

# Democracy in pakistan

Politics, Democracy



Democracy in Pakistan Posted on January 24, 2012 by admin786| Leave a comment Anwar Syed We hear almost every day some commentators saying that democracy in Pakistan is in danger of being overthrown by hostile forces, and further that the democracy we do have is not the genuine article. These observations will bear scrutiny. It is not clear who the foes of democracy are and what they expect to gain from its demise. One explanation may be that the army chief and the DG ISI, who have traditionally exercised decisive influence in this country's politics and governance, do not want an effective rival. The ISI is indeed a state within a state. It is a huge organisation that employs hundreds of highly trained persons from a variety of professional backgrounds. It has access to virtually unlimited funds for the disbursement of which it is accountable to no external agency. It is autonomous in setting its own agenda. If democracy worked well, parliament would be supreme not only in theory but in actual fact. Its agent - the prime minister and his colleagues - would operate as a preponderant centre of power whose writ would be obeyed in all departments of the government, including the army chief and the DG ISI. The security establishment would not welcome this arrangement. Chosen representatives of the people make laws and policies in a democracy and a committee of their members, called the cabinet of ministers, implements them. This condition is met if fair and honest elections are regularly held. Since Ziaul Haq's death, elections have been held in 1988, 1990, 1993, 1996, 2002 and 2008. They are likely to be held again in 2012. In what way then is democracy in Pakistan lacking? The government resulting from the elections of 2008 is perceived as being corrupt and incompetent. Many

commentators ask what good democracy then is. This is not an appropriate question. The quality of governance that democracy produces will depend on the nation's political culture. It is nevertheless the best of the available alternatives, particularly because it is more amenable to improvement. The generality of people in this country are now politically much more aware than they were a few decades ago. Their interest was suppressed during the years of military dictatorship imposed by Generals Ziaul Haq and Musharraf. But their involvement with politics has been enlivened considerably in recent years. Politicians and their parties have already begun their campaigns for the elections to be held in 2012. The people seem to be anxious to exercise their right to vote and want elections to be held as soon as possible. It should, however, be noted that none of the major parties is expected to win a majority of seats in the National Assembly. It will be a hung parliament. The largest party will have to recruit one or more of the smaller groups to form a coalition government. Coalitions are less cohesive and energetic than single party governments but they may be the only available option. Coalition making may turn out to be a complicated exercise. The MQM and JUI-F have usually been ready and willing to sit in the aisle with the party that is likely to form the government. They pose no problem, but some of the others do. The ANP has been well disposed towards the PPP but their togetherness will not bring about a majority in the House. In terms of the requisite numbers, an alliance between the PPP and PML-N would do the job but they are each other's principal foes, and their alliance is not on the cards. PTI will emerge as a significant force in the assembly. It denounces both the PPP and PML-N and will not join hands with either of them. It will

wield whatever influence it can muster as a vocal element in the opposition. The PML-Q has been known as the king's party and may be willing to cooperate with whichever party is ascendant, that is, if the latter will have it. A coalition consisting of the MQM, JUI-F, ANP and PPP or PML-N might form the next government. Needless to say all of this is our speculation; we will know what could happen until it does. A serious impediment to the refinement of democracy in Pakistan should be noted. The attachment of its professed adherents to its spirit and processes is mostly superficial. This is evident from their tolerance in most cases of a variety of electoral malpractices. Note also that many of them do not take their duties seriously after they have been elected to public office. We have all heard of legislators who have not risen to speak, or even to ask a question, on the floor of the assembly during their entire five-year term. Much too often the Speaker has to adjourn the proceedings because of a lack of quorum. Many members would rather chat with colleagues and constituents in the cafeteria, or do errands in town, than sit in the House and participate in the ongoing debate. This is true of even the leading members of the ruling party, including ministers. It does not follow from this state of affairs that democracy cannot work in Pakistan. Its blemishes notwithstanding, it is digging roots in our political culture. The elites profess their unfaltering commitment to it. They claim to have made sacrifices for its preservation and tell us they are ready to make more of the same to safeguard it if necessary. There can be little doubt that the people at large have begun to value democracy and will make whatever exertions may be necessary to keep it. The infirmity of the political elite's dedication to democracy is apparent from their disinclination to

practice it in the internal management of their respective parties. The Jamaat-e-Islami does hold periodic elections for its amir and council. No other party maintains rosters of its members with the result that there is no basis for holding internal elections. Party functionaries at the ward, town, and district levels are actually named by the higher orders. Some of the parties do have central executive committees but matters coming before them are hardly ever put to vote. Members may voice their different interpretations and views but the party's top managers are likely to have the last word. On the other hand, it is to be noted also that centralisation is weakening in both governmental administration and party management. It is giving way to devolution of authority and power to the local nazims and their committees. Democracy in Pakistan is here to stay. The writer, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, is currently a visiting professor at the Lahore School of Economics. He can be reached at [dranwar@lahoreschool.edu.pk](mailto:dranwar@lahoreschool.edu.pk) - Daily Times