

Pakistan's cyclical politics

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The recent 'rejection' of the government's notification on Dawnleaks by the army was interpreted by analysts as a sign of increasing fissures between the apparatuses of the state. That it was the civilian government that panicked, rather than the military high-command for its legal insubordination, confirmed the essential truth about power: it is not located in the pages of a constitution but rests with those who are able to 'demonstrate' it in moments of crisis.

Such overt interventions of the military in the political arena are complemented with rising indifference, if not outright disillusionment, to the procedural details of democratic rule. The public response to the Panamagate verdict further confirms the lack of enthusiasm for defending democratically elected governments. Does this mean that Pakistanis essentially prefer dictatorial rule, and gravitate towards it at opportune moments?

A cursory glance at Pakistan's history reveals a different story. Few societies have demonstrated such resilience in the face of authoritarian rule. From Fatima Jinnah's challenge to Ayub Khan to the lawyers' movement against the Musharraf government, our history is replete with instances of popular rage directed at authoritarianism. Yet, once civilian rule is restored, rather than critiquing its shortcomings from within the system, we immediately become nostalgic for what has just passed. And like all nostalgia, ours is also one for a golden place and era that never actually existed, except in the realm of our memory.

Much of modernisation theory has argued that societies develop through a linear path, going from feudal to capitalist, and in the political field from authoritarian to democratic. This notion of history is challenged by events in Pakistan, where one mode of governance is superseded only for it to return in a few years. Rather than linear, we remain victims of a cyclical consciousness, where the vestiges of the past perpetually haunt our imaginary, and prevent us from moving on. 'The more things change, the more they remain the same' seems to be an apt description for our political history.

Our task is to explain the basis of this obsessive repetition that seems to have taken hold of our consciousness. My hypothesis is that one fundamental basis for this cycle is the dangerous disconnect between the political sphere and the social sphere. Let me explain.

There is indeed a democratic ethos in Pakistan's polity that makes the prolonged rule of dictatorships, like those in much of the Arab world, almost unthinkable. The repeated bouts of popular agitation stem from the Subcontinent's common anti-colonial history. Colonial rule promised a gradual movement towards self-rule for Indians once they were sufficiently 'civilised', while perpetually deferring the final date for the completion of this civilisational mission. Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has called it the "waiting room of history" mode of politics, where the colonised were expected to patiently wait for the transfer of power.

Anti-colonial politics were directed precisely against this mode of waiting – by demanding self-rule in the immediate here and now. Rather than accepting colonial arguments against the inherent

deficiency of Indian subjects, anti-colonial leaders argued that Indians were ready for self-rule, and colonial tactics of deferral were a mask for perpetual plunder of the region's wealth. According to Chakrabarty, the history of anti-colonialism produced a "politics of impatience" as a response to the colonial "politics of waiting".

This partly explains why governments in South Asia find it impossible to rule with the confidence of a Gulf monarch or 20th-century Baath Party officials. The drudgery, alienation and humiliation experienced by citizens are directed against governments that are accused of 'abandoning' their citizens, an allegation that gains potency from its deployment against the British during the anti-colonial movement. Yet, whereas this impatience has led to a widening of the Indian polity with the inclusion of lower castes, classes and regional and anti-corruption movements, in Pakistan this rage is primarily mobilised to demand a return to an imagined past.

It is here that the question of social reform, if not a social revolution, becomes central for overcoming cyclical consciousness. For example, in Europe, revolts against monarchies remained common throughout the Dark Ages, as well as the Renaissance. What was distinct about the French revolutionaries was that they attacked the entire edifice on which the authority of the monarchy rested; the church, the nobility, the feudals etc, and replaced them with the concept of citizens, representation and separation of powers. While this new republicanism has had a tortured history, it nonetheless ensured that nostalgia for the monarchy remained an impossible desire, lacking a material base in society.

On the other hand, a major reason for our cyclical consciousness is that democratic forces have been unable to forge a social coalition that will have no interest in a return to authoritarian rule. While political parties are able to use the public's desire for change to force military juntas to re-institute the constitution, they are unable to build a large and effective alternative power that could see its interests reflected only under democratic rule.

Trade unions, student groups and media organisations remain either banned or under strict surveillance, international financial institutions and their demands remain central to financial policy, bureaucrats remain arrogant and the critique of our national security policy remains outside the purview of acceptable discourse, while ethnic and religious minorities continue to experience the horror of mere existence. In other words, despite formal democracy, the lived experience of millions continues to remain one of subjugation, fear and humiliation.

This is not to suggest that there is no difference between the two forms of rule, or that political parties have not developed an elaborated electoral machine for themselves. Yet, such power quickly evaporates in the event of a coup d'état, where the enthusiastic participation of the people is required to save democracy. But whether it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif, they witnessed their political machines melt as their allies deserted them and joined military juntas en masse. Yet, such political figures remain indispensable for political parties once civilian rule is restored. Faisal Saleh Hayat's recent re-entry into the PPP, despite his betrayal in 2002 to become Musharraf's interior minister, is the latest example of how the shift from military rule to civilian rule does not produce a rupture in this logic of power.

For Ambedkar, the Dalit leader and astute political thinker of colonial and postcolonial India, Indian democracy could only work as long as it allowed for the expression of contradictions within India's social life, in particular the caste and religious problem, rather than their suppression through force. For democracy to acquire popular appeal, it must not only allow for dissent, but must also give space to embarrass the rulers so as to force an acknowledgement of social ills and a willingness to address them. This way, marginalised social groups would end up seeing their political being attached to democratic rule, thus becoming a bulwark against authoritarian rule.

Rather than looking down upon the people of Pakistan for their lack of interest in democracy, we should ask whether political parties give sufficient reason to citizens to identify with them. If a Hari in Sindh or a katchi abadi resident elsewhere cannot differentiate between life under democracy or life under military rule, then the emptiness of democracy is the fault of those leaders in whose name ordinary people have given countless sacrifices.

Only a political force capable of connecting the realm of everyday life with national-level concerns will be able to overcome the unending tussle between civilian and military rule so as to begin focusing on ways to deepen democracy. And only then will we end the cyclical nightmare we find ourselves, and begin to dream about possible, alternative futures.

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