

Paradox of Our Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

Almost all present day societies, democratic, semi-democratic and despotic, have political parties that link citizens to the government. Occasionally, military dictators – such as Franco in Spain, Pinochet in Chile, Irshad in Bangladesh, Musharraf in Pakistan or generals in the developing countries try to dispense with political parties and blame them for the country's political, economic and social ills. But even these despotic rulers set up pliant parties to bolster their rule, and after the dictators depart, free-flouting parties are exposed almost immediately. Whether one likes or dislikes them, most countries seem unable to do without political parties. To use a "system's phrase", political parties are a major "inputting" device, allowing citizens to get their needs and wishes heard by the government. Of course, without political parties, individuals would stand alone and be ignored by the government. Therefore, at the very least, parties give people the feeling that they are not utterly powerless. In Pakistan, however, political parties have become such a commodity that is readily available to the unconstitutional military rulers and non-representative elites for political maneuverings and extending their political legitimacy. The result is obvious --- increasing disenchantment with political parties and decreasing trust on the "leaders". A striking contradiction in political parties of Pakistan is their internal deficiencies and undemocratic structures and practices, even though the same parties fight for or seem to struggle for democracy in the country. Socio-political and socio-economic development, therefore, have turned into a "false dawn" and Pakistanis by and large have realized that their freedom meant little and no more than a change of masters. This paper focuses on the trend of declining faith in political parties and underlines the problem areas from the point of view of initiating the reforms in political parties, ranging from democratization within to evolving an issue-oriented political course of action.

KEY WORDS: Political Culture, Political Integration, National Integration, Political Decay, National Politics, Modernization of Political Parties, Constitution

Political Parties-An Integral Part of Political Culture

The political culture of a nation or a country is determined by its history, economy, religion, folkways and political development, in particular. Political development is a fairly objective path of political progress, through which

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societies move towards further political sophistication. The accomplishments of political development, therefore, are “knowledge about politics, level of political interest, psychological involvement with the outcomes of political actions, extent of political socialization, extent of political communication, belief in and acceptance of the competitive party system and fair franchise, support for the common goals of the nation, strength of identification with the system (and parties as sub-systems), sense of political efficiency and self-accountability for the purpose of creating a clean political environment (Alexander, 1978:141). On account of these gains, it can be said that a country has achieved three characteristics in its political growth. These are:

1. An increased separation of powers, with a strong system of checks and balances in the state, coupled with the weakening of traditional sources of centralization of authority or power;
2. The growth of responsive, extractive, regulative and distributive characteristics of the political system;
3. Increased popular participation in politics and greater identification of individuals with their specialization (Rodee, 1976: 318-320).

To be more specific, the ingredients of political development can be stated as follows:

- i. Political Integration
- ii. National Integration
- iii. Values Integration and Elite and Mass Integration, resulting in an integrative political process
- iv. Democratization
- v. Adoption of secular values in the field of politics
- vi. End of discrimination
- vii. Rational distribution of human and economic resources
- viii. Greater economy building capacity and containment of the class divide
- ix. Differentiation and specification of political roles and structures
- x. Social harmony and maintenance of law and order

In reality, political development means the capability of political parties to synchronise the different sectoral growths and to integrate them in the political system as a whole. Political parties create a fine balance between demands and support, i.e., interest articulation and interest aggregation. Professor Samuel J. Eldersveld considers the political party from a behavioral viewpoint, as a “Social group engaging in patterned activity within the social matrix (Michael, 2000: 189). When interpreted as a social organism, the party possesses role playing individuals within an identifiable social unit, perceiving and attempting to achieve specific goals. A political party is also a polity or miniature political system with an authority structure, patterns of power distribution, a representative process, electoral and decision making system. In this connection, the political parties are looked upon as an institution or a mechanism that in a sense, stands between the public, particularly the voters in a political society and the government. It helps people to identify and articulate their interests (David, 1985: 263-264). Assume

that the Pakistani public feels strongly about lawlessness, unemployment, income taxes, religious extremism or détente with India. In this context, political parties are manifested to provide a forum for discussion, a platform of position on the issues, where as leaders are to express views, all leading to the aggregation of public demands and all relevant aspects in a political system. Thus, political parties are considered to be ventilators in the suffocated chaotic conditions of a society and are supposed to play the role of tools of change (Thomas, 1988: 27).

Root-Causes of Political Decay in Pakistan

Since independence, Pakistan has failed to establish a cohesive and transparent political party system and a true parliamentary system of governance. Although, the Independence Act of 1947, which was enacted to give effect to the Mountbatten Plan of June 3, 1947, gave powers to the constituent assemblies of both Pakistan and India to frame their respective constitutions and to evolve a democratic political culture, yet the ruling and opposition parties in Pakistan could not agree upon a consensus formula due to problems, relating to their internal working.

The Interim Constitution of 1947 and the Objectives Resolution of 1949 clearly guaranteed the fundamental rights including freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship and association, subject to law and public morality. The Constitutions of 1956 and 1962, despite being poles apart and contradictory to one another, recognized the existence of political parties and public representation. However, political upheavals during 50's and anti-political harsh laws / regulations in the Martial Law such as EBDO kept the political parties under tremendous pressure which resulted in lack of institutional profundity and the chronic problem of defection. Furthermore, the Constitution of 1973, which provided for parliamentary sovereignty and a federal form of government, strongly articulated the fundamental rights (Afzal, 1991: 17).

Article 17 of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, under the title “freedom of association” empowers every citizen of Pakistan, the right to form associations or unions. This however, is subject to the following limitations:-

Exceptions and Qualification

- A state employee can neither form a party nor become a member of any political party;
- Reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan, public order or morality;
- No political party shall promote sectarian, ethnic or regional hatred;
- Every political party shall account for the sources of its funds;
- Every political party shall hold intra-party elections to elect its office bearers (Ibid).

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Pakistan has had following four spells of “democratic rule”;

1. First in 1947-1958
2. Second in 1971-1977
3. Third in 1988-1999
4. Fourth in 2008-to date

Thus, in Pakistan’s 62 years of history, political parties were in power for only 26 years. Remaining 36 years have either been under military dictatorship, or a quasi-democratic dispensation, allowing very limited functional space to political parties.

From 1951 to 1958, seven prime ministers were removed, while during the same period, Pakistan had only two Governor Generals and one Commander-in-Chief. From 1985 to 1999, all five prime ministerial tenures were aborted through premature dismissal of their governments. Nine national legislatures were dismissed prematurely, out of the twelve that had been established so far. However, only one elected government in Pakistan’s history could complete its constitutional term, from 1971 to 1977 (Aziz, 1988: 56). There is no denying the fact that successive unconstitutional regimes adopted a policy of de-politicization of political parties. To de-politicize the associational realms and further render political parties irrelevant to the state, successive military regimes came out with non-party elections. Therefore, local body elections held during the eras of General Ayub, General Zia and General Musharaf were all non-party based. Two general elections in Pakistan were also held on a non-party basis.

Parliamentary systems in developed countries are characterized by parties that are highly structured and tend towards unified action, block voting and distinct party platforms. This party discipline is required in parliamentary systems, primarily because deviation from the party line could result in bringing down the government. Parliamentary systems require that the executive and legislative members agree upon issues, lest it forces the dissolution of the government (Clemens, 1998: 121-123). Similarly, opposition parties theoretically want to maximize their power in a system, dominated by the majority and by voting as a block and diffusing internal dissent. Opposition party discipline is more likely to be effective, if the party or parties perceive that they can eventually gain a majority (Epstein, 1967: 111). The existence of an opposition – in essence, an alternative government – acts as a restraint on those, who are in power. Overtime, in both new and revived democracies, conflict between the government and opposition parties in fact, helps establish democratic norms and rules (McDonald, 1979: 229-232).

In case of Pakistan, whereas military take overs and establishment of non-representative and unconstitutional governments resulted in bans on political parties and witch-hunt of politicians forcing political parties and their leadership to operate under structural constraints in the face of executive decrees and Martial Law regulations on one hand and on the other, political parties also failed to modernize and professionalize their structures, which is a major pre-requisite for

effective democratic participation, promotion of capable leadership and good governance. Political parties in Pakistan have seen deficient on these counts (Bokhari, 1989: 15-17). Therefore, both military-dominated establishments as well as political parties are responsible, for what we call political decay in Pakistan politics.

This study endeavors to carry out a dichotomic delineation of Pakistani politics into reform dimensions at two levels. At the first level, it attempts to look into those areas which are instrumental in shaping the political culture. At the second level, it suggests the harnessing of such factors which may devise a positive course of action in our national politics.

First Level

There are following problem areas, intrinsic to the internal workings of political parties in the country, which lie in the domain of political party reforms:

- One of the patterns in the contemporary political profile of the country is the element of localization of politics. Since 1985, it has been witnessed that public campaigns are largely devoid of national issues, resulting in community rather “Beradri Based” voting as the major determinant of national as well as local elections. Broader issues of public policy were overtaken by family and kinship identities. Another aspect of localization of politics is found in the institutional mechanisms of the administrative set up in district governments. The previous elected local administration was supposedly non-party. It reinforced the de-institutionalization of politics, including de-legitimization of party politics at the local level.
- Successive military regimes pursued a policy of de-institutionalization of political parties (Khan, 2005: 356-358). Consequently, the institutional core of the political culture gave way to a relatively non-institutional approach to politics as a sizeable number of political workers and their leaders joined hand in hand with the illegitimate rulers for political mileage. Political parties, as the vital institution, have thus been replaced by local, communal, sectarian, parochial and constituency based patterns of politics. Therefore, the manifesto, policy, past performance and leadership of political parties are no longer the most significant determinants of politics.
- The intervention of military establishment and its sister organizations viz, the civil bureaucracy and behind-the-scenes-intelligence operatives, have rendered another “Service” to the political culture by promoting the phenomenon of factionalization of political community (Ahmad, 2004: 1-2). An obvious product of this strategy is the emergence of multiple factions and leaders. All the mainstream and national political parties in Pakistan suffered from this split or factionalization phenomenon and their breakaway factitons caused serious damage to national integration. Recent statistics denote a dangerous trend of factionalization, as all the major parties have more than one faction at the moment. It is pertinent to note that six factions

of Pakistan Muslim league qualify for election even today. This pattern has contributed to the erosion of nation-wide/mainstream political parties. Factionalization does not augur well for the political stability and integrity of the country as it helps in the emergence of ethnic/sub-national and sectarian models of politics (Ibid).

- Role of political parties has been unenviable due to the chronic problem of defection, corrupt practices in pursuit of campaign financing, as well as the absence of open and accountable activities of office holders. Political parties in Pakistan generally desist from disclosing their income and expenditure. Therefore, it is always difficult to comment upon the issue of party finance and its implications for the party structure. It is a known fact that much more money is collected at the centre than in the districts, with the result that political parties tend to be more centralized. More money is donated by prosperous industrialists, traders and landholders than by common members or the community through normal subscriptions, which makes parties more subservient to their wealthy patrons and more divorced from their own rank and file (NDI, 2000: 61). Unless political parties in Pakistan engage themselves in fund raising campaigns, the rich electoral candidates will continue to blackmail the parties, as they feel they are not dependent on their respective parties.
- Tradition of holding periodic and transparent elections within the political parties is not established as yet in Pakistan (Saeed, 1997: 21). Intra-party elections are a legal requirement now but as per previous routine, the political parties normally get their top leadership elected “un-opposed”. This trend not only tarnishes the image of the leadership but also keeps the democratization process away from fresh and skilled leadership.
- Political parties in Pakistan seem to be ill-equipped for providing in-house training and research facilities to their law-makers. Of course, it is due to this lack of party priority that we find poor performance among legislators in areas of legislation (Dawn, 2000, October 29).
- There is a visible absence of the natural process of political leadership formation. Political parties in Pakistan do not encourage party workers from lower ranks to develop themselves into leaders and politicians. Input of local branches of the party in policy issues is minimal. Party policies are generally formulated at the top level, in a highly personalized and individualized manner. Political parties do not have any hierarchical pattern whereby local leaders could gradually move upward through district, provincial and national levels.
- Parties wielding governmental power often deny legitimate space to opposition parties in Pakistan (Safdar, 2000: 389). Treatment of the opposition in Pakistan, typically includes a ban on activities of political opponents, dismissals of opposition controlled provincial government, victimization of opposition politicians and other draconian measures.

Therefore, the opposition in Pakistan remains very weak unless “power brokers” from the establishment strengthen it by putting pressures on the ruling party.

Second Level

Following aspects of proposed reforms can serve as the ball bearings of a changed and transparent political culture:

- As the political parties perform the most important public service, therefore, public funding of parties on a regular and transparent basis provides a level playing field for parties and a support to the weak and under-funded parties (Nazeer, 2004: 16). Public subsidies also help limit the need for donations from unlawful sources and prevent corruption in party fund raising. Such a system in Pakistan, if properly institutionalized, can promote political mobilization and participation of many dormant groups, especially the educated middle class strengthen an accountable, responsible and service oriented political culture and help check existing corruption in political financing.
- Modernization and professionalization of political parties is increasingly necessary for their capacity building (The News, 2006, April 6). For effective democratic participation, promotion of capable leadership and good governance, the political parties have to undergo a long-term, continual multi-dimensional capacity building process through training, research, management and information skills. This requires inputs both from outside and within political parties for their capacity building.
- Democracy and good governance both require effective participation of the opposition. The opposition should be entitled to be represented, proportionate to its numbers. Opposition should be entitled to a number of standing committee chairmanships, proportionate to its members. Opposition must also be represented on any select committee, competent to take cognizance of secret activities, regardless of their nature.
- It is critically important that political parties in Pakistan should establish mechanisms for internal democracy and transparency in the party structure. Holding of periodic elections where party members can freely and independently choose their leaders at local, provincial and national levels, should be a permanent feature. Ordinary party members / office bearers should be encouraged to express their opinions, regarding issues of public-interest and importance.
- Political parties in Pakistan should devolve more authority from party headquarters to local branch offices in order to improve the decision – making process and accountability of its constituents.
- There is a need for political parties in Pakistan to institutionalize a variety of measures to promote ethical conduct among their members, leaders and candidates, and to punish those who engage in unethical behavior or violate

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the laws of the party (The Nation, 2004, November 9). Parties should come out with codes of conduct, written regulations, reinforcing preventive measures, such as training, procedures for enforcement, particularly monitoring and evaluation and disciplinary processes. This would greatly help in the development of political leadership that can fulfill public expectations of high morality and honesty.

- Political party development requires extensive engagement of the civil society. Therefore, civil society should play the role of a watch dog on the performance of political parties by monitoring parties on the issues of public importance.

Conclusion

Pakistan's political history is replete with innumerable problems. These problems depict a pathetic state of affairs in the country. The absence of constitutional / democratic governance has produced an executive – dominated system or even an overbearing central government, all of which have grave implications for the political system. Some 36 years, out of 62 years of existence have passed without judicially enforceable fundamental rights. It will be instructive to note that these 36 years of emergency and the absence of constitutional rule severely obstructed the nation building and state building process. Country has been left with an executive dominated political system that does not provide for the independence and sovereignty of the legislature. It denies legislature the exclusive power to elect and supervise a functioning government as typically required in a parliamentary form of government. The system also negates a competitive and fair process of political ascendancy to power. However, the solution to these complex and thorny problems and threats to Pakistan's political culture rests with the political parties.

There has been a rapid spread and growth of challenges to the integrity of Pakistan. At the prime question faced by all political parties at present is the survival of the country. A network of anti-state forces is virtually running the break up campaigns, trying to create state(s)-within-the-state by pushing the state apparatus into irrelevance. Therefore, to avoid political and economic apocalypse, a social compact is necessary among the representatives of political parties, their leaders, civil society, intellectuals and all other elements that propel a political culture to grow and deliver. If the society is to be built in accordance with the vision of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the political parties in Pakistan should join hands and bring up a concise programme to effect social justice and implement the rule of law, by reforming themselves first. Unbridled populism of regional, religious, sectarian or communal variety will end only in disaster. National objectives and targets on economic, social, political, educational and related issues need a careful blending of various factors, rather than merely a pronounced tilt in favour of the numerically larger sections of the population and

their representatives. And, of course, political parties can make it by motivating their supporters to agree upon a minimum consensus above party politics.

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