

Democracy, cynicism and history in Pakistan

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It is not that people in Pakistan no longer feel the pain of their fellow, suffering citizens (although violence and precarity do have dehumanising effects). Perhaps what is more paralysing is the elevation of cynicism as the dominant ideology in popular imagination, particularly as a response to the prevalent suffering.

There are few concepts in modern political thought that have generated as much popular enthusiasm as the concept of democracy. In Pakistan as well, the desire for a more just and humane society was intertwined with the struggle for democratic rule – a movement that witnessed countless sacrifices rendered by ordinary citizens.

It is, therefore, understandable that the waning enthusiasm for democracy around the world that marks our contemporary moment has caused much concern among analysts and political theorists. Such worry stems not only from the growing sentiment that the political class is disconnected from the everyday realities faced by ordinary people, but also that the mechanisms for accountability and popular participation have become obsolete and ineffective. There is a palpable sense in Pakistan as well that the democratic dispensation is neither meeting the expectations of the electorate nor are the voters powerful enough to influence the trajectory of politics.

A few relatively unnoticed reports from the past few weeks are perhaps symbolic of the indifference of ordinary people towards the political process. The first focused on the prevalence and impact of malnutrition in Pakistan. A joint venture by the Pakistan Scaling up Nutrition and the United Nations World Food Programme, the report claims that the monetary costs of malnutrition – particularly from the loss of manpower – is around \$7.6 billion annually. The next point highlights what this statistic means in terms of human suffering: 177,000 children under the age of five die due to malnutrition every year.

As if such a colossal loss of innocent lives was not enough, another report – which was, once again, ignored in public debate – conducted by the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources, claimed that 84 percent of the country's population was supplied water that was not fit for consumption. Moreover, 14 percent of the water supply was heavily contaminated with arsenic which poses a grave threat to human health.

Such spectacular neglect on the part of the government is not, in itself, an indictment of democracy since the very concept entails an assertion of popular sovereignty to hold those in power accountable. What perplexes many is why such studies, rather than causing national embarrassment and popular agitation, do not even enter the political imagination – which remains fixated on more glamorous themes, such as the recent feud in parliament between two politicians from rival parties.

It is not that people in Pakistan no longer feel the pain of their fellow, suffering citizens (although violence and precarity do have dehumanising effects). Perhaps what is more paralysing is the elevation of cynicism as the dominant ideology in popular imagination, particularly as a response to the prevalent suffering. A cynical point of view does not endorse the prevailing situation as

desirable. Instead, it simply denies the possibility of change, asserting that the attempts at transformation will only end up reconstituting the status quo with the added misery of violence and stigmatisation directed at those fighting for change.

What allows cynicism to act as a sinister disciplining mechanism for the system is that it includes the ideological critique of the status quo within its ambit while simultaneously securing its perpetuation in practice. This is the reason why all those who comfort themselves by claiming to know 'how bad things really are' – while at the same time denying the possibility of collective transformation – do not realise how closely wedded they are to the ruling ideology since the latter no longer justifies itself by claiming to be virtuous, but by denying the possibility of an alternative project.

Anyone remotely familiar with the history of social movements knows that there is nothing natural about this state of cynicism – its dominance being a historical contingency of our times. It is the divorcing of social contradictions – classically understood as cleavages across class, gender, ethnic and religious – from the sphere of politics that has eliminated the latter as a site for socio-economic transformation and turned it into a bureaucratically-managed affair. The deep structural continuity between both military and civilian rule in terms of what many political economists have described as an elite-centric state and economy, has had a powerful demoralising impact on activists who suffered for the cause of democracy in Pakistan.

The active criminalisation and demonisation of the organs of popular will, including trade unions, students unions, peasant committees as well as unacknowledged restrictions on the media, have eroded the capacity of the people to self-organise to create alternative political possibilities.

As a result, politics is no longer viewed as an active process of popular mobilisation based on the existing contradictions in society to expand the set of choices available to the electorate. Instead, the docility induced by cynicism turns citizens into passive consumers of political choices, with each election cycle offering different candidates that have little to differentiate themselves in substance – a condition similar to the choice between buying Coca Cola and Pepsi in the market.

Yet, politics in the somewhat tarnished name of democracy has produced some of the finest moments of human resilience and creativity – particularly in terms of opening novel possibilities through collective action. The idea of abstract equality and citizenship would have been impossible to imagine if it had not been for the courageous people who participated in the dramatic events of the American, French and Haitian revolutions in the late 18th century to overthrow colonial, feudal and slave-based rule, respectively. Pakistan itself has witnessed an arduous journey for equality and dignity articulated in the name of democracy, ranging from Fatima Jinnah's challenge to the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan – one of the most repressed stories of our national memory – to the countless and nameless activists who braved torture, incarceration and exile in the subsequent years to fight for the realisation of popular sovereignty.

However, in the current moment the disappointment with an uninspiring government colours the reception of these struggles as simply a long and painful proof of the eternal fixity of the power structure in the country. How do we then avoid cynicism without necessarily becoming the cheerleaders of 'democratic' governments who continue to disempower the citizenry while failing to provide many the basic necessities required for survival?

Walter Benjamin, the 20th century German philosopher, proposed a way out of this apparent impasse in relation to social movements from the past. For him, the past consists of not only those events that happened but also of the processes that could have happened and never did. The utopian promise of a revolution – or the indefatigable determination of activists resisting tyrannical military regimes – gained an eternal life of their own beyond the contingent trajectory of their immediate

consequences. In other words, even if the upheavals are followed by betrayal, the pure emancipatory potential of such events maintains a spectral presence in the present, opening up the possibility of choosing paths not taken previously.

Our relation to pro-democracy movements in Pakistan should be based on a similar search for rescuing the potentialities contained in them from the history of subsequent compromises and betrayals by the political leadership. A defaulting present cannot be given the sole authority to judge history – especially since the prevailing cynicism is not merely reflecting the current paralysis, but is entrenching it.

Considering the social catastrophes we face in the shape of food security, housing, water (and now even clean air), sanitation, and education, we urgently need to overcome the debilitating indifference caused by the prevalent ideological milieu. In this arduous but necessary journey, we must not treat history as a succession of failures, but as a contradictory process of possibilities and dangers. Only then will we identify the openness of the present and begin to take responsibility for what did not happen, but must happen now.

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P.S.

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