

## ***Comment***

# **Why the Political Process is our Only Hope?**

***Syed Jaffar Ahmed\****

Is it not paradoxical that one finds oneself faced with the challenge to construct a case for politics and democracy in a country that attained independence seven decades ago through political and legal means. Unfortunately, Pakistan's history has regularly oscillated like a pendulum between military and civilian rules. Recurrence of military rules and their longevity—the four such regimes consumed almost 32 years of the country's history—have, to many, made it an ever-present option, to revert to. At least, it is regarded as a preferable option by those who find military rules more conducive for their economic and financial gains. The presence of this option, no matter how real or unreal it is, does cast a shadow of threat on the democratic dispensation at a given time. Presently, the cynics among the intelligentsia and a wide segment of electronic media speak as loudly and, at times, also as admirably about it, as possible. Now, after the end of the fourth military rule in 2008, and while under the second civilian dispensation since then, one is made to be confused with the question why expectations should still be pinned upon democratic institutions and the political class when they have largely floundered the space given to them, and have failed to deliver for which they were brought to the fore. Unfortunately, what charges are leveled against the politicians and political institutions may not be rejected outright, however, what the critics miss out are the facts that the country is at best an evolving democracy, and also that no democratic set-up is ever free of faults and flaws. Moreover, a couple of other questions need to be answered in understanding why democracy and a continuous political process built around it, are so essential for a country like Pakistan. First of all, there is a historical argument. Pakistan was established to be a federal democratic state, with all the traits of modern states—equality of citizens, equal opportunities to all, autonomy for the

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federating units, accountability of the executive before the legislature as well as the electorate, and independence of judiciary.

Pakistan's choice of democracy and federalism was determined by historical and political factors. It was during the colonial period that the initial representative institutions were established in India. It was also during this period that realizing the diverse nature of Indian society the political and administrative structuring of the colonial rule was done on the pattern of federal countries. The colonial system of control gradually inducted into itself the local representatives beginning from the localities. The system moved upwards and by 1919, amidst the introduction of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms, the provinces, though bereft of any significant autonomy, took a noticeable shape. With the passage of time, the scope of representation and the urge for enhanced space for the provinces increased. The Pakistan movement was launched in this political setting. The founders of the country presented the idea of the new country as one that would build on what had already been attained in the colonial rule in the form of political institution building.

The second factor dictating Pakistan's choice of a federal democratic arrangement was the very modality of the carving out of the country from united India. It was the Muslim majority provinces who were asked to decide if they wanted to join the Indian federation or would make one of their own. These provinces opted for the latter. Pakistan, therefore, can very rightly be described as a federation created by the federating units, which were also provided with the other option of joining the united Indian federation. Moreover, since a federation can operate in an essentially democratic milieu, thus the choice to be a federation had implicit in it a choice of democracy.

Third, the diversity in Pakistani society, the variance of languages, cultures, historical experiences, etc., in the Pakistani regions also made it compulsory to build political institutions on the affirmation of the above realities. This meant adoption and development of parliamentary democratic and federal institutions.

However, constructing a democratic and federal edifice, also accompanied a multidimensional challenge. The choice of the above mentioned institutions was either determined by the initial political and administrative experiences during the colonial rule or by the logic of the demand of Pakistan and the modalities chosen for its realization. Taken together, it appears that on its inception Pakistan did have a sort of theoretical political framework but the actual beginning along these lines had been only limited. The institutions built during the colonial rule, though carried representative and federal ingredients, were all geared

towards consolidating colonialism. The same institutions had to be transformed if the country after independence had to serve the purposes of the people. Thus the philosophy and strategy of managing colonial control over the Indian subjects had to be transformed into a philosophy and strategy to serve the citizens of the new country. This implied the need of an agenda of decolonization of state and society.

While envisaging and developing modern democratic state for Pakistan, the founders of the country must have pondered over the fact that images and visions they were projecting would pose severe challenges in their realization. They were conceiving a modern state in a society that was feudal and tribal, with strong primordial loyalties.

After partition, it soon became evident that the Muslim League was not prepared for the task entrusted upon it by history and by its own undertakings and proclamations. In the hindsight one can say that perhaps by trials and errors and by the pressures that had to emerge from the society in the subsequent years, the political leadership would have taken to a path leading towards democratization and the adjustment of the federating units—even on the eve of partition a talk about land reforms had started in different circles, including those of Muslim League. Within a couple of years of independence a thrust for constitutional consensus had also emerged, and by the end of 1953, the famous Mohammad Ali Bogra Formula had courted the support of leadership of various provinces. The move upset the Governor General Ghulam Mohammad who dissolved the Constituent Assembly preventing the constitutional consensus from becoming a part of the constitution. These were very initial and limited initiatives while the agenda of decolonization could be quite big and all encompassing—this opportunity was denied to the political class.

Instead, the traditional institutions which had served as the operators of the colonial rule took the initiative and consolidated their power. They found no difficulty in acquiring support from the dominating economic classes, whose interests they were already managing. Thus there came about the post-colonial state of Pakistan, dominated by the civil-military bureaucracy. The nexus has ruled the country all along with the difference that with the passage of time the military has emerged as the more powerful, and in certain respects, exclusive power-holder within it. Today, the phrase of establishment is used more frequently which refers to primarily the military and then the military and the bureaucracy both. It is this establishment with respect to which the prospects and the future of democracy are discussed in the country.

Insofar as the future of democracy is concerned, a military rule can outright be rejected not because it cannot come—a topic that can be addressed separately—but because it cannot handle the society that Pakistan has today. To ponder over this, let's suppose that it is true that politicians in the past had been a total failure, and the inconsistencies and contradictions of the political dispensations paved the way for the military rule—an oft-repeated argument—but one may ask the question that if military rules were any solution, if they succeeded where the politicians had failed, and if these were panacea for all national evils, why on earth these came to an end and why they were all rejected and their heads doomed. One may also ask as to what these regimes left as their most noticeable legacy for the country. Ayub Khan, through his economic and political policies and devices, widened the cleavage between East and West Pakistan. General Yahya Khan presided the break-up of the country. Zia-ul-Haq disfigured the society and injected strong doses of extremism which started ripening even in his life time. Today, the whole society has been hijacked by religious extremists and sectarian outfits. General Musharraf almost sent Balochistan packing. He also, through his policies, provided opportunities to the extremists to make inroads into far-flung areas of Pakistan.

In this context, one needs to see, where Pakistan stands today in terms of its state and society. The state that had apparently emerged on strong pillars of the military and bureaucracy has shown chronic disabilities. In the last couple of decades, its internal cohesion has greatly impaired. Its writ on the society has reduced, if not, waned. Its external agenda seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan and Central Asia has back-fired and today it is trying to get a strategic depth within the county, establishing its control over areas taken over by the extremists and militants. This is also an objective reality of today's Pakistan that state is largely disengaged, if not totally disconnected, with the society.

On the other hand, the society has undergone enormous transformation, not as much due to the policies of the successive governments, but as the result of people's own local initiatives and their adjustment to, and accruing benefits from, a globalized economy. Moreover, internal migration has characteristically changed the demographic profile of the country and reshaped the urban-rural dichotomy. With the passage of time, new occupations have made roads in the society. Similarly, choices are changing and priorities are reset. Though the middle class is not too big, but today it is bigger than what it had ever been in the past. To add to this there is a middle-income class which may not have the foundations of a middle class yet has some money to survive in a consumer economy on the basis of sources of

income such as foreign remittances, etc. The choices and priorities of this middle or middle-income class are also changing. Investment on children's education is taking priority over investment in property. The trend of girls education is gaining fast popularity except for places where people have not yet been able to overcome the local hardships of, for example, distance of schools from their dwellings, poverty, still prevalent male-chauvinism, etc. Isn't it meaningful to see that even in higher education, in the universities of Karachi, Gujrat, Sargodha, to cite only some, the girl students have outnumbered the boys.

Similarly, the urban as well as rural political cultures are demonstrating transformations of another type. Traditional bonds are giving way to new types of loyalties and adjustments. The elections, since 1993, as analyzed by different political scientists and anthropologists, have shown a relative weakening of the traditional bonds of *biradari*, clan and other relations of kinship.

In the case of Pakistan, democracy and provincial autonomy found their earlier aspirants in the subordinate classes and the oppressed nationalities. However, with the passage of time, and the vast changes in the society, more and more segments are joining the forces searching for political spaces. The emerging interests are built more around pragmatic concerns and objectives rather than this or that given ideological formation. In the emerging scenario it seems that people, in case they have a choice, vote a candidate, who they think can deliver. They opt for candidates who can bring water and electricity to their areas, build roads, and improve health and education facilities. In case such candidates also belong to their *biradari*, their vote for them is interpreted as a vote cast in the name of *biradari*. But people can bypass the *biradari* connections if they are convinced that a candidate not belonging to their *biradari* has more potential and is resourceful to fulfill their expectations.

The recent elections in Azad Kashmir provide a good example. There have been charges of rigging. There must have been irregularities and use of unfair means by different parties. These have become common practices in elections in Pakistan. But despite this, observers have acknowledged the wide support given to the Muslim League (Nawaz) by the electorate. It is interesting that Mr. Bilawal Bhutto of PPP had taken part in the election campaign with anti-India slogans. He raised the slogan of "*Modi ka jo yaar hai, Ghaddar hai*" (One who is friend of Modi is a traitor), a reference to Nawaz Sharif's occasional demonstration of his desire to have trade relations with India. The slogan was raised at the time when Indian security forces were quelling with strong arm tactics, the recent protests in Indian held Kashmir. In this background, the electorate in Azad Kashmir instead of being carried

away with anti-India slogans or moved by the actual happenings in Indian held Kashmir, opted to vote for PML(N) showing that they were more concerned with everyday problems faced by them and were seeking to have them solved. The slogans which worked in the past may not have the same appeal in present times.

So, while the state institutions are in disarray, and are seeking to restore their writ, and while the society is in the flux of changes, what fate democracy holds in Pakistan? Needless to say, that the democratic credentials of the political parties and the political class as a whole are quite poor. There is a lot of talk about the corruption in the political ranks. The state of internal democracy in political parties is also miserable. But then one can begin with what one is available with. At best what can be done is to impress upon the political class and pressurize the political parties to reform themselves so that they come in a position to address the issues of the disconnect between state and society, civil military imbalance, and the new thrusts coming from the fast changing society.

In democratic systems political parties play the crucial role of serving as a linkage between the state and the society. The more functional this relationship is, the more democratic the state and the society become. At present our political parties are in no way nearer that role. For them to be able to play that role they would need to meaningfully reform themselves. A few areas can be indicated here. First, the political parties spend most of their energies on how to win the elections. Some of them have devised better strategies as compared to the others. But by and large all political parties remain oblivious of the challenges they could face once they come in power. Seldom do they come with reasonable homework; at times they come into power without having a reasonable team to carry forward the task of different ministries. This makes them dependent on the bureaucracy. This can be corrected by increasing the intellectual capacity and resourcefulness of the political parties who should also have their think tanks. Without the backing of think tanks and their research output political parties in the modern times may not play their required role.

Second, our political parties, whether in office or not, do not keep regular contact with the people. They approach the people on elections with the result that on the one hand they are not always aware of the ground realities of the society and on the other do not win the people's trust. A contact with the constituencies is what the political parties need to have on permanent basis.

Third, the political parties desperately need to allow democracy in their own folds. At present our parties are mostly dominated by the

leaders who exercise immense power in the party matters. Almost all parties have their constitutions carrying substantial democratic clauses but these are very easily overlooked. Parties' bodies are, in many cases, nominated by the leadership rather than allowed to be elected. In the case of certain parties, the constitutional bodies do not meet for years. Dynastic trends of leadership are also quite visible in a number of political parties. If the parties adhere to their own constitutions, this would be a reasonable means enabling them to become a good vehicle of democratization in the country.

Fourth, transparency in financial matters of the political parties is also something which is lacking in most cases. At times, parties do not keep their financial records; they are not, in many cases, in a position to state their resources. This culture of financial indiscipline allows all types of vested interests and mafias to make use of the political parties and to make inroads in them for the realization of their respective ends. Without overcoming this weakness, our political parties would not come in a position to undertake the task of addressing the issue of corruption in the society. Needless to say that what a party does in the country is a mirror image of what it does within itself.

To conclude, one can say that the case of democracy in Pakistan is at once very simple as well as complex. It is simple because time and experience have shown that the military regimes have proved injurious for national integration and have left deep imprints of extremism of all types on the society. The democratic option involves complexity because it requires political parties to be able to understand what is happening in the society, and to have well thought out programs addressing the needs of the society. Their task is challenging also because at the end of the day it will be their work that would correct the civil military imbalance and would ensure the supremacy of the civilian and democratic institutions.