

MISUNDERSTANDING MULTIPOLARITY

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Though the popular definition of Pakistan's regime type has varied, in essence the state has remained authoritarian in substance, irrespective of form. Pakistan has assumed a Competitive Authoritarian State form for the entirety of its existence but its 'strategic importance' has kept it relatively immune to Western leverage for comprehensive democratisation (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Since independence from the British, Pakistan's security establishment has been quite successful at maintaining control over all four main arenas of democratic contestation (Levitsky & Way, 2002) exercised through a manipulated electoral process, subservient legislature, a compliant judiciary and a systematically repressed media. The monopoly on the access and dissemination of information remained a valuable tool in exercising this control. Their hegemony over these arenas has ensured that rights violations, though wavering in intensity, have remained constant and without consequence. In a domestic environment where upward mobility, judicial redress, provision and omission of personal security and liberty, and access to information could be manipulated at will, the security establishment could wield authoritarian control without facing a successful organised popular challenge.

In a bipolar world, where economic and security hegemonies were complementary and either uncontested or restrictively contested, security establishments within authoritarian states took advantage of the need for ideological, economic and security homogeneity within competing global blocs. States within the US fold experienced occasional, but explicit, political influence through diplomatic or economic coercion manifested through punishment or manipulation (Vayrynen, 1995). Security establishments could continue domestic exercise of control despite violating rights, as long as they adhered to homogeneity in their global postures. In Pakistan the root of this dichotomy of policy-coercion at the expense of rights was sown and socialised successfully during British rule where the co-opted ruling elite espoused values, such as global hegemonic homogeneity, as a modern norm, at the expense of domestic rights (Ikenberry & Kupchan, 1990).

With the ushering in of the brief American unipolar era, security establishments in authoritarian middle powers needed to grapple with the twin dangers of abandonment and entrapment (Walt, 2009). Weaker authoritarian states like Pakistan needed to import liberal norms of the Washington Consensus along with adherence to US-led regional geopolitics, in order to avoid abandonment. All four arenas of democratic contestation needed to be instilled with a suitable façade of democratic practices and deference to human rights became important, with co-optation as the preferred tool of exercising control rather than coercive authoritarian practices. Failure to do so risked potential economic growth and global recognition as the harbinger of the 'third reverse phase' of democratisation (Diamond, 2000).

The War On Terror provided Pakistan's security establishment a relatively small window of opportunity to reverse much of that democratisation façade (Carothers, 2003). Rights violations were once again practiced, ostensibly to reinforce the war effort, while placating the difficult but important US-Pakistan geopolitical relationship (Badalich, 2019). US concerns about rights violations within Pakistan's domestic arena suffered from an imbalance versus military aid, as exercised during the bi-polar era (Ali, 2009). Belated democratisation concerns manifested in direct interventions by the US, including successful regime alterations (Rice, 2011).

During the unipolar era, Pakistan's security establishment's control over one arena of democratic contestation weakened considerably as repressive media controls were rolled back leading to the emergence of privately owned and managed sources of information, suffering relatively limited direct censorship (Hassan, 2017). This provided a platform for highlighting and demanding redress against rights violations. Overtime digital media, especially social media platforms, culminated in the reduction of electoral apathy and the emergence of citizen driven advocacy against governance inefficiencies, challenging the relatively restrictive norms of old (Michaelsen, 2011). This inevitably manifested itself in a populist challenge to the security establishment's domestic political hegemony and its co-opted democratic vehicles.

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Despite these elements, Pakistan's security establishment was largely successful in ensuring that democratisation assistance remained 'security driven' and the pre-eminence of security aid, over all other forms, was reinforced, rather than challenged. As a result, the power base of the security establishment to manipulate the quality of elections and appoint, or dismiss, democratic governments remained at roughly the same levels as at the beginning of the unipolar era (Cheeseman & Desrosiers, 2023).

When US emphasis once again shifted towards a more Manichean framework, liberal capitalism versus authoritarian capitalism, with respect to global competition,

first with Russia (Arbatova, 2014) and then China (Kupchan, 2014), Pakistan's security establishment grossly misinterpreted the advent of a multipolar world as a return to the bipolar era and once again pivoted back into the historical norms, motivated primarily through institutional memory (Rafiq, 2023). This motivated an assumption that rights violations could once again be pursued domestically to reinforce control if the security establishment also ensured homogeneity of policy with the United States in the global arena. This interpretation meant that, having retained its power to install and dismiss democratic governments, the security establishment considered it plausible once again to re-establish complete control of all the arenas of democratic contestation.

This assumption that the clock could again be rolled back was largely invalid. Unlike the Soviet era, today's multipolar world is witnessing a global competition that is not in fact bi-polar with ideological, economic and security homogeneity. While the US retained an overwhelming advantage in the security arena, its position in the economic sphere now faced competitive challenges by a number of emerging global powers, with China-led multilateral organisations dominant among them. The US's ideological hegemonic power was being challenged by a completely new sectorial entrant to the global competition of ideas and the provision of information. The emergence of a 'digital order' dominated by a handful of corporations and institutions across the globe has created a world where the ability of states to control the dissemination of information, globally and domestically, has all but eroded (Bremmer, 2022).

Both the mass society and economic theories regarding the emergence and rise of populism highlight that the prevalence of censored or incomplete information has historically hampered the channelling of popular discontent through political vehicles (Hawkins, et al., 2017). Online platforms emerged as an 'alternative media' and provided a more suitable environment to foster the growth of uncivil, aggressive and populist discourse (de la Torre, 2019). The emergence of this digital order provided relatively unfettered access to, and the means of sharing, information without the exercise of centralised regime control. This has meant that all states, irrespective of regime type, have had to adapt to a world in which the provision and access to independent sources of information is beyond the direct control of government coercion. Digitisation, especially in the domestic political and economic environment, fanned populism across the political spectrum (Guvercin, 2022). In the established democracies of the US and Europe this led to a shift in the governance model towards greater localisation where urban populism is combated through the emergence and institutionalisation of city and metropolitan based governance networks. Cities have emerged as both engines of growth and economic inclusion (Katz & Nowak, 2017). Most authoritarian regimes embraced the architecture of the digital order to instil systemic disruption of access to regime critical material while providing

their citizenry an illusion of digital freedom within 'networked authoritarianism' (MacKinnon, 2010). In authoritarian regimes such as China and Vietnam the emerging digital order was countered by empowering local governments while concentrating coercive measures at the national level, without compromising the effective control of the authoritarian regime (Truex, 2016). In hybrid democratic regimes such as Turkey and Indonesia, the emphasis shifted towards empowering local governments while concentrating centralised coercive power over the arenas of democratic contestation (Andrews, 2021) which resulted in the repackaging of social media as a provider of an 'artificial atmosphere of polarisation' allowing the regime to avoid serious policy or ideological national debates while pandering to localised political conflict (Fadillah, et al., 2019). Authoritarian Iran embarked on a comprehensive 'big bang' reform package to empower local governments in order to encourage local political contestation, and economic growth, expand local participation in implementing government services and shift populist focus away from the central regime's coercive control (Tajbakhsh, 2018).

Though the perception that the new digital order could spearhead an existential and transformative political impact against authoritarian regimes was greatly exaggerated (Morozov, 2010), its mishandling by some regimes resulted in lasting political and economic consequences. Countries that failed to modify their authoritarian behaviour within their domestic digital arena through local government empowerment, as in Egypt (Open Technology Fund, 2019), have suffered political and economic instability.

Pakistan's security establishment misunderstood the impact a digitally interconnected and economically interdependent multipolar world has had on their domestic arena which had witnessed a populist channelling of angst and resentment against its competitive authoritarian regime. By continuing to use a largely bipolar security driven lens, where individual rights, rule of law and even the façade of democratic norms could be manipulated, co-opted or reversed at will, the establishment stumbled into a populist domestic backlash which weakened its control by a far greater degree than any democratisation efforts during the unipolar era.

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