

Pakistan: The political worker: in the winter of despair

Wednesday 29 September 2021, by [JAN Ammar Ali](#) (Date first published: 12 January 2020).

Historically, the struggle for civilian supremacy, and upholding of constitutional principles, has provided our political theatre with a sense of purpose, with political workers and leaders making all kinds of sacrifices for the cause.

And, often, they have suffered a sense of despair and helplessness when abrupt decisions by political parties supported individual whims over institutional reform, casting a paralyzing impact on political activists as they witnessed the replacement of ideological battles with a sort of managed consensus. There have been few instances starker than the latest such “unanimous” act by our political leadership.

The strange lack of public celebration on such a thumping parliamentary majority betrays a widespread sentiment that there was something deeply disingenuous about the whole process. Even government supporters seem relatively reluctant in claiming a victory where the opposition surrendered without a blush. Perhaps the shock was felt most intensely by the workers of political parties, who sustained the dreams of resistance and democracy in a society rapidly drifting towards authoritarianism. Within a week, their entire narrative was dislodged not by their opponents, but by the political leadership that they had trusted despite the persistent propaganda and repression against pro-democracy forces.

This sudden capitulation has further blurred horizons in an already disoriented society. But what is shocking is the response of the country’s political leadership to the voices of dissent emanating from their own party workers. The opposition’s leadership is hiding behind the veil of some deep wisdom that is only accessible to the top echelons of the party hierarchy, a level of understanding that is beyond the comprehension of those who keep the parties alive at the grassroots level.

Such an argument reduces the idea of the worker to an unthinking instrument that can be used for political rallies and electioneering. On the other hand, decisions regarding governance and political strategy are deemed too complex for ordinary mortals, re-enforcing the aristocratic divide between mental and physical labour. These views are deeply insulting to the intelligence of political workers who have persistently exposed engineered lies and propaganda to defend democracy and political parties in the country. This fidelity to the truth has come at immense personal and physical costs for these dreamers.

The untold story of political workers in Pakistan is a tale of resistance in the face of hangings, imprisonment, lashes, exile and financial ruin. They have held onto their commitment not because conditions drifted them towards political parties. Instead, they had to make conscious decisions against the flow of history, upholding the vanishing ideals of democracy and equality through personal (and often physical) suffering. There is no value that one can place on the years spent by political workers in the dungeons of military dictators for their refusal to desert the political organizations that they supported.

To claim that such people are undeserving of an engagement on key decisions that will impact the struggle for democracy is an affront to the very idea of political activism. To make matters worse, Khawaja Asif aired a pervasive sentiment among political leaders that those who are most vocal in the fight for democracy often limit their activism to angry rants on social media without bothering to come out on the streets. While such an argument underplays the pressures and consequences of being outspoken on social media, it also ignores the history of betrayals experienced by activists that have made them reluctant participants in the country's politics.

After each cycle of intense political upheavals, our political leadership has made spectacular compromises with the powers that be. This 'deep wisdom' followed in the wake of the 1971 disaster and also permitted a manipulated and managed democracy from 1988-1999 in which political parties were vying to attain the emperor's favour. Even this truncated democracy was deemed intolerable, and resulted in General Musharraf's coup of 1999. Similarly, in the last few years political parties have abdicated a number of responsibilities in accordance with their policy of institutional appeasement. Yet, the space for democracy continues to shrink, and parties remain more marginalized and weak than ever before.

It is these U-turns that have reduced faith in the commitment of party leaderships in pursuing the struggle for democracy. It is clear that these party leaders are not in possession of any deep wisdom that justifies their capitulation. In fact, the compromises have not even resulted in any sustainable power-sharing formula in the country. Instead, we have witnessed a chaotic form of short-termism that elevates immediate results over any long-term political objectives. The desire to be selected has overwhelmed the passion for democracy.

The worst aspect of this tragedy is that, despite the obsessive invocation of 'crisis' in our political lexicon, the power structure in the country remains incredibly stable. We are still caught in the unresolved dialectic of military versus civilian rule, with continuous reversals condemning our consciousness to a cyclical form that prevents us from moving onto other concerns of great importance. Part of the reason is that any mass upsurge in political activism is disciplined through secret deals by a leadership that is not answerable to its own base.

The nauseating discourse of the 'naïve political worker' is being used only to defend the authoritarian and undemocratic structures within political parties. The increasing gap between centres of decision-making and those who are forced to defend decisions at the grassroots level has produced comical situations where workers vigorously defend a position of the party only to know that the leadership has changed course without providing any justification. The result of this uncertainty has been that some of the most committed workers simply abandoned their political parties, citing the sense of humiliation they felt over the direction of their parties.

This crisis has not only demonstrated where true power lies in the country, but has also exposed the limitations of political parties. They are unable to win over their own base for their political decisions, let alone wider segments of society. There is a latent democratic impulse emerging in the country in which citizens want to be convinced before joining a movement. The inability of political parties to engage with their workers has meant that social movements over the past few years - from those for rule of law to those for the rights of suppressed, oppressed and humiliated communities to those for the rights of students - have emerged outside the framework of established parties. This should be cause for concern for political leaders as they are no longer being viewed as horizons for people's expectations.

The capitulation by political parties has cast a spell of depression across grassroots activists. Yet, the simultaneous emergence of economic, environmental and institutional crises means that the struggle for people's sovereignty must continue in the form of a new opposition. An opposition can

become a powerful force when it develops a vision that can interest common people beyond institutional deadlocks that have marred our history.

More importantly, any future movement cannot rally around individual and family cults and around unaccountable party structures. Instead, it must respect the wisdom and tenacity of the political workers that embody the ideals of the movement. Indeed, it would be a shame to continue fighting for democracy in a thoroughly undemocratic manner.

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