

True Democracy in Pakistan: Myth or Reality

OUTLINE:

1. Introduction

1.1. Thesis Statement: True democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality

1.2. Outline Statement: The political role of Establishment, disregard for the constitution, absence of separation of power, lack of internal democracy in political parties, illiteracy, crackdown on dissent, and failure to devolve power are the factors which indicate that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth.

2. Arguments

2.1. Political role of establishment

↳ 33 Years direct rule

2.2. Disregard for constitution

↳ Doctrine of necessity

2.3. Absence of separation of power

↳ Interference by military, judiciary and politicians in one another's domain

2.4. Lack of Internal democracy in political parties

↳ FES Report 'State of Democracy in Pakistan 2023'

2.5. Illiteracy

↳ BISP Survey 2021 and Pakistan Economic Survey (23-24)

2.6. Crackdown on dissent

↳ RSF 'Press Freedom Index' - 2024

2.7. Failure to devolve power

↳ Local government (Article 140-A)

↳ Abraham Lincoln's View

3. Counter-arguments

3.1. End of dictatorships

↳ Democracy since 2008

3.2. Conduct of elections every five years

3.3. Completion of assembly terms

↳ Last three assemblies completed terms

↳ Smooth transfer of power

4. Response

4.1. Indirect (Hybrid) rule

↳ Zahid Hussain's book

4.2. Elections are not standard for true democracy

↳ Elections in China, Russia etc.

↳ Questions on fairness of elections

4.3. Fragile parliament and dismissals of Prime Ministers

5. Conclusion

Democracy is the predominant political system around the globe. There are a number of countries which claim to be democratic. More than half of the world's states have democratic form of government. However, this does not mean that these states are 'truly democratic'. Many people hold the view that true democracy in Pakistan is a reality since the era of dictators is over in the country, it holds elections every five years, and last three elected assemblies have completed their terms. However, in actuality, true democracy means much more than elections and completion of terms. Hence, true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality and the indicators such as the political role of establishment, disregard for the constitution, absence of separation of powers, lack of internal democracy in political parties, illiteracy, crackdown on dissent, and failure to devolve power at local level proves this stance.

Firstly, true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality because of the persistent role of the military establishment

in the politics. The establishment kept interfering in politics, either directly or indirectly, through the history of the country. Islamabad has witnessed brief periods of democratically elected governments between the lengthy martial laws. Since its inception, Pakistan had been run by the military dictators for 37 thirty-three years cumulatively. Besides the direct rule, the establishment has also meddled in politics indirectly by bringing in and out various governments. Therefore, the political role of establishment proves that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth.

Disregard for the constitution is the second indicator which suggests that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality. Pakistan took so long to formulate its first constitution and then frequent subversions from the constitution impeded its journey of becoming a true democracy. The three martial law dictators either abrogated the constitutions or 'held (them) in abeyance'. Similarly, the judiciary has always

molded the constitution for personal interests and political interest gains. Under the pretext of the 'Doctrine of Necessity', the country's judiciary had even 'justified' abrogation of constitution and military rule. This disregard and subversion from the constitution is continued till date in various forms. Hence, it would not be unfair to claim that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality.

Thirdly, the absence of the separation of power and interference of state institutions in one another's domain ^{has} made true democracy in Pakistan a myth. The oversized role of ^{the Security} State institutions and strength ^{of} judiciary ~~had~~ ^{has} made them interfere in politics. The two institutions had many a times sent the democratically elected governments and leaders home. Similarly, the political leadership had, on multiple occasions, interfered in the matters of judiciary and military. Pursuing their political interests, the politicians have always defied meritocracy and appointed heads of military and judiciary of their choice.

In some instances, such as the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) of Pervez Musharraf, politicians have even suspended the judiciary. All of these events prevented separation of power which resulted in the absence of true democracy in Pakistan.

The lack of internal democracy in the political parties of Pakistan also proves that true democracy in Pakistan the country is a myth and not a reality. The political parties of Pakistan lack the democratic culture.

The political parties have become the dynastic properties. Only people belonging to specific families, feudal class or elite class rose to the higher ranks of the political parties. The report of FES titled 'State of Democracy in Pakistan 2023' declared that the top three parties of Pakistan lack democracy within and they have a 'centralized decision making' system. Similarly, a research of Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) revealed that more than ^{fifty} 50 percent of legislators of 2002, 2008, and 2013 assembly were dynastic politicians.

Thus, true democracy is a myth within the political parties themselves, let alone the whole country.

Illiteracy and uneducated voters are the fifth factor which reinforces the view that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality. As per the Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24, 62.8 percent is the literacy rate of the country. The uneducated and poor voters have no understanding of the true value of their votes. The illiterate voters cast votes on the basis of "baradari" and sell their votes for a small amount of money. The former head of Political Science Department of University of Peshawar, A.H. Hilali contends that "Democracy suffers due to unawareness of electorates about... making accountability of political parties through vote due to lack of education." The situation is far from being over since around 22.8 million children are out of school according to the BISP Survey of 2021. Hence, with this level of illiteracy ^{and voting behaviour} it would not be wrong to say that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality.

Sixthly, crackdown on dissent shows that true democracy in Pakistan ~~and~~ is a myth and not a reality. Every government in Pakistan is dotted with the cases of political victimisation of the opposition parties and their members. Freedom of speech is widely absent in the Pakistani political landscape. The Every ruling party book the dissidents in bogus cases to suppress the opposition. Moreover, it introduces draconian laws to clamp down on media. As per the Reporters without Border (RSF)'s Press Freedom Index, Pakistan ranks at 152 out of 180 countries. Freedom of expression is a core feature of democracy. Since, it is missing in Pakistan, it would be right to say that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality.

Lastly, the absence of the devolution of power at the grass root level makes it evident that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality. Democracy is all about the power of people. Abraham Lincoln had famously said that "Democracy is the government of

the people, by the people, for the people." So, in democracy ordinary people should have the authority. However, in ^{the} case of Pakistan, political authority is limited to few people of elite or feudal classes. The article 140-A of the constitution of Pakistan also directs the provincial government to form local governments. But, this article has always been largely ignored by the provincial governments and they do not conduct local bodies elections at the required time. Hence, with the absence of devolution of power at the grass root level, true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality.

Still, there are some people who believe that true democracy in Pakistan is a reality because the era of dictatorships is over and Pakistan is truly democratic after 2008, the country holds elections every five years and the last three assemblies have completed their terms without interruption. Therefore, the smooth transfer of power between the governments shows that in Pakistan true democracy is not a myth.

The proponents of this view contend that Pakistan has remained democratic for ~~44~~ forty-four years in its seventy seven years' history. The era of dictatorships is over in Pakistan^{now}. It is witnessing uninterrupted democracy since 2008. With the absence of martial laws or any direct military intervention in the democratic setup of Pakistan, it would be unfair to say that true democracy does not exist in Pakistan and ^{that} it is a myth.

The second argument presented by the adherents of the view that true democracy exists in Pakistan is that the country holds elections every five years. Pakistan has been conducting elections at regular intervals since 2008. The country^{has} witnessed elections of 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024. The conduct of four elections without interruption is an indication of the truly democratic character of Pakistan's political system. Moreover, the elections also highlight that the public is being heard. The people are being given the right to choose their legislators.

at their own will. Since, conduct of elections at regular intervals is a prime feature of democracies, hence Pakistan is truly democratic and it is a reality.

Those, who believe that true democracy in Pakistan is not a myth also claim that no doubt Pakistan had witnessed the frequent dissolution of elected assemblies but now the situation has changed. Now, the legislative assemblies are completing their tenures. They are not being dissolved either by military dictators, judges or presidents. Thus, the sanctity of the parliament has been established now. The legislative assemblies now exhibit smooth transition of power. They have completed their tenure for three times now. Therefore, the completion of assembly terms signify that in Pakistan true democracy is a reality and not a myth.

However, there are certain ^{pieces of} evidences which prove that the claims of the proponents of true democracy in Pakistan are not true. The persistent

indirect control of establishment after the end of martial laws, the fact that elections are not the only standard for true democracy, and fragile Parliament and frequent dismissals of elected Prime Ministers are the arguments which reinforce the argument that true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality.

Firstly, the era of dictatorships and direct political control maybe over but the military establishment still has indirect role in politics. There are ~~many~~ a number of incidents which indicate that military establishment still interferes in the political matters, hence preventing Pakistan from becoming a true democracy. The establishment still covertly pulls the strings and make and break governments. Zahid Hussain, a seasoned political analyst, has in his book 'Hybrid Rule in Pakistan' uncovered this role of the establishment. He contended ^{that} 'realising' the feasibility of direct rule, the establishment has now turned towards indirect 'hybrid' rule where it dictates the apparently

'democratic governments' Hence, in the presence of indirect influence of establishment the true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and certainly not a reality.

Secondly, the view that true democracy exists in Pakistan just because it holds elections is flawed. Democracy means much more than elections. The Canadian author and activist, Naomi Klein says that "Democracy is not just the right to vote, it is the right to live in dignity". So, elections are not the ^{only} standard to gauge the democracy in a country. Even the countries like China and Russia hold elections regularly but this does not make them a democracy. Moreover, ^{almost} every election in Pakistan had been questioned and the independent observers had doubted the fairness of elections. Even if one assumes that elections in Pakistan had been free and fair then the oppositions' refusal to accept the results reveal the undemocratic culture in Pakistan's political landscape. Therefore, mere holding elections does not mean that true democracy exist in Pakistan, instead the evidence suggest otherwise.

Lastly, without a doubt the last three legislative assemblies have completed their tenures but it is also a fact no Prime Minister in Pakistan has ever completed his five years term. The country has witnessed frequent dismissal of elected Prime Ministers on, what Salman Akram Raja has termed, 'dubious grounds', in the book "Pakistan: Search for Stability." Moreover, the claim that the sanctity of the Parliament has been established now is not true. How can the sanctity of the Parliament be established with the leaders of its lower house being dismissed on bogus cases. Hence, just the completion of assembly terms does not mean true democracy. Instead, the frequent dismissals of the Prime Ministers through unconstitutional means justify that in Pakistan true democracy is a myth and not a reality.

In conclusion, true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality because of the political role of Establishment, disregard for the constitution, absence of the separation of power, lack of internal democracy in political parties, illiteracy, crackdown on dissent,

and failure to devolve power at local level.

The military establishment either directly or indirectly influenced the politics of Pakistan, which includes thirty-three years' military rule.

The judiciary and politicians, along with the establishment, disregarded the constitution by frequently using 'Doctrine of Necessity' for their

petty interests. Moreover, politicians, judiciary, and establishment have interfered in each others' domain resulting in absence of separation of power. In

addition to this, political parties lack internal democracy which is also highlighted by FES' report 'State of Democracy in Pakistan 2023'.

Furthermore, the illiterate voters do not know the true value of their votes resulting in

dynastic politics. Also, the crackdown on dissent and media reveals the situation of democracy

in Pakistan. Lastly, the devolution of power at the grass root level is absent making true

democracy in Pakistan a myth. Some people believe that true democracy in Pakistan

is a reality because the era of dictatorships is over, the country holds elections and last

three assemblies have completed their terms.

However, this viewpoint is flawed because establishment

still influences politics through 'hybrid regimes', elections are not the only standard for true democracy and so does the completion of assembly tenures. Hence, to call it a day, true democracy in Pakistan is a myth and not a reality.