

From Electoral Politics to Sustainable politics: Challenges and Prospects for Civil Society in Pakistan

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Abstract

Electoral politics has long been a dominant feature of Pakistan's political landscape, with political parties vying for power through democratic means. However, this approach has often led to short-term thinking and a lack of focus on sustainable development. This paper explores the challenges and prospects of transitioning from electoral politics to sustainable politics in Pakistan. It examines the current political, economic, and social context of the country, including the role of the military, corruption, and climate change, and analyzes the potential for a shift towards sustainable policies that prioritize long-term planning and environmental protection. The paper concludes by highlighting the opportunities for a more sustainable future for Pakistan and the role of political leadership in achieving this goal. Unfortunately, in a social contract between state and people of Pakistan, state has dishonored its obligation many times. The role of one of the states institution had remained over developed and to remove the label of garrison state to a welfare state, a great deal of responsibility lies with politicians and their electoral politics.

Keywords: Electoral politics, Political leadership, State's Institutions, civil society, democracy

Introduction

Pakistan and India have experienced two different political trajectories after their independence from British raj in 1947. Though the changeover from colonialism was difficult for both newly states throwing many social and economic challenges like division of assets, finance, lack of resources, governess and unexpected massive mass migration to go along with uncontrollable violence but at the same time All India Muslim League virtually did not had any organizational structure in the areas constituted as Pakistan apart from the province of Sindh.

Concept of Pakistan in subcontinent was quite unique in a sense that it primarily intended to uniting the regions having different linguistics and ethnic groups consists of different cultures and traditions together in the name of religion. Soon after the creation different identities never manage to be united as a single nation. Even in the religion there are different schools of thoughts some time contradictory as well could not perform the base of single identity. National integration cannot be achieved until the cohesion of different ethnic and linguistics groups and equal distribution in power and national resources.

Since its inception Pakistan has been through many crises of serious nature that's why the idea of a welfare state as promised to the Muslims of undivided India by the leaders of Pakistan movement is still to be materialized and its journey form a security state to welfare stare is still to be covered. Challenges and issues like external, internal security threats, economic hagged, frequent military interventions, fragile judiciary, religious war lords and mismanagement of resources to lack of resources, crisis of governance, instable and feeble democratic system and many more has hindered the prosperity, progress and institution building of this country.

Initial problems also include political instability along with other administrative and refuge crisis for Pakistan. Main idea of politics and having a political party is to ensure the involvement of people in the decision making. In electoral democracy around the world people having resources and wealth usually win the elections. In history of Pakistan use of religion not

only by the political parties but from military dictators had been a common trend. All India Muslim League primarily gathered its attention using religious sentiment throughout the Pakistan movement and even after the creation of Pakistan all the mainstream political parties have been using or making alliances with minor religious political parties for seeking support. Even military rulers used religion as a main source to be in political power and terms like Ayub's liberal Islam, Zia's fundamental Islam to Mushraff's moderate Islam have become common during their tenure.

Over the years, biggest challenge remains for Pakistan is political instability. Political instability in Pakistan can be attributed to several factors and some of the key reasons include frequently Military intervention, Weak democratic institutions, Economic challenges, political polarization, role of civil society, Economic challenges go with Governance and corruption.

The world has adopted the system of democracy to administer the state's affairs effectively and efficiently. For democracy to flourish requires a suitable environment in which its every aspect and component perform autonomously. Timely, transparent, free and fair elections are the backbone of any democratic system only then a society can benefit from this in real sense. Over the period of time different countries have brandish their own form of democracy as they practices it and believing it to be the best. As Henry J. Steiner in his work states "Countries with markedly different political systems have termed political participation the vital human right. In its absence it is said; all other fall to a perilous existence".¹

Following are the important components for sustainable political system in Pakistan.

Fare Elections

Any level of elections in a country is assumed to be very important component of a democratic system. It gives an ability to check and empower the voters to control the legislators and authority to verify the ruling class in many areas. It also provides its subjects sense of safety and involvement in affair of the state. As stated by Madison: " as it is essential that the government in general should have common interest with the people, so it is

particularly essential that the (legislators) should have an immediate dependence on, and intimate sympathy with, the people. Frequent elections are unquestionably the only policy by which the dependence and sympathy can effectually be secured”².

The formulation, growth and functioning of political parties and pressure groups are part and parcel of Representative democracies. Pakistan is an exceptional case for understanding the role of political parties and pressure groups in both the civilian and military regimes. These political parties and pressure groups have worked for and against the development of a true democratic culture in Pakistan. Social forces and norms are far more influential than administrative measures in a society. Unlike some other countries where the institutions are strong and well performed, people usually look towards the government for guidance and direction but Pakistan is quite different in a sense that different segments in society through their political affiliations try to influence the public policies in their favor. In Pakistani democratic system almost all the political parties derive their power from the top leadership of the party usually a charismatic personality, who is a main source of popularity. So it is relatively easy for these pressure groups to influence the governance in their favor.

Generally voter's electoral choices and decisions, is a result of several variables which are marked under the title of prejudiced considerations, environmental influences and other utility concerns. Political activities are a result of all these circumstances in which a voter finds themselves during elections. The study of politics and political behavior of Pakistan has been generalized by the foreign and indigenous scholars with their particular perspective without giving empirical observation except a few. Elections are an important aspect of democracy and political process. Electoral politics is about participatory play in governing process through election in which voter and politician want to achieve power “to control the behavior of others through force, threats, or with holding of resources”³

People of Pakistan never liked the sitting governments as they never come up with their acceptations in short political history starting from 1960s. Every

popular leader soon after their take over the government its opposition leaders and other political parties have been able to create resistance to the sitting governments in the general public and in most cases these oppositions manage to tumble the governments. So the political process that makes the institutions strong and self motivated never established on strong footed from initial stage.

Challenge for Pakistan's democracy is manifold. Every political government has remained surrounded by many controversies, challenges and hurdles. Apart from their survival as a governments representing their people, questions has always been raised about the competency and credibility of politicians. There are many classic example of bad governance. Until it is not functional and performing for its people and following the merit based policies and putting their house in order the institution of electoral politics. In electoral politics and the subsequent institutions formed by it are true representations of the society, while other institutions like Military or Bureaucracy are state institutions. In developing countries, like Pakistan, few state institutions are strong enough to counter the influence of society and its representative governments⁴.

The political history of Pakistan evidently indicates the supremacy of state institutions over political parties. Since getting independence in 1947, Pakistan has witnessed three different martial law periods from 1958 to 1971, 1977 to 1988 and 1999 to 2007. Even military dictators natured few political parties to gain political support and manipulate them to prolong their dictatorships.⁵

In Pakistan democracy has many dimensions of social, cultural and economic nature. That's why it's never easy to govern the state with much of linguistic, social, cultural and regional diversity and disparities with some serious issues of human development and human rights. There for it is still unable to relish the dividends of democracy which is being enjoyed by the west in abundant. Growth of democratic culture and tradition is slow or even declining because of many elements as we were not able to build institutions over certain period of time due to lacking of effective judicial system, weakening of political

parties with the hold of dynasties and families in electoral process, malfunctioning of parliament and the crises of federalism, the result that today we have controlled institutional democratic system.

An independent institution with education and awareness is a pre requisite for the democratic culture to be fully developed in any country. A country where 50% of its population is living below the poverty line, 60% of population does not have access to safe drinking water, where society is facing thousands of other issues of social and economic nature all the noble ideas of good governance and value of voting in elections is less important to lay man who is busy in arranging two times meal for his family.

Reason why Pakistan is hoping for democratic hopefulness is because those political elites and all the major political parties have agreed to continuity of democratic process. They have learned that becoming part of any effort which weakened the democratic system is not in the interest of any political party "After aligning with the military or playing games in pulling down a rival party government, major sections of political elites, if not everyone, believe that democracy with all its flaws is a better option than military"⁶.

Historical Context of Military Interventions

Since its inception in 1947, the country has experienced multiple instances where the military has directly or indirectly influenced political affairs. These interventions have significantly shaped Pakistan's political trajectory, often leading to adverse consequences for democracy, governance, and socio-economic development. In this critical note, we will delve into the detrimental effects of military interventions on Pakistan politics.

According to Dryland (1992) "during the period 1950-1958, Pakistan appointed seven prime ministers and one commander in chief, a record which may be attributable to the political immaturity of Pakistan's political aspirants." "Pakistan's first military intervention occurred in 1958 when General Ayub Khan overthrew the civilian government through a coup d'état. This marked the beginning of a trend that persisted for several decades. Subsequently, General Yahya Khan's regime oversaw the disastrous separation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971. The 1980s saw General Zia-Ul-

Haq's era, which witnessed the Islamization of society and a weakening of democratic institutions. The 1999 coup led by General Pervez Musharraf resulted in a prolonged military rule that further undermined democratic processes. Military interventions in Pakistan have consistently undermined democratic institutions, preventing their organic development and consolidation. Frequent interruptions in civilian governance have eroded public trust in democratic processes and institutions, thereby impeding the country's democratic consolidation. The military's interference often weakens the judiciary, media, and other crucial checks and balances, ultimately leaving the state apparatus susceptible to authoritarianism”.

“Military interventions perpetuate an unhealthy civil-military imbalance in Pakistan. The military, with its significant economic and political influence, operates as a parallel power center. This undermines the principle of civilian supremacy and weakens democratic accountability. The military's expansive role and its control over key state institutions, such as intelligence agencies, hinder the development of a mature democratic system based on civilian oversight and robust institutions”.

“Military interventions disrupt governance processes and lead to a lack of continuity and long-term planning. Frequent changes in governments and policies hinder effective implementation of development programs, resulting in slow economic progress. The absence of a stable political system discourages foreign direct investment, impairs economic growth, and exacerbates poverty and inequality. The military's involvement in economic ventures also distorts market dynamics and further entrenches a culture of corruption”.

“Military interventions in Pakistan's political landscape have had far-reaching consequences, negatively impacting democracy, governance, civil liberties, and economic development. The frequent interruptions in civilian rule and the military's expansive role have created an environment of instability and undermined democratic institutions. To achieve sustainable progress and stability, Pakistan must break free from this cycle of military interference and

focus on strengthening democratic processes, fostering inclusive governance, and ensuring civilian supremacy”.⁷

Civil Society and Sustainable politics

“Civil society plays a vital role in the political process by acting as a bridge between the government and the citizens. It refers to the collective organizations, institutions, and individuals outside of the government and the business sector who work together to advance the interests of the community. Civil society plays a vital role in the political process by acting as a bridge between the government and the citizens. It refers to the collective organizations, institutions, and individuals outside of the government and the business sector who work together to advance the interests of the community”.

“Civil society acts as a watchdog, monitoring the actions of the government and holding it accountable for its decisions and policies. CSOs engage in activities such as research, fact-checking, and reporting on government actions, which helps ensure transparency, prevent corruption, and maintain democratic governance. They contribute to the policy-making process by providing research, analysis, and recommendations to the government. This input helps shape policies that are more inclusive, effective, and responsive to the needs of the society”.

“Civil society organizations often fill gaps in public service delivery, especially in areas where the government may be unable to reach or where services are insufficient. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, and voluntary associations work on issues such as healthcare, education, poverty alleviation, environmental conservation, and more, complement the government's efforts”.

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Conclusion

For a social change, a great deal of responsibility lies with the politician how they are involved in politics what their priorities are. They are the one who

gives visions and determine the path to out to reach that vision. Their public policies and initiatives paved the way in which the societies to flourished. “Achieving social change and political development and maturity in Pakistan requires a multifaceted approach that involves several key factors. Firstly, investing in education and raising awareness among the population is crucial. Access to quality education helps build an informed citizenry, fostering critical thinking and active participation in political processes. Secondly, strengthening democratic institutions such as the judiciary, electoral commissions, and anti-corruption bodies is essential. These institutions ensure transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Depoliticizing them and enhancing their effectiveness and independence are vital steps. Thirdly, encouraging civil society engagement and participation, along with promoting political empowerment, particularly among marginalized groups, is crucial. This includes initiatives like voter education, quota systems, and creating an inclusive environment for meaningful participation. Fourthly, protecting freedom of expression, fostering independent media, and responsible journalism contribute to a vibrant democracy by facilitating public discourse and holding the government accountable. Additionally, addressing socio-economic disparities, promoting interfaith and interethnic harmony, and seeking international cooperation for capacity building and good governance are also integral to achieving social change and political development in Pakistan”.

In Pakistan the continuous struggle for political positions among different ethnic groups in order to control the socio-political and economic sources is main objective which is a permanent problem for democratic government. The sole ambitions of these ethnic groups are controlling the powers, for political power especially at the center or provincial are controlling by various ethnic groups in Pakistan from very beginning. When we see the current political legacies of Pakistan we find out that its roots lies well before the partition of India during the colonial period when in order to strengthen the state right after the War of Independence in 1857, the British introduced the representative form of government rather than democratic form. Governor

General Council was created and prominent person was asked to join that advisory body. As Paula R Newberg states in his book Judging the state; courts and constitutional politics in Pakistan “with times British reconceived their concepts of control, less to accommodate Indian protests against its exercise than to create flexible state structure that might respond to local challenges to colonial power”⁷ We have seen that people of Pakistan are not only queuing at vote booths, but are also taking to the streets for pressurizing the governments and are questing their performance. They truly believe in the system of democracy despite of its several incapacities and inefficiencies. Now the productive role of politician will not only enhance the political development but also promotes the sense of ownership and belonging among the masses. A great deal of responsibility lies with the politicians in making this democracy into a viable democracy, a societal institution and a success by living up to the expectation of the people who trusted them to be in a driving role.

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