**[Turkey and Pakistan — a democratic comparison](https://nation.com.pk/18-Feb-2020/turkey-and-pakistan-a-democratic-comparison%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

Muhammad Ali Ehsan February 18, 2020

The history of political similarity between Turkey and Pakistan is hard to miss. Both countries have experienced military rule, and military coups have come and gone with almost equal intervals. Military coups took place in Turkey in 1960, 1971, 1980, 1997 and 2016. Whereas Pakistan experienced military interference in politics and resultant military rule in 1963, 1971, 1979 and 1999. Politics under the civilian rule in Pakistan in the last decade plus has brought about little change in the lives of the common people but the story of politics in Turkey, under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has altogether been different.

He has been elected and re-elected by the Turkish people, so much so that the results of the April 16, 2017 referendum in Turkey now puts him in almost another political league. He now exercises an absolute (authoritarian) power by becoming both the head of the government as well as the head of state. Recently in Pakistan on a two-day visit, the Turkish President, like always, brought with him his good wishes and an unfaltering support on all the issues facing Islamabad, including the issue of Kashmir.

Confronted with many challenges, including a strong military, the Turkish President managed them all and successfully carried forward Turkey on its democratic journey. Why then the political leadership of Pakistan could not achieve similar democratic success when it had its chance from 2008 to 2018?

Political narratives matter and President Erdogan’s political narrative has been unfailing and consistent for a very long time now and has served him and his political career well. It can be summed up in one line: “only a strong leader with public support can generate political stability, and can then galvanise the state to see off its enemies.”

The April 2017 Turkish referendum was a consequence of a belief in this narrative. Succeeding in obtaining a yes vote by only 51%, President Erdogan not only successfully abolished the Turkish parliamentary system of government but replaced it with a better functioning presidential system. Erdogan’s political narrative was bought by the people who believed in him and enabled him to accumulate power entirely in his person as the president of Turkey. Were the people of Pakistan also as welcoming to purchase the political narratives of their political parties?

The 18th Amendment in the Constitution introduced by the PPP paved the way for Nawaz Sharif to become a third-time prime minister of our country. While the Turkish President’s political narrative was a consequence of his ideological belief, Sharif’s only came to limelight after the historic decision by the Supreme Court (SC) of Pakistan to remove him from power and bar him from politics for life.

Sharif’s political narrative based on his slogan of “vote ko izzat douu” (give respect to the vote) was an anti-military and anti-judiciary narrative aimed only at maligning the country’s premier institutions. His hostility towards them became very apparent through his speeches only after his dismissal from the office of prime minister. While seeking sympathy votes and portraying the judicial verdict as controversial and politically motivated, Sharif openly targeted Pakistan’s military and judiciary which was not well received by the majority of the people of the country. Sensing the damage his political rhetoric was causing to the country, even the Lahore High Court (LHC) barred all Pakistani television channels from airing the speeches of the PML-N leadership in the country.

The political narrative of Sharif was not about reforms but his political restoration. There was nothing in it to guarantee access to better jobs, security, education, health or better living standards. While in power, unlike Erdogan, Sharif failed to bring about any meaningful difference in the lives of the people. As a result, the majority of the people in Pakistan did not fall for his narrative as was evident in the 2018 elections which the PML-N lost.

Unlike Sharif, President Erdogan made the best use of his popular support when in power. The reforms he initiated in public transportation, healthcare and other civic services added to his popularity. He also gained the support of the masses when he initiated serious steps towards attaining membership of the European Union. As a political leader, he demonstrated a resolve to continue to stick to the roadmap that he laid for his country. His political narrative was not only more people-oriented and beneficial, but also politically rewarding and sustainable.

In retrospect, in Pakistan, the lack of political reforms and the judicial verdict on the Panama scandal undermined the moral standing of the politicians. The anti-military and anti-judiciary narrative Sharif tried to utilise to revive his lost political standing failed to inspire the people. Had the two governments, of the PPP and the PML-N, utilised almost a decade available to them (from 2008 to 2018) to introduce political reforms, democracy in Pakistan may also have gained political mileage like it did in Turkey under President Erdogan.

PM Nawaz Sharif’s government introduced many “infrastructure building” projects in Pakistan. Over the years, these projects failed to produce the economic return on investment or bring about the much-awaited economic boom. The lives of the people have hardly changed despite all the infrastructure building carried out by the PML-N government including roads, bridges, airports and metro lines, etc. Poverty has lingered on and over 25 million children in Pakistan remain out of school.

Compare this to how Turkey experienced an economic turnaround under Erdogan’s rule. In 2002, a year before he won elections and took power, Turkey was utilising 90% of its tax revenues to pay the interest on its debt. But with Erdogan’s tenure things started changing. He inaugurated the world’s largest airport in the world in Istanbul. But before this the country’s highways were expanded by 10,000 miles, the number of airports were increased to 50 and Turkish Airlines increased its destinations to more than a 100 countries.

The fact that the people of Pakistan have chosen to rest their hopes on a new party tells us how important it is for a political leadership to come up to the expectations and aspirations of the people it represents. People saw hope in Erdogan. Whereas they only lost hope in the two democratic governments that exchanged hands in Pakistan. The result is that one is firmly entrenched in power in Turkey, while the former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, and the former president, Asif Ali Zardari, face corruption charges in the courts, in Pakistan.