



When democracy fails

After de-colonisation, most newly-independent Asian and African countries were unable to stabilize democratic institutions and traditions. The system in these countries further weakened and became vulnerable when armed forces intervened and overthrew democratic government to establish military dictatorships.

Another factor that has remained significant in the failure of democracy in such countries is the role of politicians. With their mediocrity, corruption and lack of vision, they plunged the country into disorder and chaos. Based on this situation, liberal western intellectuals often argue that certain countries were granted independence while their leadership was still immature and unskilled in politics. They argue that during the colonial period, there was peace, prosperity, law and order in these countries. As these countries became independent and their socio-political situation rapidly deteriorated, these intellectuals urged the old colonial powers to either reoccupy these countries or to make arrangements to restore the democratic system.

Although politicians and leadership can certainly be held responsible for the decadence of the system, the seeds of a system that negates democracy were sown during the colonial rule. After the Indian war of independence in 1857, the British government promoted and strengthened the feudal system in order to control the rural population with help from the landlords who were granted special privileges and powers to raise their social and political status in society. In turn, they collaborated with the government against the interest of their own people. The British government supervised them and kept a check on them so they could not deviate against the policies of the government.

Pakistan inherited the feudal system which gained power and strength since there was no longer the check and balance of colonial governance over their conduct. These feudals have played a negative role in Pakistani politics since independence. During democratic rule, they formed political parties, participated in elections and became a part of the ruling classes.

Freedom and democracy are dreams you never give up. — Aung San Suu Kyi

In case of military government, they supported every coup in order to preserve and protect their privileges and properties. Army officers who are granted property after their retirement also became landlords and as their interests became common, both made efforts to strengthen feudalism.

Presently, feudal lords control state institutions for their own benefit as most of the leading families are members of the parliament, holding ministerial portfolios. They use this power to enhance their influence and prestige in the society. Nearly all political parties are dominated by feudal lords who are so powerful that a common person does not have the courage to contest elections against them. In political parties as well as in the ruling circles, there is no space for ordinary people to participate or challenge them.

Some feudal lords exercise even more power and control as spiritual leaders of their community. Their disciples have no alternative but to vote for them. Therefore feudalism is an impediment in the way of democratic institutions and their growth. Moreover, contesting elections has become so expensive that common people stand no chance of participating in the electoral process. It is common knowledge that electoral candidates have to pay large amounts as 'donation' to the party in order to obtain a ticket. The whole process is undemocratic and against the spirit of democracy.

Another cause for the failure of democracy in our country is the institution of the bureaucracy which we have also inherited from the colonial rule. Bureaucratic institutions such as police, secret agencies, judiciary, and government officials were trained during the colonial period to control people by using coercive methods. They were not pro-people but against them. For example, in case of strikes and demonstration, the colonial police would crush them brutally, a practice which continues to the present.

Secret agencies used to check the conduct of people and those whose activities were suspected to be anti-government were imprisoned and tortured. Nobody would be appointed on an important government post without the clearance of these agencies. At present our government follows the same exercise. All these bureaucratic institutions are used for the interest of the ruling classes and not for the welfare of the people. All respective governments have retained these institutions and use them to subdue and crush any opposition which challenges their power. Therefore, the existence of these bureaucratic institutions is also a major cause for declining democratic traditions.

The Pakistani leadership has created confusion by building the political structure of the country so as to make it an ideological state. Whether democracy is according to our religious tenets or not remains a debate. Does nationhood include non-Muslims within its orbit or not? In the absence of Pakistani nationalism, regional sub-nationalism is becoming a strong source of identity. As a result, central authority has weakened and there is no binding force to unite

different provinces under one state rule. There is a need to end feudalism, tribal leadership and the hold of powerful individuals from political parties. Common people must be provided opportunities to participate in political activities. Only their inclusion in mainstream politics would strengthen democracy and save the country from corrupt, dishonest and mediocre leadership.

