



GRASSROOTS POLITICS: THE ONLY WAY FORWARD

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If there was ever any doubt that the current political set up has failed the people of Pakistan and held the country hostage to powerful vested interests, recent events have all but eliminated it.

This is a logical outcome of decades of excluding people at the grassroots level from meaningful participation in the political system of Pakistan. Since inception, Pakistan's politics has been dominated by the moneyed class, mostly large land owners. Their collusion with the civil and military bureaucracy has blocked the devolution of power to the masses. As a result, the institution of democracy has become handmaiden to their vested interests. The fact is that elections in Pakistan serve only one purpose: to create a facade of democracy while in reality it is an oligarchy, a small group of rich and powerful individuals and families pretending to be politicians, doing whatever best serves their own agendas.

Decades of incompetence, insincerity and vested interests have brought us to the point where economic and political crises have led to social and political turmoil, increasing rates of crime and the resurgence of terrorism – collectively representing an existential threat to the country. This is besides the influence of foreign powers, which have frequently intervened for their own interests.

While there is so much hue and cry about violations of the Constitution where power grabbing is concerned, not even an eyebrow is raised on the state's failure to safeguard the most fundamental rights of citizens guaranteed in the Constitution – most of which are outlined in Chapter Two. Some of the most important clauses are:

The State shall:

- Promote, with special care, the educational and economic interests of backward classes or areas.
- Secure the well-being of the people, irrespective of sex, caste, creed or race by raising the standard of living, by preventing the concentration of wealth and means of production and distribution in the hands of a few to the detriment of general interest and by ensuring equitable adjustment of rights between employers and employees, and land lords and tenants;
- Provide for all citizens, within available resources of the country, facilities for work and adequate livelihood with reasonable rest and leisure;
- Provide basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, housing, education, and medical relief for all such

citizens, irrespective of sex caste, creed or race, as are permanently or temporarily unable to earn their living on account of infirmity, sickness or unemployment.

The system has been hijacked by a privileged few, while poverty, hunger, unemployment, disease, oppression and exploitation have become the fate of the majority.

In their pursuit to acquire power at all costs, most of these politicians seek help from and make deals with the military establishment and conspire against each other, thus weakening democratic institutions. Their lust for power is so strong that they have blocked the entry of any newcomer, except their own progeny, into mainstream politics, using their wealth, power and influence.

Rather than educating voters about more important policy level issues and offering solutions, they have kept them embroiled in petty constituency politics and when needed, have appealed to their regional, religious, linguistic and other identities to promote division for their own political benefit.

Politics is fundamentally a process through which it is decided who will have the authority to make decisions. Under the current system this process is strictly controlled by the rich powerful class, perhaps only a few hundred thousand in numbers in a country of 225 million people. Bad politics has led to bad decision making, leading to bad governance. There are mountains of papers written with policy recommendations to reform every sector but they are buried in some dark dungeons of the bureaucratic maze. Without political will, nothing can change.

On the one hand, extreme inequality of income and wealth, which has created extreme inequality of access to opportunity and on the other, decades of systematic disenfranchising of the masses from the political process. This is done by obstructing access to opportunity and quality education and keeping them financially destitute, making them believe that they neither have the capacity nor the means to become active players in politics. These are two of the biggest hurdles in the way of mobilising the masses.

According to Burki et al.¹ the wealthiest 10 percent of the households own 60 percent of household wealth, while the least wealthy 60 percent own just one-tenth.

The State's failure to fulfill its social contract has forced people to fall back on clan, tribe, and kinship for social security. This has affected their voting patterns. The political, economic, and social influence and oppression of tribal chiefs and large landlords in some parts of the country is another factor which compromises the

people's ability to vote freely.

So, what is to be done? Let us start with ending extreme inequality of income and wealth and access to opportunity, proven enemies of democracy. This will help reduce the political, social and economic power of this class. Some of the steps needed for this are:

- Agricultural land reforms. End unlimited profiteering and speculation on land and eliminate urban land mafia groups whilst developing a comprehensive land policy that is in line with the needs of people, now and in the future.
- State to set up new industry and control the strategic sectors of the economy, including the energy sector. There are successful models of this around the world.
- Austerity measures on government spending.
- Reform tax system to reduce wealth and income inequality.
- Focus on human development rather than brick and mortar.
- Strengthen public social sectors, e.g. education, healthcare, food security, transportation, housing, and internet access.
- Change colonial era laws to meet current needs of the people.
- Reform police, bureaucracy and the judiciary to make them people friendly.
- Promote and strengthen public banking.
- Strengthen local government system to empower local people to solve local problems.

But these steps are contrary to the interests of the current ruling class. Who will bell the cat? One thing is very clear, there is no magic solution and no quick fix. The only way out is for those who have been discarded and excluded from political, social and economic spheres of the country to rise up and take their place in history. However, waking up a sleeping giant will take time, effort, resources and leadership.

¹Burki, A. A., Hussain, A., & Khan, K. E. (2020). Exploring the Extent of Selected Dimensions of Inequality in Pakistan, Oxfam GB, Islamabad (in association with Chanan Development Association).

Revolution is the only way out but its pathway in the 21st century is through an informed, organised, and united political action. An angry, unruly, unorganised mob of people can cause a lot of destruction but can never bring about a revolution. Capitalism, whilst causing huge inequality, has also given masses the power of vote. But to use this power for revolution is like bringing millions of sunrays to a single focus through a lens.

The fundamental question is what will mobilise and unite the masses who are ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and nationality wise as diverse as it can get, and make them believe that they have the power? The answer is to start a class based politics.

With the changing forms of capitalism, there is no organised proletariat as it was during the production based model of capitalism. Capitalism's evolution into finance capital and digital platforms have changed that. The fact remains, however, that a few individuals or groups of individuals own and control all means of production, land being the most important one in Pakistan, with the rest of the population is almost completely dependent on them.

The needed ingredients to mobilise and unite this disenfranchised class are:

- A common agenda. Poverty, hunger, disease, joblessness and exclusion from economy, as well as politics and social life, are common problems regardless of sex, caste, creed, nationality or ethnicity. With the worsening economic conditions, even the relatively comfortable middle class is slipping down, increasingly struggling to afford good education for their children, cope with major healthcare disasters or own a house.
- A leading voice which is already well known and trusted, without the usual baggage of vested interests, to rally people around their common interest, giving them courage and cheering them on.
- A political party platform for people to come together, organise themselves, and work in a disciplined manner under a central command.
- A strategy to reach out to people and convince them that they have the power to do it, that this will not only work but that it is the only way forward. Social media is an important tool for this.
- Finding supporters and sympathisers from all segments of society: a broad based coalition of intellectuals, writers, poets, artists, journalists, professionals, experts in various fields, which adds their weight behind this initiative.
- Enough committed people to provide the needed material resources.
- Then the rarest of commodities: patience, perseverance, commitment, courage and a relentless willingness to sacrifice for the cause.

Success will be achieved when people will understand this message. It is only then that millions of sunrays will come together and focus on a single agenda to create a more inclusive society with equitable distribution of resources and access to opportunity. Only then will we see the new dawn promised in 1947.

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