



The Problems of Political Parties in Pakistan (A)

In democratic societies, political parties play a significant role in articulating citizens' aspirations. Upon gaining people's support and electoral trust, they serve as a vital link between the state and society.

Islamic Politics

Since Pakistan's inception, the combination of self-interest and Islamic politics has complicated the problem of building a political organization with broad responsibilities to the larger society. Efforts by other parties to contest the power of the League were frustrated and the opposition politicians were often physically prevented from appealing to their constituents and by dubbing them unpatriotic. The League governments used repressive measures against them. The Red Shirt (NWFP), Majlis-i-Ahrar, Jama'at-i-Islami, and the Pakistan National Congress were the targets at different times.

East Bengal's first province-wide elections in 1954, however, dramatized the weakness of the League and its programmes for constructing an Islamic state as the United Front - an organization of all provincial parties - won the elections. The League also lost its influence in West Pakistan when a Bengali, Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy, took charge as the prime minister in 1956. The Punjabi landlords sought refuge in a jerry-built organization, the Republican Party. In 1958, the military-led establishment decided to terminate the constitutional experiment, and the 1956 constitution was abrogated, the legislatures were closed, and all political parties were banned.

Pakistani Version of Political Party

Between 1958 and 1971 President Ayub Khan, through autocratic rule was able to centralize the government without the inconvenience of unstable ministerial coalitions that had characterized its first decade after independence.

The martial law was lifted only when Ayub bestowed his own constitution to the nation in 1962. Ayub believed that it was possible to conduct government without the formal establishment of political parties but had no recourse other than to resurrect his own political party in the parliament. He borrowed the name of the Muslim League, but when the real Muslim League members displayed their outrage, Ayub modified the name, as Convention Muslim league. It performed well under Ayub Khan's military umbrella but in December 1970, with official patronage, it polled only 3.3 per cent of the total votes cast.

Along with other political parties, it was dissolved on July 5, 1977, when the third martial law was imposed. Again in 1986, Mohammad Khan Junejo recreated it after becoming prime minister in the non-party based elections. But on May 29th 1988 President Zia dissolved the National Assembly and removed the prime minister.

The growth of political parties within the parliament is a phenomenon confined only to Pakistan. Otherwise, citizens form parties that politically compete for power and if trusted only then enter power corridors. Besides the establishment's modus operandi to have obedient political parties in its pocket, personality centered Pakistan People's Party and Awami League were able to articulate people's voice and exhibited unique success in the country's first general elections in 1970 on the basis of adult franchise. General elections were held in Pakistan on 7 December 1970 (East and West Pakistan) and ultimately only general elections held prior to the independence of Bangladesh. Voting took place in 300 parliamentary constituencies of Pakistan to elect members of the National Assembly of Pakistan. The politically shocked establishment, instead of transferring power, resorted to military action in East Pakistan, which resulted in the tragic break-up of the country in 1971. Later, Awami League assumed power in Bangladesh and the Pakistan People's Party remains a potent force in Pakistan.

Political Parties and Mass Contact

The development of political parties is related to the level of development of a society, the quality of mutual relations and the nature of the state structure. It was the uneven political development in rural and urban areas that affected the growth of parties in the colonial period also persisted, though it gradually narrowed down in 1990s. The trend affected the development of parties in Pakistan. They mostly remained urban-based, with limited contacts with rural population. In the absence of regular elections there was no pressure on the city-based political parties to reach the 70 percent rural population and integrate it in the political process.

The Problems of Political Parties

Almost all the political parties currently face certain problems. The first is the lack of democracy within the party structure. Second, they are preoccupied with the sole objective of grabbing power. They have failed to encourage the growth of alternate leadership. Third, most of our political parties lack a clear political vision. Corruption has also eaten into the heart of the society, a society that has few resources and great development demands. Thus, they have alienated the citizens from political sharing and participation.

Lack of Inner Democracy

All major political parties are accused of democratic malpractices. Their leaders appoint themselves as life chairpersons. Heirs are groomed to take over their father's mantle. Party positions are distributed at a price to favorites.

With a few exceptions, political parties in Pakistan have never held elections within their ranks. Often, influential politicians (landlords and industrial barons) sought and secured important positions in major political parties on the basis of nominations. The heads of major political parties are nominated by their so-called working committees or Central Boards, which again comprise non-elected nominated members.

Down to the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder in the party, the leaders of the different tiers and/or Central Executive Committee nominate the office bearers. Consequently, influential people with clout within the party and high command get themselves nominated to important positions in the party. Social and business upstarts with political ambitions employ similar tactics. The heads of the country's two largest political parties often cry hoarse over the need to get rid of military dictatorship, yet they continue the dictatorial practice of nominations in their own parties. Such contradictions hinder the flourishing of normative democratic culture. The result of this situation is that the political parties were hardly prepared to cope with the situation arising out of the assumption of power by General Pervez Musharraf in October 1999.

Lack of Building Up of Leaders

Both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, the leaders of the two mainstream parties, never encouraged the growth of alternate leadership in their parties. The parties in Pakistan do not build politicians from workers to leaders, from low-ranking to high-ranking public activists

and from weak to powerful decision makers, commanding a progressively expanding jurisdictional territory. Hence these parties face a problem in mobilizing their disenchanted workers who seem to be in no mood to make sacrifices for the leadership.

Corruption and Lack of Transparency

The political leaders focus on personal or vested interests instead of national interests. They have always tried to achieve their vested interests in the garb of politics. They have never respected the norms of democracy. That's why our country has failed to develop healthy political institutions and lasting democracy. After the October 1999 military coup, many analysts described the two major political parties of Pakistan as "corrupt, incompetent, unpopular and highly damaging to the welfare of the people in Pakistan" and observed that it was plutocracy which was ripping millions of rupees away from the public exchequer.

Such charges of corruption against the party leadership further strengthened the feeling of alienation among the people. Political parties' funding in Pakistan remains an unanswered question.

Political Parties and their Manifestoes

Electoral manifestos play a crucial role in visions of party democracy and political science analyses of party competition. Ritualistically, every party has its manifesto issued at election time but these manifestoes hide many contradictions.

First, while they consciously try to be "all things to all people", they are also high nuance documents - nuances that only seasoned and native political analysts can adequately fathom. Second, while manifestoes tend to address a long list of problems, they evade prioritizing them - as well as the pledged solutions. Third, while they promise an array of outputs, they rarely specify how resources, not only financial and economic but political, administrative, cultural and social are to be generated and allocated to mutually competing promises. Fourth, parties are rarely serious enough to sift through and solve even serious contradictions among pledges made in their manifestoes.