



Strengthening political parties

By
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The military in Pakistan often takes over power swiftly and comfortably without any meaningful resistance either during or after the process of the take-over. Prime ministers are put behind bars and sent to gallows through manipulating the judicial process. Military rule is legitimised by referendums and judicial validations. The usurper is easily given powers to amend the constitution.

One of the many reasons for this is the weaker base of political parties in terms of membership cadre and organisation. Except for Pakistan People's Party, which has a large political base, most other parties have a weaker political base. Almost all political parties are dominated by individuals and families. The electoral process also throws up entrenched wealthy individuals, strengthening status quo and thwarting social and political change. In most parties there is a narrow core of formal members, around which is a large number of political supporters. Ironically political parties' leadership is reported to be even discouraging local cadre in launching membership campaigns, perhaps in vain attempt to maintain control of the party or entrenched groups or perhaps thwarting organised take over.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has a large popular support entrenched by a large number of workers. Successive victimisation and eventual murder of Bhutto family has largely been responsible for legitimising the party control by the Bhutto family. There are some small exceptions. Jamaat-i-Islami is an Islamic ideological party, which manages to gather support from far and wide parts of the country. This party also has narrow strength of formal members due to its doctrine of making the "Muttaqi" (pious) as their member only. The core of the 'Muttaqis' is surrounded by most of its informal members which it calls 'Muttafiq' (agreed). However the party is well organised and is quite capable of organising resistance movements. Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) has a large and active membership and leadership coming from lower party cadre. However due to its initial ethnic basis, located in Karachi and other Sindh's urban areas mostly, its effectiveness at Pakistan level remains wanting.

Other parties like the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), Pakistan Muslim League (Q), Tehrik-e-Insaaf (Imran Khan's party) are tightly controlled by wealthy individuals like Nawaz Sharif, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and Imran Khan. In all these parties a total of less than 100 individuals control. The wealth of these individuals is largely their source of strength. Although participation in the long political process spread over more than two decades is also the part of their political capital.

Ironically, there is a typical trend to political induction of party leadership. An aspiring and ambitious politician is first discovered and co-opted by the military rulers. Military rule gets legitimacy and wider political base through such inductions and the individual power, pelf and wealth increases by various transfers and favours made for such co-optees. Typically and eventually, the fate of military dictator goes down after having ruled for an average period of a decade. Dichotomy and contradictions develop amongst the political and military leaders and the co-opted joins the opposition and the democratic forces, suffers for a period in the form of jail or exile and thus gets legitimised and become a bona fide political leader.

ZA Bhutto was executed among unexplainable silence of the masses and supporters and Nawaz Sharif was jailed and exiled with comfortable ease by the two respective military dictators. Both the PPP, PML-N, more so the latter, have suffered due to the lack of an organised large political cadre as is found in most democracies of the world. PML-N should not be afraid of new membership. They should shun their fear and scepticism of the people and masses. A shift towards middle class power may not be able to unseat the top leadership in the short run, which is what matters for political control. In the long run, it would reward them with strength, appeal and vitality.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO POLITICAL PARTIES While top leadership and its continuity may be indispensable for most parties, there is no justification of monopoly of landed aristocracy over the political party. Tickets for assembly memberships are awarded based on district power base, which largely comes from land power. Overall party finances also come from this core group. If political parties are provided public funding (government financial support), the influence of this typical core group would be gradually and partly replaced by new forces from the middle classes.

In most democratic countries of the world especially in South America and Europe funding to political parties is common. Normally funds are given on the basis of votes cast in the elections; about 10 euros per vote on the

average, as straight transfers to political parties' central funds. In Pakistan such support maybe differentiated and targeted to encourage reforms in the political parties. Following criteria and targets maybe kept in view:

1. Number of voters.
2. Number of workers.
3. Direct financial support to eligible candidates for assembly seats.
4. In kind support such as allotment of urban plots and rural land for political parties, to generate income sources and build party offices, meeting halls, libraries etc. Political parties fund maybe created to be managed by eminent persons, administrative persons and financed by the following:

1. Federal and provincial government budget.
2. Levy on media and advertising.
3. Funding from multilateral and bilateral donors, countries and organisations.

A fund of Rs 1.00 billion (seed fund) should be initially created and should be feasible. This fund would go a long way towards building strong and organised political party system in the country and fostering new entrants representing a diverse social base.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND PARTY MEMBERSHIP The common impression is that political parties in Pakistan discouraged general membership, and prefer to have "core workers". The possible reason for this is the apprehension that the party may be hijacked by some "interest groups" who may manage to mobilise general party workers who may not be as ideologically committed to parties' mission, characters and ideology, as core workers would be. Nevertheless, large pool of workers is required to maintain party organisation and win elections. Thus there is a varying level of motivation to induct party members and launch membership campaigns. Reliance is usually made to induct members through personal contacts.

The ambivalent attitude is also reflected by lack of proper membership registers and databases of party members, and accurate statistics thereof, as we find this in established democracies. The following estimates of political party membership are usually guessed by commentators;

- Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP): 20,000
- Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N): 100,000
- Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM): 50,000
- Jamaat-i-Islami : 25,000

Admittedly, the political participation in most European countries has come down from a high level in 1960s to a much-reduced level in 2005. In 1960s in Austria and Scandinavian countries, political participatory rate used to be between 15-25%, which came down to a level of 5-20% in 2005. In the UK, participation rate in 1960 was 10% and came down to 2% in 2005. In Italy it came down to 4% from 12%, in Germany, the rate increased 4% in 1980s and came down to 3%; in Netherlands from 9% to 3%. A general average for Europe can be taken as 4% that is 4 political workers out of every 100 electorates (voters). In India, with a population of 1.0 billion and registered voters 671 million have some 60 to 80 million estimated party workers, which is more than 10% of the electorates.

In Pakistan, at a participation rate of 4%, both PPP and PML (N) should have 1.0 million strong party workers, each a slightly more. As against these members, PPP has 2% of the required number and PML 10% of the required number. By comparison in India, BJP had 30 million workers in 1980, Shivsena 5 million and Congress 15 million. Without a strong worker base, the political parties cannot mobilise public opinion and much less resist military coups, which is a frequent requirement of political parties in Pakistan. In fact, absence of core workers in required numbers is one of the major reasons the military dictator is able to assume power so swiftly and amicably without any resistance. Military dictator goes away only when general discontentment against him and his policies becomes too widespread. Recent success of lawyers' movement is a case in point, proving what an organised force can achieve in the context of popular support.

If democracy is to be strengthened and re-enforced and military coups resisted and repulsed, political parties will have to strengthen their cadre by:

- a) Enhancing the numbers
- b) Training and motivation
- c) Indoctrinating the workers with party ideology and programme

Fortunately, Pakistan People's Party and Pakistan Muslim League (N) have started their membership campaigns under strong competitive pressure. We wish them success. Democracy has started paying dividends and right kinds of incentives have already started operating. It is hoped that the democratic order sustain and flourish.

BROADENING THE POLITICAL BASE; LET TEACHERS AND PROFESSORS ENTER POLITICS

We have mentioned earlier that the political structure and organisation in Pakistan suffers from a narrow social base wherein landed persons dominate and monopolise power. We have examined how the influence of private money could be partially balanced by public funding of political parties.

There are a large number of persons employed by the government in education sector; mostly teachers, lecturers, and professors. They are barred from entering politics because they are government servants. Private sector is also present in education, but in terms of numbers their count is much less. Admittedly there is no bar on their political role.

An important constraint on individuals aspiring to enter politics is availability of time, even if money is provided for their election campaign and other political activities from other sources such as public funds. In the US and other democracies, lawyers have significant presence in politics and the elected institutions such as parliament and senates; the reason being the professional flexibility. A lawyer can plan and apportion his time more flexibly than those employed by the private and public sector companies and institutions. A lawyer can have his private practice in law firm, engage in full time politics, same as a member and come back to his profession with more distinction, value and acceptability by the legal profession and his former or potential employers. In Pakistan most lawyers have kept away from politics, fallaciously assuming that practice of law is to be independent from politics. There is a sizeable exception. Quite a few prominent lawyers are politicians too as well but the bulk stay away from politics.

There is a similar strain of argument and refrain among the teaching community. They argue that politics is bad and would be potentially divisive and would cast negative shadow on educational activities, and peace and harmony therein. They may have a point there. However, the positive impact of the teaching communities' involvement in politics and representation in parliament are potentially very significant. It would diversify the social base of politics, diluting the preponderance of a few. Politics would benefit from the individuals who are highly specialised and knowledgeable in science, economics, engineering, health etc. As to the divisiveness of politics, that is already there. People and teachers have their ideologies and political views and even informal or sometimes formal and unannounced affiliations.

Fortunately and unfortunately teachers have time. Educational institutions do not open for more than 150 days in a year. There are all kinds of leaves, strikes, and voluntary closures due to law and order situations. Time is a great resource, which could be put to public service. Democratic governments and political parties should seriously investigate about encouraging and involving teachers into active politics by

1. Removing legal and employment conditions and constraints against their political participation.
2. Provide for paid and unpaid leaves for teachers and professors for the period of their assignments and elections in the parliament and absorb them back once they return.

Reportedly Turkey, a not very egalitarian state, relaxed constraints on university professors for entering politics and running for public office, with remarkably positive and softening impact on Turkish political system, so much dominated by the military.

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