[**The parliament we need**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605405/the-parliament-we-need)

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THE Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services is an extremely useful institution created to assist members of parliament in the performance of their august tasks.

Among other things the institute publishes a magazine, *Parliamentary Research Digest*, which offers lawmakers rich material for study and absorption. The latest (December 2020) issue of the journal contains a discussion on the ‘IPU’s [Inter-Parliamentary Union] best practices on parliament and democracy in the 21st century’, that Pakistan’s parliamentarians will at least find interesting, notwithstanding the prime minister’s confirmation of his contempt for democracy that one had suspected all along.

The IPU defines five features that a modern democratic parliament must possess. Such a parliament should be:

1. Socially and politically representative of diverse people and protect all members, especially minorities and other vulnerable elements of society. Although the authors of the article find the existing arrangements in Pakistan adequate they suggest parliament could be made more inclusive by reserving a small number of seats for farmers, industrial workers, students and people with disabilities;
2. Transparent in the conduct of business and open to the media;
3. Accessible to the people, including civil society, associations and the youth;
4. Accountable (ie its members) to the electorate;
5. Effective when it performs its legislative and oversight functions in accordance with the people’s needs and aspirations and keeps in mind a proper comprehension of future generation’s needs.

Under each of the five heads, suggestions are given for improvement in parliament’s performance. In the discussion on accountability, data on the total number of questions asked on federal subjects in the Senate and the National Assembly during the 2019-2020 parliamentary year has been given. As regards effectiveness of parliament, it is suggested that the most satisfactory indicator could be the finding that its legislative and oversight functions serve the needs of the entire population.

Most of the suggestions offered to make parliament more effective should receive wide support from discerning sections of society. The first requirement for making parliament effective is to protect by law its authority against encroachment by the executive. No branch of administration should be outside the oversight powers of parliament. In some imperfect democracies, security matters are not debated in parliament which is quite dangerous. Security issues touch on the very survival of the state and exempting them from informed discussion in parliament can lead to disastrous consequences. But all this appears to be discussion for the sake of discussion, quite unrelated to the reality on the ground. As things stand today, an overly ambitious executive wants parliament to rubber-stamp its rule by whim and caprice.

In underdeveloped democracies, especially those wrestling with fears of collapse or demise, genuine or imagined, security concerns are not shared with parliamentarians while the very nature of such matters demands the fullest possible discussion with a view to working out strategies based on consensus. This is especially necessary in matters touching on issues of war and peace. The more underdeveloped a country is, the greater will be its need to proceed on the strength of the people’s unity that can only be forged through unfettered discourse.

To be able to overcome the tendency among strong and arrogant executives to use parliament to rubber-stamp their initiatives, parliaments will need to enjoy the confidence of the people, something that can only be achieved through a strong tradition of governance by consultation and consent.

However, the kind of parliament the people of Pakistan need and deserve cannot be created without free and fair elections and that is a dream yet to be realised. Manipulations by a powerful elite apart, the system of election as it has been streamlined over the past many decades offers little scope for genuine representatives of the masses to get past the winning post, except for situations of extraordinary awakening among the people witnessed during the elections in the 1940s and in 1970.

The entire edifice of representative government in Pakistan has been raised on shifting sands and there is little evidence of efforts to go beyond cosmetic changes in electoral procedures that the ruling elite, to which all parties in power and in opposition have belonged, will allow.

The discussion in the journal concludes on a plea that parliamentary institutions at national and provincial levels ensure comprehensive application of legislation and scrutiny in such a manner that no part of government escapes assessment. But this sounds like yearning for a revolutionary change without any possibility of a revolution.

Democracy has little chance of taking root in a society riven by inequalities of the kind prevailing in Pakistan. All those who wish to see Pakistan acceding to a democratic dispensation must begin by demolishing divisions in society caused by structured social and political inequalities. At the moment, one can only hope that the people of Pakistan will discover their inherent strength to reorder their social and political structures on the pillars of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The possibilities for such a development are, unfortunately, not in sight. Indeed, Pakistan seems to be hurtling along in a direction opposite to the goal of a truly democratic dispensation. A meaningful start towards rebuilding Pakistan will be possible only after the state can be cured of its infatuation with a regressive outlook and concentration of power at the centre. And this in a state that is supposed to be a federation.

In view of an overbearing executive’s insatiable lust for power the chances of Pakistan’s acceptance of the supremacy of parliament are none too bright. As time passes and Pakistan continues to rely on distorted institutions of democracy, the task of reviving a genuinely democratic dispensation will become harder and harder. One wonders as to what will persuade the custodians of power to discard governance with executive’s fiat and revert to governance with the people’s consent.

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