**Continuity and Change**

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PML-N led new coalition government is in place in the country. Shahbaz Sharif is the new Prime Minister of the country. It is an opportune moment to explore the patterns of continuity and change in the politics of Pakistan.

The first lesson is that the Pakistani people and Pakistan’s democracy is resilient. My generation grew up in Zia’s martial law and has also seen Musharraf’s martial law. We lived through the War on Terror when sometimes there would be daily bomb attacks on the cities of Pakistan. Similarly, Pakistan’s democracy has been subjected umpteenth times to trials and tribulations; it always makes its way back into the governance of the country.

Another lesson is that dynastic politics is here to stay in the country. Now, we have Shahbaz Sharif as the Prime Minister of the country and his son Hamza Sharif as the Chief Minister of Punjab. Earlier, Nawaz Sharif used to be the PM and Shahbaz Sharif was the CM. Benazir Bhutto as the two-time Prime Minister followed Zulfiqar Bhutto as the political leader and Prime Minister. Zardari became the President after Benazir’s tragic murder. Bilawal Bhutto is the co-chairman of the current PPP. So dynastic politics is here to stay in Pakistan’s politics. It may not be such an unwelcome development.

As has been recently argued in the press; dynastic politics is better than the cult politics that gives rise to leaders like Imran Khan. When the structures of the political parties are not strong; dynastic politics is going to sustain itself in the foreseeable future and it reflects a pattern of continuity in Pakistan’s politics.Populism has been resurrected in the form of PTI and Imran Khan from 2011 onwards. Recently, whoever has concocted the so-called American conspiracy to remove Imran Khan is a brilliant mind. It seems someone has gone through very carefully the intelligence files on Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and has tried to make Imran a fake ZAB 2. The PTI government has been a failure on most counts except for its successful handling of the pandemic. The inflation in the country during the PTI reign was skyrocketing. The PTI government was extremely unpopular amongst the people and was losing most of the by-elections. If it had completed its tenure, it surely would have lost any fair elections. There comes the so-called foreign conspiracy script out of nowhere and Imran, like the real Bhutto, is experiencing a resurgence of his popularity on the foreign policy agenda since he does not have anything to show for his government performance. Imran is drawing big crowds in the major cities of Pakistan and may even win the next election thanks to this so-called foreign conspiracy script. In reality, if any American official has indeed used strong language about Imran Khan in some diplomatic meeting; they could not have done a bigger favour to him given his low popularity otherwise. So populism is another pattern of continuity straight from ZAB’s era.

There is a need to work on improvement in the political, social, and economic aspects of women’s lives.

The strong influence of the establishment in all fields of Pakistan’s life is going to continue, despite the so-called assertions to remain “apolitical”. Whether it is politics, media, civil society, foreign policy, internal security, economy or any other aspect of the structure of the state and society in Pakistan; the establishment’s crucial role is going to remain very relevant and it is another pattern of continuity in Pakistan.

The economy is also going to experience a continuation of Pakistan’s dependence on the IMF and the neoliberal model. Though, a change is needed in the economic framework to address the structural issues. Shahbaz Sharif is a doer. Earlier, I was under the impression that PML-N under Shahbaz Sharif has largely delivered on infrastructural projects in Punjab. However, now I know that Punjab made good progress also on human development including education under Shahbaz Sharif. PML-N needs to focus on increasing exports badly, something it could not do very well during its rule from 2013-18. The government also needs to increase taxation effectively and tax the real estate sector in the country meaningfully along with the other sectors. The PML-N led coalition government also needs to take the issue of haemorrhaging State-owned enterprises head-on. All the civil and military governments in the past have not addressed this crucial aspect of Pakistan’s economy due to expediency and it has been damaging to Pakistan’s economy. It needs to be resolved. We need to see some change in the performance of the PML-N led coalition government for better economic outcomes.

It needs to be seen if there is any change to improve both the laws and implementation of empowerment of women in the country. There is a dire need to improve women’s participation in the labour force. There is also a need to work on improvement in the political, social, and economic aspects of women’s lives. It needs to be seen whether the new government is able to make any change in this regard. Change is also needed to effectively improve the human rights record in the country and to mainstream the peripheral areas of ex-FATA and Balochistan. It remains to be seen if the new government has the independence to truly strengthen the federation.

There is also a dire need to improve the education sector in the country, which has been badly undermined by the previous PTI government. One hopes that the new government can do away with the Single National Curriculum that is awful for critical thinking-based educational models. The new government also needs to prioritize the promotion of technical education, which has been neglected by previous governments and is critical in generating employment and productivity in the economy.

As far as I am concerned, I wrote in my civil society-establishment engagement article one year ago on 2nd April 2021 in the Daily Times, “Personally for me, I am very lucky to have a truly authentic intellectual and loving and caring husband. However, I do not trust at all any of my colleagues I worked with in the past in a policy think-tank, an NGO, and those who worked with me in consulting assignments. I do not trust either my colleagues or friends (both in Pakistan and abroad) or relatives simply because the establishment is so powerful in Pakistan that it can make anyone work against you due to its power of coercion and cooption.” What I wrote one year ago is as true now and will be as true in the future as it was one year ago. My husband is an angel; he is my oxygen. I look forward to growing old with my husband for many more decades to come. There has been one change. My distrust of my relatives has become more intense with time. I have not met or visited my relatives in the past many years and neither do I intend to do it at all in the future since my relatives are manipulated. I will not even call my relatives on Eids for the next 20-30 years. I am very happy spending time with my husband and reading social science literature and writing about social science issues in newspapers and I would continue to do so for many more decades to come.

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