

# WHY IS PAKISTANI POLITICS STUCK IN A GROOVE?

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Consider our predicaments: We are meant to be a democracy but beyond being an electoral democracy our socio-politics is patently autocratic – political parties blatantly defy inclusivity where one man, one family or a dynasty alone decides the politics that a party will pursue. Absence of democracy within parties means elections to top positions of leadership are either not held or are won uncontested. Members are subservient to the will of the leader which if challenged can lead to treatment such as that meted out to Shahid Khakan Abbasi, Mustafa Khokhar, Chaudhry Nisar and the likes. Patron-client relationships better define the structure within political parties. Such politics can rarely, if ever, deliver democracy to common folks.

Within such a nominal democracy, parties must seek accommodation with the other two power circles, the military and the judiciary. They are in perpetual negotiations with the two to seek favourable space for themselves. Politics thus stands compromised in the eyes of the people and appears severely enfeebled, which has a lot to do with how politics is conceived as an activity. Over the last over four decades it has turned into an occupation where return on investment is the key consideration of this commitment. Return, in essence, is material but can be tribal and social eminence, as well as positions held and the influence they endow to the benefit of certain families, tribes and cronies. This has severely degraded the conception, the purpose and the institution of politics in the country. To be political is widely related to being insidious.

This has little to do with the four martial laws alone or how the media is managed by the powers that be, but

everything to do with the prevalent decadence in politics which is devoid of competence and diligence in its conduct. Politics draws its power from the people but negligently weakens this foundation by keeping the people impoverished, unattended to: treated as the weakest link in this construct of power. They remain dispossessed, devoid of relief or favour, and denied the fruits of democracy on which the label of 'politics' seeks its relevance. When the foundation of this assumed power is so emaciated and debilitated, how can the structure that rests on it ever be strong and sturdy?

A balance in the equation of relative power will help restore the freedom of action to politics essential for heading the Parliament and government more broadly. However, rather than reforming their own culture through performance and delivery and better probity and integrity in their conduct when in power they seek the other two for leverage: which gets widely read as insidious and Machiavellian. Such is the broader assessment of the political stock. Strength within the political culture will only come by reinforcing democracy in party structures and in respecting democracy as a sacred touchstone for credibility – else they will continue to be conceived as an extension of the other two power circles, the enablement of which they rise to power.

The above aspects deal only with the quality of democracy and why it alienates public perceptions of politics, and explains why most tend to keep away from it – being shunned by its closed spaces and restricted access, particularly for those not belonging to the political fraternity. The lack of fresh induction in ideas and in policies has

stunted the growth of politics, decaying its substance and turning it stagnant and odious – all at the cost of politics itself and its inherent strength as an essential pillar of state and governance. There are two other aspects which are structural in nature and have crept up with time gorging on the purpose and position of politics as the prime executant in matters of state. Both are institutional and constitutional in nature and need reformative focus, which is rarely available to the political establishment, so caught in its incapacity/incompetence to deal with challenges.

It is now a nightmare for bigger parties to contrive a majority at the centre without a coalition. PMLN, despite its unchallenged position in the run-up to the forthcoming national elections, must still go looking

for alliances and partners in the most unlikely spots in the country. Sindh's MQM, and more likely the GDA and the JUIF come to mind. As is of course the case of BAP and other political entities of Balochistan. This largely emerges from the fact that the PMLN does not, of itself, have any notable presence in provinces outside Punjab. PTI faced the exact same dilemma five years back. Such arrangements compromise the ability of any government to deliver on its promises and implement a vision without succumbing to the whimsical and unethical demands of their coalition partners. This is always at the cost of probity, degrading a government's performance and credibility. PPP too is desperate to break out of Sindh but has been reduced to an exclusively regional presence.

This is a result of two flaws in how the constitution and its amendments structure politics. The federation is composed of provinces as its constituting units under a power and responsibility distribution shared through a concurrent list. This ensured equal weight of the centre and the provinces. A political philosophy that has traditionally abhorred a strong centre was sold to the Parliament in 2010 under PPP in the shape of the 18th Amendment which over time has hinged major political parties to their regional roots. While it gave them exclusive control over resource and distribution in their respective provinces, it turned those political parties into wholesale overlords trumping democratic ethos and obligations.

Political parties turned into closet autocracies in function. Devolution to local government levels never materialised. Local governments were denied, delayed and weakened through legislation in patronised provincial legislatures. The 18th Amendment abolished the concurrent list and enumerated revised shares in the National Finance Commission (NFC) to levels far higher than what was earlier distributed between the provinces. Consequently, the centre is far weaker - functionally and financially - but carries the weight of

major policy articulation impacting the economy, finance and foreign affairs whilst also shouldering the weight of accumulated debt, taxation and national security.

These are huge responsibilities for the government at the centre when the federation is far weaker because of dominant provincial entities. If a federal government dissolves to hold early elections, it does not impose any such constraint on the provinces: the party in power decides if it must follow suit or simply hold off. This trumps the central tenet of the notion that elections to all assemblies must be held together on the same day. Provinces have become far stronger and remain the primary focus of predominant political players as *sine qua non* for their politics at the cost of the centre.

This system has prevailed since 2010 when the 18th Amendment was first passed. Governance under all dispensations, democratic and quasi-democratic, since then has only deteriorated. The quality and the function of democracy stands fully compromised while accountability at any level, fiscal or electoral, has stood vacated and helpless. The results are obvious in the way that economy, society and polity have all suffered the ignominy of incompetence and negligence. Without major remedies to the constitutional statute affected by the 18th Amendment, there is little chance of any improvement in either the quality of democracy and its inclusiveness or its delivery and accountability.

Two options remain available to reform governance. The first is to keep the system with only minor modifications to the distribution and delegation of authority and responsibility, resurrecting the concurrent list, and forging collective efforts to resolve Pakistan's ailments: which will need the policies, ingenuity and resources of both the centre and the provinces. Impacts from climate change, finance and economy are the clarion issues begging concerted response from all hands. The quality and delivery can be realised with an empowered and wholehearted commitment to the local government system which should be strengthened with uniformly powerful legislation across the country. Power and authority to plan and prioritise services and development suitable at the level of local governments will need to be delineated and delegated to that level. Given our political culture which rarely parts with central control and authority and is mostly personality driven, the likelihood is minimal that the needed integrity in such reformation will ever find requisite support of the powerful political entities.

The second option is to restructure the composition of the federation on administrative basis. Each of the 39 administrative divisions of the country be made into a state in an ultimate form of delegation of authority and responsibility, bringing delivery many times closer to the



people as opposed to keeping it centred around elites who live in provincial capitals and major towns. It forces a delegated and devolved political structure where not only the quality of democracy, but its purpose, gets served many times better. High Court branches can be clumped for some states to reduce the burden of expense and local economies strengthened to raise revenue that can be utilised for the people. The US or the Indian models should be studied for these reform and restructuring efforts so as to enable a far more democratic system of governance. Dynastic and tribal politics can be sufficiently trumped through this mechanism in the interest of inclusive and devolved governance. It will help restore the faith in the political system so essential for stabilising internal dynamics for any society and an economy. A stable internal composition renders a federation much stronger and reassured.

Our problems of governance are essentially structural, needing structural remedies. It is time we thought beyond rhetoric.

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