

Abrar Haider

# The return to democracy: an option for the future

Pakistan is certainly going through some tumultuous times ever since the military set-up of Mr Pervez Musharraf was replaced by the democratically elected government of Mr Asif Ali Zardari.

The whole nation enthusiastically welcomed the return to democracy after nine years of military rule under General Pervez Musharraf. Democracy was seen as a saviour for the nation, a much needed change to drive the country forward. A chance for the masses to select their leaders who would make the people of the land their priority. Yes, the democratically elected government of Mr Zardari came in with much enthusiasm and a vow to work for the poor and neglected masses of Pakistan.

Two years down the path of democracy, the majority of people in Pakistan are disappointed and much worse off than they were under military rule. Is General Pervez Musharraf's prophesy coming true that they will regret his ouster from power? Democracy seems to have become a buzz word devoid of any meaning. Democracy has become a facilitator for the rich and the powerful to further their own vested interests and agendas. The common man has not reaped any benefits from democracy and his voice is as hapless and subdued as under military rule. To add to his woes the power crisis has worsened, closing off many industries and making countless people jobless. Inflation and hoarding remains at an all time high, making even basic food items out of reach for the common man. Corruption is rampant and institutionalized by the current government. It seems we have entered a vicious circle where increasing poverty and desperation underpins the writ of the state and per-

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petuates lawlessness and chaos. It seems the democratic Pakistan is more unstable than ever before. In times like these, it has become popular among literary circles to discuss the French Revolution. People are looking for desperate

measures and the current democratic set-up is given only months for survival. There have been voices that openly want a return of military rule. But at the moment, the military seems to be reluctant to enter the fray, being pinned down by a burgeoning militancy in the north along the Afghan border.

## Purist version of Islam

I ask myself, like the common man on the street, "Is democracy viable for Pakistan?" There are rare examples of true democracy in the Islamic world, most Moslem countries having monarchs or dictators. Is democracy inherently un-Islamic or is it the Moslems who cannot come to terms with modernity? There is perhaps no simple answer to the question whether democracy is suitable for Islamic countries and whether it is a question of religion at all. I may add that Pakistan is a country of 160 million Moslems and was carved out of India as a separate entity for the Moslems, but at the same time was envisioned as a secular and democratic state by its founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah. He clearly believed in the ideals of democracy where all minorities would be respected and safeguarded. He never created a Moslem state with the intention of introducing an intolerant and purist version of Islam, as is the case now.

My intention here is not to come up with an alternative to democracy, but to highlight some of the fac-

tors which are undermining the proper functioning of democracy in Pakistan. Democracy, a cherished institution it may be in the west, has recently come under much fire and scrutiny in Pakistan. There are interest groups inclined towards a return to military rule in Pakistan, also the Islamic conservatives who propose a strictly Islamic form of government under the caliphate. I personally feel both these forms of government will further subjugate and suppress the masses. On a personal level I still feel hope for democracy, but with the current flaws in the system, it seems democracy itself has become the main problem. Democracy is not working in Pakistan! The current set-up is seen by many as a continuation of the military dictatorship of yesteryear only the dictators have been elected this time around. The media and judiciary have so far played a pivotal role in counter-balancing the fascist nature of the current set-up. Why has democracy failed to deliver the 160 million strong masses here in Pakistan and been a source of much disappointment? I believe there are no straight answers and the problems in Pakistan are complex. One can only begin to take down the layers one by one and endeavour to get to the core of this multi-faceted problem.

To begin with, democracy needs an ideal set up to function properly. Pakistan in the current state is not an ideal country for democracy to flourish. Foremost, I believe, it needs an educated and socially responsible body of people who can make decisions critically. Education has never been a priority for previous regimes. Only a fraction of the budget is spent on education and government schools are poorly equipped and lack dedicated educationists.

### **Illiterates elect corrupt politicians**

The high rate of illiteracy may be one reason why democracy fails to function properly in Pakistan. It is the Pakistani people who voted and elected the corrupt politicians that rule Pakistan today. Are these politicians the true reflection of the masses that elected them? Here perhaps lies the dichotomy. The people who have been elected don't really represent the aspirations of the masses that elected them in the first place. The ruling Pakistan People's Party is known for leftist inclinations, famous for its slogan *roti* (bread), *kapra* (clothing) and *makaan* (housing). A party of labourers and the working class. But those were the ide-

als of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto when he founded the party back in the 1950s. The party of today under President Zardari still capitalizes on that popular appeal, but what it delivers in reality is a very different picture. It has become the party of the rich and influential, the landlords and industrialists who find it convenient to use the populist appeal of the party to come to power for their own vested interests and gains. They have clearly betrayed the masses and led them up the garden path. It will be another three years before people can exercise their right to vote again. In three years' time these corrupt elements would have amassed enough money to buy any body of voters. An illiterate body of people is prone to fall for fake promises, or if they do see the reality they are either coerced or their vote simply bought for the highest bid. The education system is in dire need of reforms in order to make Pakistan competitive in the world market. The educational/vocational training needs to be brought to a level where it can empower the masses financially as well as nurture a sense of responsibility towards society. Pakistan has a growing young population, but alas unskilled and barely literate. These people lack empowerment and lack the sense to determine their own destiny. For example, people in the rural areas are often forced by the landlords to vote for people of their own choice.

These exploited people end up making 'choices' which further the interests of the powerful and rich. These people need to realize that they need to make socially responsible choices, choices that serve their own interest. They need to break free from subjugation and exploitation by becoming educated and skilled. Educational reforms need to go hand in hand with land reforms. It may be noted here that Pakistan is an agrarian based economy with 70% of the population engaged in land cultivation. However, a tiny minority landed class controls the majority of fertile land, often tilled by landless peasants and workers.

It is of utmost importance that along with imparting education in the rural areas, the government should initiate land-reforms for a more equitable and fair distribution of land. I feel that these two steps are of foremost importance for democracy to take root in Pakistan. These steps will not happen overnight. Even if the current government is sincere about up-

lifting the masses, it may take decades before a more equitable and socially responsible society emerges, in which democracy can flourish. Apart from education and land reforms, I believe there is a dire need to strengthen the justice system and create institutions that enforce transparency and accountability. The democracy in Pakistan is a good example of how a respectable system of governance could be subverted and made corrupt to the extent that it begins to jeopardize the very existence of the state it is meant to serve and preserve. The corrupt elements in the current democratic setup have been beyond accountability so far as they have resisted the creation of any such body which could hold these public representatives accountable. The elected representatives consider themselves to be the highest authority in the land since people have vested their trust in them. In Pakistan generally they consider themselves above the law too. They are above the jurisdiction of the courts and the police. Once elected, these politicians tend to fill the police service and the courts with their favourites and sympathisers. This practice ensures a free hand in all illegal and corrupt practices.

A glaring example of this practice is how the law minister was doling out money to the bar associations in order to get the support of the lawyers and counter balance the tough stance of the supreme court vis-à-vis corruption. Another example is how various

ministers have received huge kick-backs from various foreign firms, who are currently working on establishing rental power projects in Pakistan. These firms have signed contracts which safeguard their interests and the end user, the public has to pay exorbitant rates for electricity. By making electricity expensive beyond most people's reach, they have set the stage where more and more industries are shutting down and workers laid off. Corruption is eating away at the very basic fabric of society. It is the need of the hour to have transparency and accountability in any system of governance Pakistan may have. It is this corruption which is undermining the very existence of this country.

I may conclude here by saying that it may take decades before democracy may take a respectable shape in this country. The people of this land will have to make smart choices in the next election. Clean and socially responsible people will need to come forward and run for public offices and weaken the hold of political dynasties, the corrupt and the powerful. For democracy to function properly, the people of this land will have to stand up and claim a stake for their own better future. Pakistan is a land blessed by vast natural resources and a young population that could make it another Asian tiger. Democracy should be given a chance and our rulers should wake up to the realities before it is too late.

## Die Rolle Pakistans in der Welt

Wilke, Boris, 2009: Pakistan: Politik, Geschichte, Kultur. (Beck'sche Reihe 1838) München, Beck-Verlag. (208 Seiten)

Seit dem 11. September 2001 steht Pakistan im Brennpunkt der Welt-politik. Im Kampf gegen den internationalen Terrorismus und bei der Stabilisierung Afghanistans kommt dem Land eine Schlüsselrolle zu. Die innere Stabilität des über 170 Millionen Einwohner zählenden Landes wurde dadurch

schweren Belastungsproben ausgesetzt. Die Kontrolle über das Grenzgebiet zu Afghanistan könnte der Regierung entgleiten und auch nach dem Rücktritt von Präsident Musharraf kommt Pakistan politisch nicht zur Ruhe. Droht der innere Zerfall der einzigen islamischen Nuklearmacht?

Boris Wilke, wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter bei der Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin zuständig für Pakistan, führt in diesem Buch in die geographi-

schon, ethnischen und historischen Grundlagen des Landes ein, beschreibt die politische und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung der jungen Nation von 1947 bis zur Gegenwart und analysiert die Rolle Pakistans in der Welt. Den Abschluss bildet ein Kapitel über die wichtigsten Zukunftsprobleme des Landes. Boris Wilke hat das Land in den letzten Jahren mehrfach bereist und zahlreiche Gespräche mit Politikern geführt.

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