Pakistan - A Struggle with Democracy: An Analysis about the Democratic Quality of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research note is interested in analyzing the quality of democracy in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. It focuses on the current political state of the nation and how it has developed politically since its origin. Other aspects include the discussion of the democratic and non-democratic aspects of the country, whether it can be called truly democratic and finally, conclude if democracy is the best way forward for Pakistan.

Keywords: Democracy, Democracy Ranking of the Quality of Democracy, Democratic Quality, Military, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a relatively young country, established in the year 1947 by gaining independence from British occupied Indian subcontinent. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan has been regarded as a parliamentary democracy, constituent of the President as the ceremonial head of state and the Prime Minister as the head of government. In the current multi-party system, the government exercises executive power; legislative power is largely entrusted to the Parliament.

Democratic quality in Pakistan can be defined to have the following elements:

1. A populous government (a government which truly represents the aspirations of the people) with selfless leadership;
2. A reliable, independent and neutral electioneering institution and process (election commission and process should be trustworthy);
3. Trichotomy of power between executive, judiciary and legislature. Sovereignty of the parliament over all institutions, civil or military;
4. Protection of citizens by state forces such as the police;
5. Viable, working institutions of accountability (like judiciary, National Accountability Bureau, Auditor General of Pakistan and other parliamentary oversight bodies);
6. Right to free education and basic health care of every citizen. Freedom of opinion; freedom of association to pursue one’s ideas of progress;
7. Economic equality (equality of opportunity to earn one’s livelihood);
8. Religious tolerance.

Pakistan lies in an extreme tension-ridden geographical situation with two very sensitive neighbors: India and Afghanistan. Therefore, this analysis does not reflect conditions in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the volatile North-Waziristan (Baluchistan) region bordering Afghanistan.

BRIEF POLITICAL HISTORY FROM 1947 TO THE 21ST CENTURY

The history of Pakistan demonstrates that from the day of its inception on 14th August 1947, the founder of Pakistan (Muhammad Ali Jinnah) was quite clear about the roadmap of democracy in Pakistan. That is why in his famous address to the constituent assembly, he expressed his infallible faith in equality of rights and freedom of faith when he said, “You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State.” He set up the beau ideal of religious tolerance. The very fact that he wanted to draft a constitution on the basis of consensus reflects the statesmanship through which he wanted to achieve a high quality of democracy. However, time did not permit him to quickly build up strong institutions as the newly born state (Pakistan) had to face massive problems of Muslim migrations and a terrible bloodbath of communal violence by Muslims and Hindus on both sides of the border.

Unfortunately, after the death of Jinnah, political polarization and strife led to delay in the framing of the constitution. Govern-

General Ghulam Muhammad (1951-1955) and military adventurers like Ayub Khan (1958-1969), Yahya Khan (1969-1971) and Zia-ul Haq (1977-1988) sneaked into the corridors of power through unconstitutional means and justified the impositions of military rule on various pretexts of economic growth and political stability. Out of more than 60 years of Pakistan’s history, more than 30 years are plagued by martial law i.e. military rule. Thus the quality of democracy suffered immeasurable losses.

Constitutions were abrogated/suspended and therefore fundamental rights of the citizens were denied or curtailed to the citizens of Pakistan. Ayub Khan appointed a Constitution Commission in 1960 and a new constitution was approved in 1962, Zia amended the 1973 constitution and brought Islamic provisions. General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2007) created National Reconstruction Bureau to formulate constitutional changes, most of which were incorporated into the 17th amendment.

Once the citizens of Pakistan could not exercise the fundamental right to choose its leaders, the entire design of democracy was altered through sham democratic systems. For instance, Field Marshal Ayub Khan introduced a presidential form of government through his own constituency of Basic Democracy System. Zia introduced Local Bodies System and similarly, Musharraf introduced the National Reconstruction Bureau. These were personality-based institutions made to protect a certain ruler and sustain their governments. Hence, we see that the growth of naturally elected institutions suffered heavily and could not perform their truly democratic role for development.

Elections to assemblies were driven not by the spirit to lead the nation out of poverty but were based on personal ambitions of power and greed. Nepotism and corruption became the common ground on which political parties established their relationships. Coalition governments became the order of the day and with divided mandates the parties in power used every high-handed method to stay in power. Both governments of Nawaz Sharif and PPP
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