



## Democracy's Failure in Pakistan

Why India is democratic and Pakistan is not. What after all is wrong with Pakistan? (By Shamshad Ahmad)

On their emergence as two independent states on the map of the world as a result of a democratic political process, both India and Pakistan inherited a parliamentary tradition and began their independent statehood with a democratic path clearly charted out for them. To start with, however, there was no level-playing field for the state of Pakistan which had to build an entire government from the scratch in 1947 under a state of emergency whereas India was born with an intact bureaucratic apparatus in Delhi. The Congress emerged virtually as a mini-parliament with democratic habits of debate, argument and negotiation.

Since then, India managed to forge an uninterrupted democratic tradition by adopting its constitution in 1950, going through political and economic reforms and despite its huge size and socio-economic challenges, holding elections every five years. In Pakistan, the vision of a democratic and progressive future articulated unambiguously in a resolution adopted by the Council of the Pakistan Muslim League in December 1947 remains an ever illusory goal. With its Founder's early demise in September 1948, the new State of Pakistan lost the promise of healthy political growth with acute systemic deficiencies restricting its transition to democracy. After the Quaid, it was left without any sense of direction, and came to be possessed by a corrupt political hierarchy of no more than a bunch of self-serving, feudalist and opportunistic politicians who were to manage the newly independent Pakistan in collusion with civil and military bureaucracy. In the process, we saw a continuing cycle of governmental changes by non-political means. Machiavelli's political philosophy based on the "doctrine of necessity," became an integral part of our body politic.

Given the common history of the 'twin' neighbours, one wonders why India is democratic and Pakistan is not. What after all is wrong with Pakistan? For us, it is not sufficient only to attribute Pakistan's failure in democracy to its leadership miscarriages and military take-overs. There are in fact deep-rooted historical, socio-cultural and geo-political factors that have been conditioning the post-independence democratic tradition in Pakistan. Since independence, the politics and governments in Pakistan have also remained hostage to the feudal-led elite classes which have been inimical to any far-reaching political reform or liberalization in the country.

The overbearing feudal power structure in Pakistan is the main cause of our political decay. It has always resisted land reforms in the country which it fears will strike at its own roots. Unlike India's Congress Party, the Muslim League, Pakistan's founding party was almost wholly dominated by few feudal families, which the British had patronized before partition and were powerful enough to retain control over national affairs through the bureaucracy and the armed forces. Even after Muslim League's disintegration, the same feudalized oligarchy consisting of different men at different times under different political flags remained in power with or without military collaboration

Historically too, Pakistan was handicapped in developing a democratic tradition. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British had been gradually devolving power to local authorities in several provinces across India but those reforms were never extended to the North-West Frontier Province and Punjab, the territories that later made up the bulk of Pakistan after the 1947 partition. Thus several of the provinces India inherited from the Raj already had some experience in democracy, Pakistan inherited two highly militarized provinces with no such tradition. This unpalatable colonial legacy in conjunction with the country's feudalised political parties, social conservatism, and outside influences provided a fertile ground for Pakistan's army to grow in size and scale and gain an increasingly strong influence over the state.

There are in fact deep-rooted historical, socio-cultural and geo-political factors that have been conditioning the post-independence democratic tradition in Pakistan. Since independence, the politics and governments in Pakistan have also remained hostage to the feudal-led elite classes.

The most important factor circumscribing democracy's growth in Pakistan, however, has been its geopolitical location which not only shaped its post-independence personality as a state but also conditioned its domestic as well as external behaviour. Emerging from the trauma of sub-continental turmoil, the young state of Pakistan, faced with the stark reality of its geo-political environment, especially its troubled relationship with India due to last-minute British manipulations in leaving behind disputed borders, gravitated naturally to the pole that stood for 'freedom and democracy' in that intensely bi-polar world.

On its part, the West, especially the US looked at Pakistan and its special geo-political importance only as a strategic asset in its "containment" policy against Soviet expansionism. They could not find a better partner than a country with Pakistan's exceptional location and potential for a crucial role in the final stages of the Cold War. This gave Pakistan an unrivalled relevance to the global Cold War dynamics, and following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, it became a major player and a front-line state in the last and decisive battle of the Cold War hastening the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Once the Afghan war was over and the Soviets pulled out, the US just walked away, leaving Afghanistan and its people at the mercy of their fate. We were also left in the lurch. In the years that followed, the US not only turned a blind eye on our strategic concerns vis-à-vis India's unchecked nuclear weapon program but also started bringing us under greater scrutiny and pressure for our own legitimate nuclear program. We became its most sanctioned ally.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistan again became a frontline state, and a pivotal partner of the United States in its war on terror. As a battleground of this war, Pakistan could not escape the fall out of the crisis on its already volatile socio-economic environment. It continues to suffer protracted violence, massive displacement, trade and production slowdown, and worsening law and order situation. Indeed, this sequence of history speaks for itself in determining what really happened to democracy in Pakistan.

Pakistan's failure in democracy is also attributed to its long American connection as a friend and ally. For Pakistan, the issues of security and survival in a turbulent and hostile regional environment and its problems with India have been the overriding policy goals in its relations with Washington. For Washington, however, Pakistan was solely a strategic 'asset' and at times a 'fall guy' and occasionally an easy scapegoat for its own failures and setbacks in its regional and global outreach. In the process, no wonder, Pakistan's military regimes and dictators remained its most favourite interlocutors.

In today's context, what is important for us is the need and urgency for Pakistan to be stable politically and strong economically so as to be self-reliant and free of external constraints and limitations. It has long been in need of a fresh political impulse that could immunize the country to military take-overs and civilianize its body politic forever. Our country's peculiar socio-economic and political culture, based on feudal and tribal structure, high rate of poverty and illiteracy, and inequality of wealth and power are symptomatic of a lopsided situation that warrants the beginning of an end to the current socio-economic disparities and political exploitation of the people by the privileged few of our country.

Unfortunately, our present 'elected' set up does not inspire confidence among the people of Pakistan who continue to suffer the worst-ever hardship of their history. They cannot afford to remain complacent spectators any longer. They got rid of a dictator three and a half years ago, and are now poised to get rid of this class of looters and plunderers at their first available opportunity. A popular momentum is already building up to root out the culture of "greed and deceit" from the country's body politic. There is a clarion call, loud and clear, for changing the system not faces alone.