[**Polarisation past and present**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1689942/polarisation-past-and-present)

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MANY are voicing concerns about political polarisation in an uncertain and charged political environment. A frequent question asked and answered is the degree to which polarisation has increased. A related question is what is the root cause of polarisation itself. One common answer to the first is that, yes, it has increased and is unprecedented, and to the second, it is because of Imran Khan’s recent rhetoric. These answers are worth evaluating.

So what is political polarisation and why should we be concerned with it? Polarisation usually means an increasingly zero-sum disagreement of political views on policy issues and, more dangerously, on the very rules of the political system. Examples of polarisation could be if politicians or citizens disagree on the status that should be given to immigrants or religious minorities; or whether the conduct and results of an election are deemed fair.

Such polarisation can take place between among political party leaders and their associated politicians. Or a second form that it can take is the more widespread variety, ie between regular citizens belonging to different social, economic, or political groups. In many cases, the first type of polarisation leads to the second type.

Why should polarisation be a matter of concern? In any democracy, agreement on basic rules of how someone is elected and how someone is taken out of office is necessary among all competing actors. Otherwise, the system does not function. It is also important that a range of divergent views — within appropriate limits — be allowed to exist in the political system in order to provide representation. Otherwise you end up with an autocracy and, in most cases, lots of violence among those who are being excluded.

What is causing this polarisation among politicians and among citizens?

What we are looking at in Pakistan today is both types of polarisation these days — the one between politicians themselves and the spillover of that among regular people. Politicians are at each other’s throats all day on TV, on jalsa stages, and on social media. Imran Khan disagrees with the rules of the system and repeatedly talks about the illegitimacy of the current government, due to the alleged foreign conspiracy, and the illegitimacy of other parties due to their corruption. In the past, he was on the receiving end of the ‘selected’ jibe from the current ruling coalition.

What feels more dangerous is polarisation between supporters of different parties. Social media these days is essentially a spectacle of competing trends and the exchange of abuses. Anecdotally, we hear about family ties and friendships put under pressure because of differences over who people support and the degree to which they think a certain party is worth supporting and how loudly.

So just how dangerous is this polarisation? In terms of actual ideas, it seems to be a bit shallow. The only ideas that are currently flashpoints are, firstly, the degree to which anti-corruption is important for development, and secondly the right to vote for overseas citizens. The rest is a debate about competence and who can implement broadly similar policies and run institutions better than the other. Even the support for a new presidential constitution — a typical drawing room/WhatsApp talking point — does not actually make its way to the political manifesto of PTI.

Another measure of polarisation is whether voters of one party would think of voting for another. Past survey data shows that voters have switched loyalties between 2013 and 2018. When asked if PTI wasn’t available as an option, a plurality of their voters said they would vote for PML-N and vice versa. And if the power of influential electables is still intact, that means voters are likely to vote for whichever party these candidates join. It means they may not believe in party identity as much as others do on social media. This will become clearer whenever elections are held. If there is an upsurge of party-based voting that goes against expected outcomes in different constituencies, that would be a big indication of political polarisation.

So what is causing this polarisation among politicians and among citizens? The factors are relatively straightforward: PTI positions itself as an anti-status quo party and its leader does not deem the opposition to be an acceptable presence in the political system. Its entire brand here is based on denying political legitimacy to others, which is bound to increase polarisation.

But there is another cause of polarisation as well, which is the frustration of regular citizens due to their unmet expectations from traditional political parties. There is palpable anger at the economic crisis, at the lack of transparency in politics, at the continued existence of dynastic leaders, and at the lowly status of the country globally. Stoked by a populist politician or not, these are real, deeply felt frustrations and ones that are being voiced loudly.

Finally, is this polarisation unprecedented? The short answer is no, it is not. The 1960s and 70s were a far more polarised time, when ideological conflicts between socialists and conservatives in Pakistan over the nature of the economy, as well as the ethnic conflict between East and West Pakistan over the nature of the federal system, took place.

The 1970 and 1977 elections were bitterly fought, with the former leading to a civil war and secession and the latter seeing at least 350 dead over a six-month period. Twenty years later, a decade of polarised politics ended in the 1997 election which saw PPP voters refuse to turn up altogether due to disenchantment with their leadership, but also a flat refusal to vote for the ‘other’ option. In all past cases, the outcomes of such periods of polarisation have seen only one entity gain power at the expense of all others. Reducing the political temperature today may not appear to be in any one actor’s interest, but it is actually in the long-term interest of everyone.

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