**[Broken politics](https://www.dawn.com/news/1851977/broken-politics)**

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BANGLADESH next door is going through a period of instability in which street protests by students ended in a government being sent home after 15-odd years. The rapid political changes have led to a spate of discussions about possible parallels with Pakistan, spun in different ways to suit the various discussants’ leanings and preferences.

Hence, for one side, the events in Bangladesh were about people’s power and how it can bring authoritarian governments down, while for others it was about comeuppance for those who had once stood up against their compatriots in what was then West Pakistan. For still others, it was about democrats turning authoritarian.

But the spin aside, between the events in Sri Lanka two years ago (due to the economy) and then Bangladesh, where political inequality and political repression for over a decade had created a pressure cooker-like situation, there is no end to questions about how Pakistan may end up in similar circumstances. After all, the country is experiencing both a fragile economy and an unstable political environment.

However, there are differences, as well. For instance, the economic situation has deteriorated rapidly but not in the manner of Sri Lanka, where default led to massive shortages and a virtual breakdown. Similarly, there are few immediate parallels with Bangladesh where a single party had dominated the scene for nearly 15 years; in Pakistan, the anger of the people is dissipated every few years by the removal of most individuals — including prime ministers and others. The last time we saw protests was when Gen Pervez Musharraf’s eight-year rule led to street agitations, which brought together society as well as political parties, with no elected individual completing five years in power.

The fault is not of the parties alone; the establishment too has broken the link.

Be that as it may, Bangladesh does offer some food for thought. While there is perhaps an absence of strong student unions and organisations in Pakistan, it is not simply due to bans on them. The ethnic polarisation the country faces has spread to how students organise or are allowed to organise around ethnic cultural groups in many institutes.

However, this is not to say they are not politically mobilised. Their moblisation has led to two of the largest, organic movements in modern Pakistan. Both the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) and the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) are youth-led. But it is Pakistan’s misfortune that neither movement shows any interest in politics and parliamentary politics. Neither do they aim to influence politicians or push for their resignations. Their ire and focus is directed elsewhere.

So far, both movements claim to be averse to parliamentary politics. In Balochistan, the Baloch youth is attracted to neither mainstream political parties nor nationalist ones. Perhaps it would be inaccurate to limit this to the youth; the large crowds which have welcomed or greeted BYC gatherings suggest that the indifference is growing and spreading.

This is mainly due to the manner in which elections have been conducted in the province and the results they have thrown up, which has led to a widespread perception that the legislature and governments do not exist to address the people’s issues.

With the PTM, the approach is not much different; their moblisation is also limited to street agitation. Part of the reason for their aversion to mainstream politics is the role of dominant political parties in legitimising military operations in the militancy-afflicted areas. It is noteworthy that Ali Wazir and Mohsin Dawar had to leave the PTM once they decided to contest the elections.

Part of this disaffection with politics can be linked to the post-2008 period, where mainstream parties were willing to accept power and governance in Punjab and Sindh while allowing the establishment to control Balochistan and parts of KP to tackle militancy. Over the years, this, in a way, dismantled politics in these areas, and the result has been movements that are people-focused but divorced from politics. But the fault is not of the parties alone; the establishment has also aggressively broken the link between the people and the parties by wresting control from the politicians.

Perhaps this point can be stretched further by pointing out that from 2022 to the summer of 2023, the PTI was able to win election after election, despite having resigned from the National Assembly and not having a clear strategy with regard to whether it was going to retain the seats it was contesting.

At the other end were the party/ parties which were not just in government but also sincere about staying in power, and yet the voters chose a party which had no interest in the then parliamentary system. It was perhaps not as apolitical a choice as that made by the PTM and BYC, but it still revealed what the voters thought of parliament.

This attitude on the part of the party and its voters changed only after the May 9 crackdown, which made them realise their own limitations and inability to confront the might of the state. However, whether this ‘faith’ in the parliamentary system is long lasting or temporary remains to be seen.

This should lead to some soul-searching among those in powerful positions. If the youth, which is the present and future of the country, has no faith in the democratic forums of the country, they will only turn to agitation and eventually violence. Already, their disaffection is a major reason for the instability being witnessed in many parts of Pakistan. Only once this problem is understood and acknowledged, will we be able to move forward. To think that progress will take place in a vacuum where the people feel that their voice can only be heard through agitation and street protest will only lead to more instability.

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