

*Amjad Abbas Khan**

Nature and Contours of Party Politics in Pakistan

Abstract

Pakistan is passing through another political transition. After general elections of July 25, 2018, new elected government has taken the saddle. The present party government has come up with a slogan of “Change” to the political system of Pakistan our country yet is in search of political stability and institutionalized political system. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the paradoxes and perils of party politics which has endangered working of parliamentary democracy in contemporary Pakistan. The imbalance between civil and military institutions has affected the political stability and enduring democracy. The current grave situation in our homeland may also be attributed to the failure of political parties to deliver support for parliamentary democracy. There is paucity of academic sources highlighting the menaces which have deteriorated the party system. Unveiling the dangers regarding the present-day party politics in Pakistan signifies the importance of this paper. Interestingly, many of the hazards of the party politics found in the first decade are present even in today’s polity of Pakistan. Even after passing of 71 years, political parties have failed to play their due role in addressing the menaces in the polity of the country. Unfortunately, political institutions have not been fully institutionalized. That resulted in the weakening of democratic institutions in Pakistan. It is time for the political leadership to take account of their responsibility for strengthening the parliamentary democracy through institutionalized party politics. The stability of the polity is directly related to the strengthening of the party system.

Key Words: Contours, Political Parties, Institutionalization, Democracy, Coherence, Autonomy, Polarization, Organization, Factionalism, Expansion, Leadership, Parliament, Oligarchy.

Introduction

“Political activity that involves political parties is called party politics. Further, the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society.”¹ It is also defined as “struggle for power.”² Party politics refers to the political behaviors inspired by what is right for the party, rather than for the masses. If the political parties pass bills to protect the party’s benefits or prolong its rule instead of facilitating the people, this is an example of party politics.³ Some have defined the party politics as the study of responses of parties towards certain situations. It is also a gauge of the transformation of the political parties.

* Amjad Abbas Khan, Assistant Professor, Pakistan Study Centre, University of the Punjab.

Political parties play indispensable role in strengthening of democracy. Their role in political mobilization, governance, formation and implementation of socio-economic policy, ethnic, insurgent and separatist movements, and the working of democracy has long been the focus of investigation. Their centrality arise the fact that they are the key link between the individual, state and society. Political parties provide crucial connection between social process and policy makers, and “influence debates and policies on issues affecting the interests of various social groups in the political system”⁴ and parliamentary democracy.

Unfortunately, system of political parties in Pakistan remained very feeble. Consequently, it provided space for military-bureaucratic elite to enter into political arena. Weak political parties are the major “reasons behind the overt and covert rule of dictators in Pakistan.”⁵ This un-democratic orientation of political system has debilitated the culture of parliamentary democracy and bred favoritism which has blocked the process of democratization of the political parties. Political parties in Pakistan are in a state of disarray. Intra and inter-party conflicts have eroded the legitimacy and reputation of both leadership and parties. Political parties have been accused of eroding the parliamentary democratic system by practicing corrupt politics, eschewing a long-term stand on national interest, and maximizing their personal gains and influence. Unlikely, in Pakistan, political parties follow the policy of protecting and projecting the interests of their leaders which ultimately results in disaster for the democratic system in Pakistan.⁶ Weak political parties depend more on their leaders as a substitute of strong party organization. Death of Quaid-i-Azam and Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan hastened the process of fragmentation of AIML. On the other hand in India, death of Gandhi, Patel and Nehru had not such effect on the Congress party.

Development Process of Political Parties

The strong political party system is capable of enhancing the political participation which can prevent any radical action as well as inclusion of newly mobilized group of population without harming the political system. “A strong party system thus provides the “institutionalized organizations and procedures for the assimilation of new groups into the system. The development of such party institutions is the prerequisite for political stability in modernizing countries.”⁷ According to Samuel P. Huntington, the procedure of party growth goes forward through four phases; Factionalism, Polarization, Expansion and Institutionalization.

Factionalism

In the first phase of party development process political participation and political institutionalization remain low. Different factions of the society come out of the traditional patterns and behavior of the political order but they are unable to establish a modern political organization. “Politics involves a small number of people competing with each other in a large number of weak, transitory alliances and groupings.”⁸ These groups have insignificant resilience and organization usually and reflect the one’s ambitions of family opposition and association. It may be considered that these groups called as parties but these groups neither have organization nor the social support which is the strength of any political party.

Pakistan could not attain the spirit of political parties. Usually they belong to different cliques, juntos, factions and family gatherings.

Polarization

Once the “opposition or revolutionary factions themselves cease to struggle with each other and instead direct their attention to the existing political system, the stage is set for a polarization of politics between the revolutionaries and the establishment”.⁹ In a less active society with regard to political activities, difference of opinion and amalgamation of faction’s plays pivotal and functional role which lead to the inclusion of new groups in the system, increase in participation, closer links between factions and mobilization of other social forces. Polarization or difference of opinion is very essential in the transformation of factional politics to party politics.

Expansion

The political party which has strong appeals to the masses and binds them through an effective organization is called the expansion of the political party. The party leadership, ideology, organizational structure and better strategy adopted by the political parties are the key of their success. In the pattern of party development, parliamentary factions operate with in the political system merge into broader grouping and then begin to activate new groups into politics. The shift from the “factional politics to party politics and increasing competition between parties is directly related to the increased in political participation.”¹⁰

Institutionalization

Institutionalization is an “often-deliberate process whereby a person entering the institution is reprogrammed to accept and conform to strict controls that enables the institution to manage a large number of people in effective manner.”¹¹ In case of political parties, institutionalization is the last stage of the political party’s development because the way in which political participation expanded obviously shapes the party as an organised organization.

Contemporary Pakistan has three hundred and twenty seven registered political parties. Unfortunately, they are yet to be institutionalized. All the political parties most of the time follow the legacy of undemocratic behaviour. The leadership of the political parties has been failed to address the real issues through proper ideology and provide solution with better organizational structure.

There is no definite criterion of measuring the level of institutionalization of political parties. It is a “process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability”.¹² According to Huntington, the parameter to check the institutionalization of any party can be defined as.

- a) Adaptability of the organization,
- b) Complexity of the organization (vastness of units)
- c) Autonomy of the organization and
- d) Coherence.

German Institute of Global and Area Studies also provided four dimensions to gauge the political party's institutionalization. These dimensions are;¹³ "roots in society, autonomy, organization, coherence". An attempt has been made here to evaluate the party politics in Pakistan in the light of above mentioned dimensions and criterions.

1. Roots in the Society/ Adaptability

According to Matthias Basedau & Alexander Stoeck, a well-institutionalized political party should have "stable roots in society, links to society, and number of alternations in party leadership, changes in electoral support after alternation in party leadership, decisional autonomy from individuals and groups".¹⁴ Adaptability of a party is its ability to assimilate new social groups into its fold. In Pakistan, applying this criterion to gauge level of institutionalization gives disappointing findings.

I. Parties as Election Entities

There are three types of the political parties such as electoralist parties, electoral professional parties and catch all parties.¹⁵ During elections, the political parties' in Pakistan spring into action to conduct their campaign what is their main function. They utilize all the 'modern' techniques of election campaign. They also heavily rely on professionals. The "personal attractiveness of the party's candidates is an important criterion for nomination at the expense of other considerations, such as length of service or organizational position within, the party."¹⁶ Electoralist parties in some important respects affect the quality of democracy. Most political parties remain inactive during the elections. Parties have no link with labour and trade unions, lawyer associations. Because of the weakness in the political parties these unions has also deteriorated.

II. Similarity of the Programmes

Similarity of the programmes and mainly sloganeering is the one of the major drawbacks of party politics in Pakistan. Surprisingly, all the political parties have been offering the similar manifestos and if the covers of the manifesto revealed are removed and they mixed up, it is doubtful if the party leaders themselves would have been able to discover which manifesto belong to their party. Lack of research is the major cause of the similarity of the programmes. Personalities matter more rather than the policies. The parties depend on the charismatic attraction of the leaders instead of manifestos.

2. Organization

The second criterion to gauge level of institutionalization is complexity or the organizational level of the parties. All the political parties have organizational apparatus which present at all administrative levels. It acts in the interest of the party's organizational presence. The indicators of this criterion includes

- a) Activities even beyond election campaigns;
- b) Coherence of parliamentary groups;
- c) Moderate relations between intra-party groupings (moderate factions present without any serious differences).

In third world countries, political activities are often concentrated in the capitals during the elections only. A well-organized party should be active in all periods beyond the election campaign. There should be regular meetings of the workers at all levels. Indicators in Pakistan measuring level of institutionalization are not promising.

I. Oligarchy in Political Parties

Oligarchy is a form of government run by a small number of people such as feudals, wealthy businessmen, bureaucrats or powerful military generals. In the same way, political organizations led and controlled by the centralized committees are known as oligarchy in organizations. Unfortunately, almost all the political parties of Pakistan have oligarchical system because they all identified by their founders instead of ideology or policy. For instance, there are core committees and central working committees those not only control the party politics but also give direction to the party.¹⁷

Majority of the political parties did not believe in the party's constitution based organization. Barring few examples, all the parties have been running the affairs through temporary arrangements of electing the office bearers. Although, there are some parties who announced their party election dates but due to increasing internal pressure preferred to postpone the elections. This oligarchical behaviour of political parties is dangerous in the continuation of the parliamentary party politics in the right direction.

II. Party Articulation

In the party articulation, a small number of the people control the affairs of the party. Like the other countries of world, Pakistan has three or four tiers of administrative system. At the same time, all political parties of Pakistan have their tehsil, district and provincial branches. The core committees or the central working committees are the supreme body of the political organizations. The district and tehsil level branches have been less vocal and assertive and more vague and weak than the central organization. This party articulation affects the parliamentary democracy in Pakistan. In the party articulation of Pakistan, top down approach can be witnessed instead of bottom up approach and lower cadres have no role the decision making of the party.¹⁸ Central organization holds all the powers and party resources which is a big hurdle in the way of trickle-down effect of decentralization of power and resources.

Even present political parties have the policy of oblige the influential old stalwarts and its results would be destructive for the democracy and party organization as they proved in the past. Most of the time, they remained dormant and weekly meetings of council and discussions groups were unheard off. Influential occupy strong position in the party.

III. Absence of Research

It has been the dilemma of the party system that there is no concept of intellectual and think tank institutions or societies. This absence of an intellectual flank in the parties can be explained into two ways. First, the political parties themselves are divorced from the doctrinal discussions to attract any intellectual attention or

support. Secondly, free public opinion is muzzled by various administrative and executive devices. The opposition and government also failed to introduce true parliamentary democracy because majority of them lack in the proper organizations of research centres. In the west, almost all the parties have research organ and Pakistani political parties should also copy the technique from the Europe along with so many unnecessary things borrowed from West. Every party have its media wing but remained unable to conduct research and provide intellectual opinion to strengthen the democracy.

3. Autonomy

Another dimension of institutionalized party is its level of autonomy. Notwithstanding its roots in society, the party is relatively autonomous, from individuals and groups. The autonomy of the party can be gauged through its

- a) Membership strength,
- b) Holding of regular party conventions,
- c) Presence of material and personnel resources in the party.

Well-organized political parties have to “balance roots in society with their autonomous organizations. If they cannot decide autonomously on personnel and ideological matters certainly lacks institutionalization in this respect. A political organization which is the instrument of a social group, family, clan, class lacks autonomy and institutionalization”.¹⁹

I. Personalized Politics

The politics of Pakistan is tremendously personalized. Democracy is still a distant dream because personalities and pressure groups are more powerful than the institutions and ideologies.²⁰ The politics revolves around the impressive and influential men while the fate of democratic institutions is hanging in the balance.

At one stage, personalized politics destruct the fabric of party politics. At the same time, it also results in weakening of the democratic system. It further contribute in fragmentation, reinforcing tribal, ethnic, national and other factors. The weakness and lack of infrastructure also has made national integration more difficult to achieve. The dynastic politics is new face of personalized politics which has deteriorated the parliamentary system. It greatly affected the autonomy of the institutions. Feudalism is still the order of the day even in the 21st century. Personalization has become a hindrance in the path of democracy in the third world countries.

II. Relationship between Party and Parliamentary Representatives

One another critical problem of party politics is the nature of relationship among, workers, party leaders and parliamentary representatives. Democracy requires that the parliamentary representatives take precedence over party leaders, but practice has rarely confronted to it. Unfortunately, Pakistan has been going through the same situation and problems which it witnessed soon after partition. In Pakistan, parliamentary members dominate the party politics for four reasons. These reasons still prevail in the political culture of Pakistan. These four reasons are

- a) “The prestige of their office; the rank and file party looked to them with respect and envy;
- b) Their natural capacity; generally they were abler than the leaders outside;
- c) Their capacity to manoeuvre; being used to lobby intrigues, managed to outflank their adversaries within the party; and
- d) Patronage in their hands; by dispensing favours they could buy over many colleagues and outside leaders”.²¹

After entering into the corridors of power, the parliamentary leaders gave no weightage to the party workers on whose behalf they were exercising the power. On the other hand, the party councilors have not been aware with the calamities and political challenges faced by the country so they remained inactive on political, industrial, agricultural, trade, labour problems.

III. Grey Eminence

Grey eminence is a term used for a person who exercises power behind the scenes. Throughout the world, there are some pressure groups, non-governmental, business magnets and land holders who have power to influence the policy of the government. These groups provide money and lend their support to the particular candidates in elections because it is difficult for any individual to control the bigger party from the outside. At the same time, small parties prone to “external monetary influence for a number of good reasons; relative poverty, ambition to outstrip their rivals, lack of discipline, small size, etc. and if the small happened to hold the balance in parliament; it had a field day demanding its own price”.²² Business magnates control different factions inside the political party which is deteriorated the autonomy of the parties and its institutionalization process.

4. Coherence

The last criterion to gauge the institutionalization of the political party is coherence. The political party works as a united organization which allows intra-party disagreement. The coherence of a political party means that an organization can work even having organizational differentiation. Second, since sustainable coherence does not mean “rigid stiffness and intransigence, the party leadership should tolerate partial deviations from the party line without resorting to verbal intransigence, threats, or expulsion of dissidents; this tolerance, however, should not include massive violations of party statutes and principles such as basic ideological values or the principal role as opposition/ government party”.²³ Third, the nature of intra-party politics can also be assessed through factional politics. The presence of different groups is not only a problem but the most important thing is the nature of relationship between the groups. In the political system of Pakistan, the bases of mergers and alliances are personal rather than policy oriented.

The Way Forward

The problems of party politics are solvable in Pakistan through integrated and cohesive approach. Here are few suggestions for strengthening party politics which will benefit the parliamentary democracy.

- Political parties should focus on the issue based politics. In Pakistan, there are too many political parties but few principles. Pakistan has been facing extraordinary challenges on the different fronts like population, security and law enforcement. During these circumstances, Pakistan's civilian government always remains weak and ineffectual. Majority of the political parties tend to criticize leadership and personalities of the other political parties and other parties also pay in the same coin. Due to that non-democratic approach the parliamentary democracy always has been remain on stake. The political parties should not remain busy in the character assassination because propagandistic approach resulted in the weakening and derailment of the democracy in Pakistan.
- Political parties should introduce and promote research and policy culture in their organizations to gather and provide proper information to its party members. This will help the workers of the parties to generate debate regarding important issues and to find out their solutions. They should also organize study circles. It will open the new vistas for the members of a community. The final product of these discussions is to provide solutions and evaluate strong and weak points in a large group discussion. These study circles can play effective role in bridging the gulf among the political parties. Research culture will also facilitate better parliamentary performance and input of the parties on various issues.
- There should be proper mechanism for the training of the party workers and political legislators because issues based politics is only possible when members are aware regarding the issues of concern. The training workshops of the party workers, election agents and voters are also important. The legislative training of the legislators is also important because it is witnessed that majority of the parliamentarians remained unaware about the laws promulgated by the legislative assemblies.
- Political parties should be more open for inner democracy and meritocracy. The parties should take input from the lower circles while electing the party representatives. It will help in strengthening parliamentary democracy. It will be good omen for the democratic culture if parties succeeded to manage party elections as they organised for the presidential candidates in USA through open debates.
- Political Parties should enhance proactive role of women in the organization and structure of the party because they constitute almost fifty per cent of the population of Pakistan. Reserved seats in the assemblies should be filled through active workers of the party instead of daughters and wives of the “big wigs”.
- Youth is the most important part of any society. About thirty five per cent of Pakistan is comprised on youth. They have played indispensable role in emancipation of the political parties from static positions. They can be an important catalyst for the ongoing party politics. The ban on student unions should be lifted. Students are always motivated towards change, dynamism and novelty. They also share the onus of enhancing credibility

and efficiency of the political parties to strengthen democracy. Some steps should be taken to incorporate democracy in education at all levels to promote democratic values, norms and practices in youth. It will help to provide training of political tolerance to the party workers.

- Media should play its positive role because in the absence of intellectual organs in the political parties, it becomes more important and relevant to keep in touch the parties with the ongoing political and parliamentary arrangements. Media can play decisive role in the development of party politics and strengthening the parliamentary democracy working as a "watchdog" by reporting results and monitoring vote counting.
- Election Commission of Pakistan should play its proactive role to minimize the use of money in the politics. ECP should also utilize all its powers to hold free, fair and transparent elections. It should also make some mechanism for the training of electoral staff because it not only results in the improvement of the election performance but it would also be a key of the true parliamentary democracy in the country.

Conclusion

Max Webber described three stages of party development; from autocratic cliques to the parties of nobles and finally to plebiscitarian democracy. According to that definition, party politics in Pakistan is in its intermediate stage of evolution. The transformation of the party politics in Pakistan is the need of the hour to make Pakistan viable democratic country.

Strictly speaking, political parties at large centers of opinion and worst feudal clans, phantom groups, or religious associations. The present political scenario of the Pakistan is nothing more than coterie of cooperating office seeking politicians. Weak political party bring weaker executive which creates distrust of parliamentary democracy. This disenchantment of the public from the democracy leads towards extra constitutional intervention and authoritarian solutions.

Samuel P. Huntington commented that "military coups do not destroy parties; they ratify the deterioration which has already been occurred due to fragmentation of leadership, the evaporation of the mass support, the decay of the organization structure, the shift of party leaders from party to bureaucracy, the rise of personalism, all herald the moment when colonels occupy the capital"²⁴.

Notes & References

-
- ¹Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 7th Edition, s.v
- ²Mary Hawkes Worth and Maurice Kogan, eds., *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics*, vol.1 (London: Routledge, 1992), 27.
- ³<http://www.yourdictionary.com/party-politics>. Retrieved on May 22, 2016.
- ⁴Zoya Hasan, eds. *Parties and Party Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.
- ⁵Safdar Mahmood, *Pakistan Political Roots and Development 1947-1999* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 351.
- ⁶Zoya Hasan, eds. *Parties and Party Politics in India*, 2.
- ⁷Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 412.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Ibid. 416.
- ¹⁰Ibid. 418.
- ¹¹<http://changingminds.org/disciplines/sociology/articles/institutionalization.htm>. Accessed on May 28, 2016.
- ¹²Talcott Parsons, ed. *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe III, Free Press, 1952), 143, 239.
- ¹³Matthias Basedau & Alexander Stoeck, "Measuring Party Institutionalization in Developing Countries: A New Research Instrument Applied to 28 African Political Parties". *German Institute of Global and Area Studies*, February 2008, 1-28.
- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 264.
- ¹⁶Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond, *Species of the Political Parties: A New Typology* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 185.
- ¹⁷K. K. Aziz, *Party Politics in Pakistan 1947-58* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1976), 209.
- ¹⁸Mohammad Waseem and Mariam Mufti, November 2012, *Political Parties in Pakistan: Organization and Power Structure*. Lahore: Lahore University of Management Sciences, xx.
- ¹⁹Samuel P. Huntington, 20.
- ²⁰Anas Malik, *Political Survival in Pakistan* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 43. See also Maleeha Lodhi, *Pakistan's Encounter with Democracy* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1994), 220-221.
- ²¹K. K. Aziz, *Party Politics in Pakistan 1947-58*. 197-198.
- ²²Ibid. 225.
- ²³Matthias Basedau & Alexander Stoeck, 1-28.
- ²⁴Samuel P. Huntington, 409.