

UNENDING CRISES OF UNENDING HYBRIDITY

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Perhaps political crisis is ingrained deeply into the genes of the system of neither democracy nor a dictatorship, but an unnatural fusion of the two—generally understood as hybrid. Never have the two mixed anywhere in history, as demands, spirits and driving forces of the two would collide headlong for inherent contradictions. While dictatorship of any type has no faith in, respect for, or recognition of the common man, democracy places great value on the popular will, its strength, and the collective wisdom flowing out of it. The former is elitist in its ideological outlook, believing that the selected, chosen upper crust of society or those occupying high offices in the state structure must lead in the interest of the ordinary folk, as they know what is best for society, the country, and the nation. The latter rests on enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality, and dignity of mankind. In any hybrid order, like ours, the electoral process and political institutions are employed as a façade to fake legitimacy for the rulers. However, the practice of mixing two dialectically opposite propositions about how to govern, particularly a large, semi-urban, industrialising society of Pakistan, a country having a tumultuous history of political conflicts, has generated perpetual crises of managing and stabilising such an unwieldy political order.

There is yet another, more crucial and critical element in the shaping of political hybridity—the dominance of the security establishment over the power arrangements by means of visible and invisible machinations to maintain its primacy over structure of power of the state. Resultantly, the institutional imbalance in civil-military relations has only stunted the growth of democratic culture, political parties, and leadership. There are many ideas that explain the ascendancy of the military and subordinate role of the political leadership, often seen and dealt with as proxies. Among the competing theses are ‘over development of the state’, primacy of geopolitics and security, strategic alignments with the Western powers, and ‘rivalry’ with India. In my view, it was the colonial legacy of state elites guiding, supervising, and controlling the political and economic processes within which the military and bureaucratic leadership had

socialised when they captured power in the formative phase by manipulating the institutions. Since then, Pakistan’s politics has found it difficult to get out of the dense and long shadow of the ascendancy of the military, and every effort has resulted in the ‘empire striking back’. Placing itself on the high pedestal of the ‘guardian’ of the state, it has used political factions to serve as political fronts by fragmenting political parties when they have posed a serious challenge or displacing them from power by direct intervention. Since the second ‘democratic’ transition or political realignment in 1988, the establishment has employed instruments of indirect and direct interference, including coercion, intimidation, and threat of accountability institutions to produce a favourable political outcome of electoral exercises. This has actually been the subtext of Pakistani politics, an unwritten framework within which elections have been held, power transfers taken place, regimes changed, and various political fronts and king’s parties created, ensuring that the vital elements of power remained with the establishment.

The partial, incomplete, and even conditional transfer of power was acceptable to the dynastic political families of Pakistan because of their own rivalries, opportunism and requirements of a patronage system that demanded access to power to retain influence within their respective constituencies. This was not a bad bargain for them, as this hybridism with elected political fronts perpetuated electoral supremacy of the feudal-tribal oligarchy, which itself is equally deficient in holding high democratic values. The fact is the traditional elite and dynastic political parties that represent rival coalitions of socially dominant ‘electable’ families have flagrantly done the bidding for the hybrid order in order to protect their political gains. Connected with the ‘real’ power centre, they employ district and provincial administrations to jostle out competitors, as working closely with the managers of the system ensures them a good share of the spoils. However, much, like the Mughal Empire, whenever the central power of the king weakened, the peripheries seceded. Similarly, the dynastic elites left the sinking boat of a military dictator

to realign their political commitments. The civil society at large and the urban intellectuals whilst witnessing the making and breaking of collaborative enterprises between the feudal elites, industrial proxies, and the military, were not silent spectators: they always contributed to the narratives of resistance in every possible form penning radical poetry to fiction, satire, and democratic movements. The relentless counter of social and democratic movements, no matter how weak these have been, are a fascinating dimension of the political saga in Pakistan. They demonstrate an indomitable spirit of resistance that has been peaceful and constitutional and carried through generation after generation by some of the political parties, civil society, women, intellectuals, and progressives. Sadly, each time a movement shook the foundations of a military dictatorship, like against Ayub Khan (1967-69), Zia-ul Haq (Movement for Restoration of Democracy, 1983-84), and Pervez Musharraf (2007-8), the divided dynastic political class compromised on power-sharing, with the exception of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1972-77).

Two other Prime Ministers, Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif (1997-99), a protégé cultivated by the Zia regime to counter the Pakistan People's Party, attempted to grow out of the shadow of his benefactors by asserting prime ministerial powers: he was ousted, convicted for the laughable accusation of 'plane hijacking' and sent into exile in a brokered political deal. Imran Khan (2018-2021) came to power through political alignments arranged by the establishment with king's parties and members of the assemblies connected to the hybrid power system—a mistake he would repent for life. Incongruities of the hybrid system once again generated a political crisis in 2022 when Khan stepped out of the dotted line on some domestic and foreign policy issues. There are other reasons for his estrangement, including his own egocentricity, engaging in multiple confrontations, and serious failings in governance. But the straw that broke the camel's back was his trip to Russia in February 2022 on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was seen as an attempt to take Pakistan out of the Western geopolitical camp. Reacting to this purported move, the establishment realigned with the three dynastic parties—the PPP, PMLN and JUI—and orchestrated a constitutional coup in the form of a vote of no-confidence. It threw Khan out of power, but he captured the street and weaved a defiant anti-establishment narrative that struck the right note in the heart of the general public whilst the military imposed a sixteen party government for sixteen months to serve as a new front. This time around, the difference was mass mobilisation by a popular leader, resistance, and a launch of a national movement for Azadi (freedom) with the objective of claiming national dignity, sovereignty, and supremacy of civilian authority. The establishment, used to effectively silencing, found the biggest challenge to its dominance in a very charged national atmosphere and from a leader made of a very different social material—middle class and eminent on the basis of self-achievement as a renowned, charismatic cricket player and captain.

His humiliating arrest by the para-military forces inside the Islamabad High Court triggered on May 9, 2023 triggered a nationwide reaction that included attacks on military installations. The events of that day and the narrative of resistance before and after May 9 point to a change in the demographic make-up, urban landscape, class structure, role of social media and society large. There are now effectively two sides in the new political confrontation—the PTI and all the rest. The security establishment and the dynastic parties closed the ranks and have since been branding Imran Khan and his Tehreek-e-Insaaf as 'enemy' of the state for allegedly orchestrating the May 9 attacks. What followed is a long story of coercion, intimidation, humiliation, torture, forced disappearances, and dismantling of Khan's party piece by piece. Most of the notable leaders left the party in droves by addressing pre-arranged press conferences to quit and hold Imran Khan responsible for attacks against state institutions. The objective was to tell all and sundry that Khan's party was finished, and his political career was over. To ensure his exit from politics further, a harsh environment was created with questionable legal and administrative means. The proxy care-taking governments registered about one hundred and fifty criminal cases, convicting him via a judicial fast track in four cases — which collectively sentenced him to thirty-four years imprisonment, with two judgments coming just days before the general elections. Further to his anguish, the Supreme Court denied the PTI its political identity, the electoral symbol of the bat, and the hounding of its candidates and total blackout of ads and posters went on to make the electoral exercise a one-way contest for the dynastic parties: now working hand-in-glove with the establishment.

It seems both the dynastic parties and the establishment have lost touch with the political reality of Pakistan, as alluded to above. Imran Khan fostered 'change', if not in the material conditions of the country, in the form of a narrative of resistance against the dynastic parties whom he has relentlessly branded as corrupt and colluding to rob Pakistan, resulting in their routing out in the 2024 elections. Against all odds, however, the PTI affiliated independent candidates won a numerical majority even if one accepts the allegedly fabricated results. The big story is yet to unfold as the party claims it had bagged more than two-thirds of the seats in the National Assembly and also swept the KPK and Punjab Assembly polls. There is circumstantial evidence in the fact that live broadcasting of incoming results mysteriously froze on the screens when the independent candidates were leading in absolute majorities. In the meantime, the Election Commission of Pakistan switched off its live board for journalists, and the Chief Commissioner strangely disappeared for an urgent meeting in the middle of the night when the whole nation wanted him to explain the situation. The Election Management system came back to life later the next afternoon when apparently 'cooked up' results started flowing in. If that is true, this was perhaps done to avoid the worst of the scenarios—PTI's 'claimed' two-thirds majority. Once can imagine what it could have meant for the hybrid system and the future of dynastic parties: most

probably a new, populist nationalist and majoritarian order.

To conclude, the hybrid system appears to have lost whatever rationale and legitimacy, if any, it had, and so have the dynastic political parties in the face of populist sentiment of Azadi awakening the youth. A fragmented mandate, if one accepts the legitimacy of the electoral results, and a coalition government driven by political necessity at the centre, even with the backing of the establishment may not ensure stability. One cannot dismiss a paradigmatic shift having taken place in how the people of Pakistan have voted, what for, and why so massively against establishment-favored parties. The real challenge is acknowledging this change and respecting the popular will. If not, the system that is already past its expiration date may find it more difficult to deliver any goods, let alone stability and order.

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