

Pakistan's Precious Parties

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Vilified and marginalised, yet resilient, Pakistan's political parties go into elections on February 18, holding the keys to the country's future. They have survived through decades of military rule and are much bigger than the individuals that appear to dominate them. They have relatively well-defined ideological markers, support bases and ways of conducting business. These parties will now be called upon to resolve the crises in the state and the economy left behind by direct military rule. Whether they are up to it or not, it is time for supporters of democracy at home and abroad to close ranks around them.

When the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif (PML-N) routed the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto in the general elections of 1997 the rightwing Urdu press was ecstatic. Columnists celebrated the lifting of a curse that had thrown its shadow over society for 30 years – the spell of popular politics that had been cast by Benazir's charismatic father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the late 1960s. There are mean streaks in the Pakistani intelligentsia and bourgeoisie that mirror the military establishment's visceral hatred of mass popular politics of any type. Alas, for the rightwing columnist, Bhutto's PPP was only the progenitor – variations of its style, rhetoric and technology for mass mobilisation had reproduced themselves manifold among politicians and parties across the spectrum. The Pakistani soil had proven to be hospitable to the roots of mass electoral politics, even if the storms of military rule frequently wasted the buds before they flowered.

Musharraf's views about political parties and mass electoral politics, which he frequently expressed through speech and action, were not atypical of the convictions of the military and civil establishment, the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie. Like Zia-ul-Haq and Ayub Khan before him, Musharraf campaigned single-mindedly against politicians and political parties that had retained any autonomous agency. These military rulers were motivated quite largely by their own political survival, but also guided by a broader conviction that mass politics was a nuisance that came in the way of good governance and effective economic management. The otherwise liberal professionals and the non-governmental organisation leaders who flocked to support Musharraf when he deposed Nawaz Sharif in 1999 shared this conviction.

So, who are these political parties, why do segments of the Pakistani elite despise and fear them, and how do they manage

to remain alive, relevant and even indispensable through decades of military rule?

Dynasties and Personalities

It has been easy to dismiss the parties as being nothing more than platforms for personalities. The PPP was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's party, which was "inherited" by his daughter Benazir, and then passed on to her son and husband following her assassination in December. Some observers have gone so far as to claim that the PPP is not a political party but a cult of the Bhutto martyrs. The role of personalities and dynasties is no less important in other parties that have survived. PML-N is Nawaz Sharif's team, and all the indications are that his sons and nephews are being groomed as the next generation of leaders. The Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) is led by Asfanyar Wali, son of Abdul Wali Khan, and grandson of the Frontier Gandhi – Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. The Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islam (JUI) is the political organisation of orthodox Sunni Muslim clerics and is led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, who is the son of JUI's founder Maulana Mufti Mehmood. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), formerly the Mohajir Qaumi Movement is led by the London-based Altaf Hussain, who is simply known by the messianic title of Quaid-e-Tehreek (leader of the movement).

But it would be a mistake to stop simply at personalities. All of the parties described above are much bigger and more durable than the individuals that appear to dominate them. They have relatively well-defined ideological markers, support bases and ways of conducting business. Most importantly, these parties have interacted with society in complex ways and created and occupied political spaces across the national landscape.

Support Base of PPP

The PPP is perhaps the most interesting. While it has abandoned much of its socialist rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s it is still identified as a centre-left party. It has a support base in the rural areas of Sindh and Punjab, and among working class segments in the urban areas of Punjab. It also has a presence in the North West

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Frontier Province and Balochistan, as well as in the Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA) – Gilgit and Baltistan – and Azad Kashmir.

Among working class communities in the urban and rural areas its supporters stress the pro-poor credentials of its history and programme. The narratives of disparate local class struggles in villages and towns across the country posit the “Bhutto era” as a turning point when those who were “enslaved” became “free”. People in these communities speak about small, even symbolic, victories as great milestones. Sindhi sharecroppers say that Bhutto changed input sharing arrangements to their advantage and after his downfall the landlords reverted back to old practices. In central Punjab villages there are numerous “Bhutto colonies” – settlements of people belonging to “menial” castes who were awarded leases to small residential plots in the 1970s. The working-class district of Lyari in old Karachi also became a PPP stronghold after its residents, who remain desperately poor, got secure property rights in the first Bhutto government.

For Sindhis, and to some extent for ethnic Seraikis of southern Punjab, the PPP is seen as a party that gives voice to their regional interests at the national level. These ethnic groups, including their elites, have felt excluded from political power because of their historically low representation in the military and the bureaucracy. Then various other segments of the population – such as many Shia Muslims of north-central Punjab, or the Shias and Ismaili Muslims of FANA look to the non-sectarian PPP as a protector of their identities in the face of the often aggressive Sunni Muslim orthodoxy. There are even undertones that the party has a soft corner for Shia Muslims due to the mixed sectarian lineage of its founder, but these remain quiet whispers at most.

While the record of actual delivery to the working classes and ethnic and religious minorities is mixed at best, it is remarkable that the PPP continues to mean so many different things to such diverse segments of an imagined Pakistani society. What is even more remarkable is that the party has mostly resisted the temptation to get itself branded narrowly.

Under conditions of severe repression in the Zia period when party supporters were imprisoned in their thousands and flogged in their hundreds it was but natural for some to look to revolutionary violence, others to espouse Sindhi nationalism, and yet others to speak openly about getting Indian support to overthrow the Pakistani military. Yet the party leadership disappointed the firebrands and stuck to its centrist creed: political process rather than violent confrontation, federalism rather than provincial separatism, and Pakistani nationalism at all costs. Those who espoused revolutionary violence, Sindhi nationalism, or “national betrayal” were sidelined and expelled, and by luck or flaw the PPP kept itself relevant to most of its diverse constituencies. The instinct to preserve political capital was very much in evidence in the aftermath of Benazir Bhutto’s assassination. The party leadership moved quickly to silence enraged Sindhi mourners who raised anti-Pakistan slogans at the funeral.

Ethnic Nationalist Groups

While the story of PPP’s resilience is remarkable it is not unique. Various ethnic nationalists such as the ANP, the Baloch nationalist groups, and even the pro-Musharraf MQM, and the Islamist JUI and Jamaat-i-Islami are also socially relevant – even if they are restricted to narrower ethnic and sectarian pockets – because their histories are linked to social and political developments in their areas of influence. Unlike the PPP some of these parties had fewer qualms about armed struggle, and a few of them still maintain a militant wing. Progressively, these parties got engaged with mass electoral politics and saw ways of framing their demands in constitutionalist terms. Like the PPP these

parties have come to be defined and described in multi-dimensional ways and this accounts for their rootedness.

In contrast, the Musharraf-manufactured Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) or PML-Q remains a motley crew of local notables and strongmen. In creating a “Muslim League” out of pliable local patrons, Musharraf followed the script written by Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq before him. Nawaz Sharif’s Muslim League began life in similar fashion under Zia-ul-Haq but came into its own when it annoyed the military and civil establishment with its populist measures when it came to office in the 1990s. The PML-N is a key player in Punjab, and in some ways its natural constituencies, also multi-dimensional, are diametrically opposite those of the PPP: traders versus agriculturalists, town versus country, middle and upper classes versus working classes, and orthodox Sunni versus catholic.

The politics-hating Pakistani elite fails to understand that it is a strength not a weakness that divergent social and economic interests find expression in constitutional politics instead of remaining on the outside. In the manner of colonial masters this elite sees the entire gaggle of politicians and parties as being a threat to its own privileges and prerogatives. While it feels “national pride” in being the only Muslim country with an atom bomb, this elite fails to notice, let alone take pride in, the fact that despite all setbacks, political society in Pakistan is among the most inclusive anywhere in the Muslim world. In the fast-moving world of the “war against terror”, “rogue” nations and threats of military intervention, it is this political society rather than nuclear weapons that would be the surest deterrent against state collapse.

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