



Governance and democracy

Every now and then we hear noises being made in favour of authoritarian form of government. Perhaps this is a global phenomenon as there seems to be a periodic pull in all nascent democracies towards Bonapartism. The question to consider for us, I believe, is that why is this so. In spite of the fact that in the 21st Century we all are more or less agreed that democracy is the best form of government and all solutions have to lie through this system. But there is still some limited discontent against the system?

Democracy was famously defined by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address, as ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people. Historically, authoritarianism was the main form of government in countries, and it was after centuries of struggle that constitutionalism and democracy were developed, based on the twin principles of division of power amongst the three organs of the state and government, as representative of the people, elected through freely held elections. We in Pakistan had a long struggle for democracy, but still we at times, one hears voices of discontent. Maybe the reason, is that there is a disconnect between the ideal of a democratic government and the reality of misgovernance of governments. After all democracy is not just the rule by the representatives of the people, it is also good government.

Those in favour of parliamentary democracy talk about giving it time, and those against say that the system is not working, lets change it. There is already talk about the Presidential system again. I think it is right time to assess our democracy in the larger international context.

It was therefore very appropriate that on the 15th of September, 2015, the British High Commission held a Seminar to commemorate the international democracy day. The theme of the Conference was very apt, “Good Governance and Democracy”. Very distinguished panelists were invited, including Mrs. Yasmeen Rehman, former MNA, Mr. Sohail Naqvi, Vince Chancellor LUMS, Mr. I. A. Rehman, Director, HRCF and Dr. Pervez Hoodhboy. The keynote speech was by Mr. S.M .Zafar, and by Mr. Ben French of the Dfid.

Mr. S.M. Zafar said that he would describe our democracy as a 'statistical democracy'. The term has stuck in my mind. I think in some ways, it, albeit, unfortunately, but, succinctly, describes our democracy. We count numbers and after having counted the numbers, think as if this alone is enough for democracy. Will of the people as expressed in elections is of course essential and hugely important, after all that is the bedrock of democracy, but people should matter, not just at the time of votes, but throughout the tenure of the governments, assemblies, etc. How can you have a good functional democracy, without good governance? A system has to deliver to be popular amongst the people. Democracies in the West deliver, as good governance is an essential part of the government. If the government does not deliver then it is not full democracy, as the aim of democracy is to deliver services to people and run the government efficiently in accordance with people's wishes as ascertained through periodic elections. We must remember that Democracy gives the system, legitimacy but good governance systems give it, efficiency! Governments have to be efficient, accountable, honest, fair and open.

Democracies are considered most suitable to provide such governance, through elections and the assemblies, although historically, some despots, such as Frederick the Great of Prussia, have provided very efficient governance in their countries.

Why is it that our democratic experience is perceived by some as failing to deliver basic services to the people and run the government efficiently. There are a number of reasons for this, firstly, there is a difference between governance and democracy, as discussed above, secondly, there is the fact that the system is evolving and is necessarily imperfect and will take time to mature, after all England took many centuries for democracy to fully mature there, and thirdly, a very important element of democracy, the local government has been historically either non-existent or very weak. This is critical, as it is the local government which provides for basic governance and services, such as health, education, civic services, roads, etc. In the absence of a democratic input at that level, and the governance instead being centralised in the provincial capitals, with unelected bureaucrats running the districts, how can this be democratic, accountable and open? In addition, there are many other reasons why our democracy has not fulfilled peoples' wishes. One reason is that the people are ahead of the governance institutions. The people are much more aware and expect and demand a much higher level of service delivery and governance standards, than the ones our present political parties are able to deliver, even the party that is holding up the reform agenda, PTI. This is helped by the fact that the media is independent and robust in its role of a watchdog. The political parties need to understand that there is a difference between getting elected and good governance. One reason for bad governance is that our political system is based on patronage. It is not the best man who gets the job, but the best connected one. Bilawal is the Chairman of the party by virtue of who he is, Hamza Shabaz is important in his party, because of who, he is. The same is true in many cases for politicians. It is widely believed that with varying degrees in the Centre and all the provinces,

as well as GB and AJ&K, the postings of government servants is not done on the basis of merit but, on the basis of connections and loyalty.

In addition, our politics is based on clientelism. This means that development work and provision of services is done on the basis of rewarding an influential. This means that a school, for example, will not get built, where it is most needed, but where a local influential wants it, or wherever the government has a piece of land. Politicians go for projects that make an impact and news rather than invest in the health and education of the people. Metro is a case in point. However, good governance requires economic efficiency. This is particularly true for a country like Pakistan, where the Tax to GDP ratio is very low. This means that money which could have been used for a range of important services is spent on one mega project, which can only be run on subsidy, and is therefore a constant strain on the exchequer. Although, it does provide a useful service, and is reportedly almost always full. This is not to say that there are not many good initiatives that the Federal and provincial governments, have taken for improving governance, but the gap in what is being done, and what needs to be done, is still huge. Much has been done, but a lot still remains to be done.

The awareness created by the media and the globalised nature of the world means that people are aware of very high standards of governance. Governance is defined as the way a government is run, and good governance is defined as doing a good job of governance, in simplest of terms. On this yardstick our governments are found wanting to various degrees, some more so, some less so. We need to remember that democracy and good governance go together and the best guarantor of democracy is good governance.