**[Power of the powerless](https://www.dawn.com/news/1861400/power-of-the-powerless)**

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IT was a near miss. The ruling coalition, with an arguably fake mandate, was on the [verge](https://www.dawn.com/news/1859329) of destroying the Constitution by demolishing the last hope for democracy: the independence of the judiciary. At whose behest was the act of midnight madness over a weekend resorted to? We know the answer.

The guardian angels of an authoritarian state perceive themselves not only as protectors but also the proprietors of our future. Like overzealous shepherds, they lose sight of the flock, convinced that only their guardianship can ensure the nation’s survival.

The question is: Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who will guard the guardians? A rhetorical question, perhaps, as, these custodians (read: the establishment) tend to monopolise the very means by which their oversight might be conducted.

It is time to decide what sort of governance structure should dominate Pakistan. Should it be the constitutional order envisioned by the founding fathers, where every citizen is equal under the law, where due process is followed, and where all institutions act within their legal boundaries? Or should Pakistan’s mission persist as one of an eternal security state, where justice, lawmaking, foreign policy and even the economy are militarised?

Pakistanis want a deal based on a new national agenda and a charter of governance that reflects public sentiments.

We, the powerless citizens, must choose subjugation and suppression or speak truth to power for course correction. As a former law-enforcement officer, I oppose the use of violence, not merely on moral grounds but because it is an ineffective means of fighting an ‘authoritarian’ regime. By resorting to violent means, one chooses the very type of struggle in which oppressors nearly always have superiority. Democratic activists who use force against an autocratic regime usually lose, argued American academic Gene Sharp in From Dictatorship to Democracy. They have less firepower and fewer resources than the state. He stressed that social justice and political movements should identify the ‘Achilles’ heel of the despots, the areas in which they are weak.

In Pakistan’s current scenario, the government’s great weakness is a lack of legitimacy. An overwhelming majority in the Feb 8 national elections gave a verdict through the ballot which was [overturned](https://www.dawn.com/news/1831123) by a brute minority. A state can essentially justify its power by ensuring the sanctity of the electoral process and the rule of law. The present rulers do not pass the legitimacy test. Pakistanis want a fair deal, based on a new national agenda and a charter of governance that reflects public sentiments:

**Representative democracy**: True representation can only emerge through fair and free elections. Civil society has rejected the sham results of the Feb 8 polls. We need a new and independent Election Commission. The concept of a caretaker government installed before the polls has proved a failure. Three heads in a province, ie, chief justice, chief secretary and the IGP, can ensure fair polls with an independent ECP. It is doable if there is a will to bring about representative democracy. There is one condition: the establishment and deep state should not get involved in politics.

**Decentralised federalism**: Centralised control from Rawalpindi and Islamabad must be replaced with genuine provincial autonomy and strong local self-government. We must seek unity in diversity. Cultural and linguistic diversity is our strength. A bottoms-up approach to decision-making should be adopted rather than top-down strategies.

**National security**: Our national purpose as delineated by our founding fathers was a democratic, enlightened polity based on social justice. Unfortunately, we have become a security state at cross purposes with society’s democratic aspirations. Unless we humanise the state, the national security narrative will continue to dominate at the expense of human security and development.

**Intelligence agencies**: Our premier federal intelligence agencies are operating without any legal framework. The culture of impunity developed by the deep state must be addressed through parliamentary oversight and laws that clearly define the role of agencies in both internal and external security dimensions. The issue of missing persons can be resolved through constitutional and legal means. A law to address enforced disappearances must be promulgated forthwith to fulfil an international obligation and satisfy domestic civil society organisations.

**Terrorism and violent extremism**: The counterterrorism National Action Plan, as reviewed and updated by Nacta in 2021, must be implemented by federal and provincial stakeholders. We need strong border control. The TTP’s increasing belligerence against state institutions should be met with full force. Banned militant groups like the BLA, BRA and BLF should be dealt with firmly. Effective action must be taken against domestic sectarian and militant groups. The state must abandon any support to militant outfits and non-state actors. National harmony can only be achieved through tolerance. The role of the state in religion is not that of enforcer but enabler or facilitator. An inclusive, humane state can win the trust of the citizens who are wary of elite capture.

**Balochistan and KP**: It is time to heal wounds in the strategically vital borderlands of the Baloch and Pakhtuns. Constructive engagement is needed with dissidents, activists and disgruntled youth. Sociopolitical and economic empowerment is needed in Balochistan and erstwhile Fata.

**Independent judiciary**: The role of the judiciary in upholding the rule of law and fair administration of justice is crucial in a democratic state. An authoritarian executive would always want the judiciary to be a compliant instrument of oppression. An independent judiciary would invariably foil those designs. The current internecine tensions in the apex court do not augur well for democracy.

**Corruption and organised crime**: Corruption and the crime nexus must be broken. NAB should be disbanded as it is an instrument of political engineering. A new independent commission against corruption may be established or FIA made operationally and administratively autonomous to undertake investigation of corrupt practices and economic crimes. Police as an institution needs total revamping to investigate organised criminality and enforce the law impartially.

The above is the minimum agenda for change. “Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything,” said George Bernard Shaw. The power of the powerless should not be tested further.

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