struggling for change for much of Pakistan’s history. Pakhtun, Ba­­loch, Sindhi, Ser­aiki youth, not to mention those hailing from Gilgit-Baltistan have been pushing to tra­n­sform the neocolonial state structure since its inception. Middle-class progressives have spent decades organising for land reform — initially in rural areas but increasingly in urban areas as well. It is from within the middle class that movements against male domination have emer­ged. And let’s not forget those middle-class revolutionaries that have historically been at the forefront of the heroic effort to transform Pakistan from a ‘national security’ state into a genuine people’s democracy.

Yes, the middle class is bigger, and more influential than before. It can be a force for real transformation in Pakistan. But is the PTI going to antagonise entrenched interest groups and state institutions? It now has a chance, but one can only hope that the elements within the emergent youthful ‘middle class’ that want a real alternative will not give up on ‘change’ once sloganeering around ‘corruption’ and ‘rule of law’ subsides and the imperative of political struggle to secure equality, dignity and freedom for long-suffering ethnic groups, gender populations and the toiling classes becomes more urgent than ever.

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