POLITICAL POLARISATION

Wajhullah Fahim and Muhammad Junaid

Pakistan since its birth has faced numerous socioeconomic and cultural crises, among which a highly polarised society may be seen as one of the worst. Various factors have contributed to polarisation such as religious extremism and radicalisation against minorities, and sometimes ethnic conflicts. Today our society is highly polarised not only by religious extremism and ethnic conflicts but also by the highly unpredictable political environment: challenging the social cohesion and fabric of society. Political polarisation is the process by which people start to follow only one person or ideology in a tunnel visioned manner. It is usually associated with high levels of disagreement on socio-economic and political issues, and characterised by the increasing gap between different groups in society due to divergences in opinions, beliefs, and general orientations. Political polarisation is classified into two groups. In the first group, it takes place between political leaders and their respective associations while the second type of polarisation takes place among the citizens. Unfortunately, today we are facing both types.

Politically polarised societies are not only a problem for developing countries but have also become a greater threat to global democracy. The progress of any society is largely dependent upon the collective actions of people and the social fabric that holds them together, and polarisation is the antithesis of that.

In Pakistan, high levels of polarisation are not new. During the 1960s, ideological conflicts between two schools of thought, socialists and conservatives, created a major rift in society. In the 1970s, it was predominantly an ethnic tussle between West and East Pakistan: eventually resulting in the separation of the two federating units.

In the 1977 election, the opposition parties (the Pakistan National Alliance) dominated by religious leaders started a campaign against Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto who had been accused of misuse of power and rigging in the election. The opposition parties hence started manufacturing divisions by using various tactics such as the opportunistic deployment of religious beliefs and larger cultural norms. The elected government of Mr. Bhutto was eventually overthrown by General Zia ul Haq, and religion was used as a tool in the entire process. The 'Islamisation' project of this period further added gaps among the people and exacerbated polarisation at large.

Our society is currently facing political polarisation not among supporters but also among politicians. During talk shows, interviews, and on social media, they are largely involved in mudslinging hardly anyone cares to listen to others' opinions. After the vote of no confidence against Mr. Imran Khan, he repeatedly spoke of a 'foreign conspiracy' and declared the PDM government 'illegitimate'. While he was Prime Minister, the opposition parties called him 'ladla' of the establishment and a selected Prime Minister, which fuelled the polarisation process further.

In Pakistan, there are many reasons for political polarisation. One of the main reasons is the status quo of all

political parties in Pakistan where politicians belonging to different parties see their domain as a zero-sum game are not ready to accept the presence of – or even work with – the others. The denial and rejection of political legitimacy have increased political polarisation in Pakistan. While the supporters and workers of political parties on social media are competing on different trends, exchange of abuse is also frequently observed.

Social media is another possible reason for increasing polarisation in Pakistan. The government can easily regulate electronic media, but regulations over social media like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are weak. Due to this, different political parties have formed their social media teams so that they can easily spread their messages. The weak government regulation and formation of social media teams have also increased political polarisation in Pakistan.

In developed countries, particularly in Europe, political leaders strive for their national cohesion and an overarching sense of communal solidarity between groups. This is not the case in Pakistan, where ruling elites with backgrounds in feudal-tribal families are so entrenched in the political process that they have little incentive to focus on anything besides self-interest, which naturally results in little besides gimmickry within the corridors of power.

The de-facto institutions are also among the central actors in fostering political polarisation in Pakistan. In Pakistan, political parties are all affiliated with certain TV channels and when in power will invariably resort to blackmailing or banning platforms that are critical of them. In this way, only a handful perspectives are able to reach the masses – thus enhancing political polarisation. Similarly, due to the de-facto institutions, different organisations work in close coordination with each other to ensure a particular narrative emerges on top of media waves: functioning to create the impression that this alone is (or can be) the means through which Pakistan can take an exit from the quagmire it finds itself in.

National integration and sovereignty play an important role in all economic systems, which excessive levels of political polarisation badly affects. A democratic government is characterised by the presence of critical and heterogeneous views but this is impossible in the context of rampant polarisation – which inevitably leads to authoritarianism prevailing. A highly polarised society adversely impacts every element of society. Coordination between different institutions of state plays a vital role in the progress of the state, but due to polarisation the efficiency and productivity of institutions decline as they experience unnecessary hurdles in their functioning.

Political dialogue is commonly considered the best way of discussing different issues and problems in the economy, but declining levels of tolerance amongst politicians this has become virtually impossible. Such an environment leads to the use of power as a means to deal with serious crises such as limiting the freedom of expression.

Polarisation must be curtailed immediately. One way to do so would be by developing a system of political reconciliation in Pakistan. All political parties should work on the development of a political framework that can promotes genuine democracy, tolerance, and acceptance. When such factors are promoted, polarisation is automatically mitigated as a culture of debate and good faith exchange emerges.

Another way to reduce political polarisation is to enhance the interaction among various stakeholders who can play their role in fostering a cohesive society. Hence, the benefit of such interactions among different sections of society can not only aggravate social interaction but also enhance the genuine exchange of ideas among similar and different kinds of communities in society. It has also become the prerequisite for the policymakers to take perspectives from every member of the society which reduces polarisation.

The other way to deal with the issue of political polarisation is the adoption of the proportional voting system in which people decide on behalf of the political party manifesto rather than its behaviour in the future. After careful analysis, if people vote for the best policy option, not for the party then polarisation can be minimised. Further to these, awareness campaigns should be started immediately by using social media platforms and by starting such trends which are based upon realities and using appropriate language/messaging that people can easily understand, relate to, and benefit from.

The authors are MPhil Scholars at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad.