

DATE: ① / /

# POLARIZED POLITICS:-

## The Issues and Challenges of democracy in Pakistan

### Outline

#### (1) Introduction

"The pervasive negativity in people (society), media and political parties has intensified the underlying political polarization, posing significant risks to the survival of democracy in Pakistan including erosion of democratic norms and weakening of public institutions."

#### (2) Underlying Issues Caused by Political Polarization in Pakistan for Democracy

- (2.1) Politics of Hate and Populism
- (2.2) 'Us' Versus 'Them' Mentality
- (2.3) Lack of Genuine Political Debate
- (2.4) Redressal of Grievances is absent
- (2.5) Political consensus impossible to achieve.

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

(2.6) Party Interest Supersede National Interests

(2.7) Tranished Political culture.

### (3) Challenges to Democracy in Pakistan exacerbated by Political Polarization.

3.1) Echo Chambers Strengthened by Traditional and Social Media

3.2) Lack of Accountability of Political Discourse

3.3) Strong Man Syndrome

3.4) Infighting Among Public Institutions

3.5) Entrenched Rivalries Among Political Leaders

3.6) Loyalty to party rewarded over public Service

3.7) Identity and Emotions-Based Politics

### (4) Remedial Measures for Pakistan's Polity to get themselves out of this Quagmire.

4.1) Revamping Charter of Democracy (1.5)

4.2) New and Enhanced Dialogue between Political Parties (6.6)

4.3) Ending Culture of Political witch-hunting and Victimization (3.6)

4.4) Reforms in the media, political landscape and Society

(5)

## Conclusion

"Political Polarisation have damaged the fabric of democracy in the country, through concerted efforts and wholehearted approach this can be reversed and democracy can be allowed to flourish."

Pakistan, a nation envisioned and created on the principles of democracy, faces an existential crisis. These very ideals are under threat due to the rise of polarized politics in the country. One may argue that this attitude is nothing new and, sooner or later, it was bound to blow. Today, popular rhetoric has overtaken sensible and substantive debate, an aura 'us' against 'them' has taken hold of society and personal rivalries have seeped in the guise of political discourse. This pervasive negativity among society, media and political has intensified the underlying political polarization, posing significant risks to the survival of democracy in Pakistan, including the erosion of democratic norms and weakening of state institutions. These issues are not merely abstract concerns but, fundamentally alter and they

②

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

impact the fabric of democracy within Pakistan.

Politics is the best path towards a true representational democracy. It gives a voice to the voiceless, and give them an opportunity to take part in nation-building. These are the ideals that the institution of politics should achieve. However, it has not done so and today, the very institutions of politics is full of hate-mongering and populism. Polarisation in society has been accelerated by the polarisation of domestic politics. Politicians have also become complacent to this and accepted this as the new norm. It is much easier to sell a populist and hate-filled narrative than to genuinely work for the people. Due to the low education of the populace, it is much easier for politicians to adopt this route. Moreover, the media, playing true to its sensationalist roots, glorifies and hypes up this narrative. A feedback loop is created between the polity, media and society. The <sup>eventual</sup> loser, in all of this, is democracy in Pakistan.

Education plays a huge in holding elected representative accountable. However, the lack of it in our country has given the political class a free hand to do whatever they want. This has led to the creation

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

of an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. It is <sup>no</sup> more than evident than the politics done on <sup>the</sup> rivers water. The lower riparian <sup>(Sind, Balochistan)</sup> provinces accuse the upper riparian ones (Sind Punjab, KP) of stealing their water. This feud is further aggravated when political parties campaign on this during election years. Social media has added fuel to the fire and these issues have become completely un-navigable. This approach has turned the people of the lower riparian against the upper ones. Similarly, this negative thinking only leads down <sup>to</sup> the road of discontent and agitation. Prominent Baloch Leaders have accused Punjab and others of depriving them of their rightful shares. They have created a narrative of 'Baloch' versus 'Punjabis'. This essentially closing <sup>the doors to any</sup> any genuine political debate on this.

Political debate, done in its true spirits, allows the resolution and reconciliation of conflicts and parties, respectively. For this to be effective an atmosphere of friendliness needs to be cultivated. All of this is absent, due to the growing political polarization. Political debate, today, is no more than rivals benches trying to out do each other in cheap theatrics. The treasury and opposition are both to blame

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

as they both have resorted to this. The debates in Parliament have gone down in value as political ethos and culture were sacrificed in favour of short-term points gaining. Leaders, with the advent of social media, have resorted to creating sound bites instead of genuine political debate. The public now glorifies those sound bites as 'stunning' and 'out of this world'. This mere sophistry stands in the way addressing people's <sup>the</sup> grievances.

People elect politicians to address 'their' grievances and ensure 'their' representation in these corridors of power. However, all of this comes to naught, if the said politician is busy with creating sound bites. An MNA/MPA (member of National/Provincial Assembly) has a duty to their electorate. They are ultimately answerable to the people. They are supposed to guarantee prosperity and economic uplift for the area, but all of this is lost when the politician sidelines his electorate and picks up short-term fire fighting measures instead of long-term policies. Moreover, politicians are often accused of carrying their interests forward i.e party interests instead of the community. Opposition party members seldom have their grievances redressed by the treasury benches. They get sidelined in the decision making process and this ultimately

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

fuels the polarization cycle.

Every country has some goals or interests upon which the political class can unite and generate political consensus. In the United States, it's their relationship with Israel. In Australia, it's the mining industry in the north of the country. However, in Pakistan due to the <sup>current</sup> political environment, political consensus is the last thing that can be achieved. Even legislation which benefits the nation and carries its interest are subject to politicization. Parliamentary proceedings are marred with inadequate debates and are full of name-calling, brawls and unparliamentary behaviour. Both sides trade barbs and call it a day when the session is adjourned. In this charged atmosphere, both sides accuse each other of perpetuating this divide. The media carries this divide and propagates all the negative highlights to the public further polarizing the country. The supporters, being the linchpins, of the system feel the party comprising on its ideals when it sets out to mend its way. All in all, feeding a cycle of polarization within the country.

Every political party wishes to leave its mark on the electorate and portray itself as 'the saviours of the nation'.

③

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

when all they<sup>have</sup> done is the opposite. During their time in government, it is a common practice that new administrations undo all of the work that their predecessors did. They put forward their party interests ahead of the progress made on the national interests front.

The opposition decries all of this, but a sad reality is that they did the same when they were in government. A good example of this is when the proposals of the 'Kalabagh Dam' were being floated, the political parties from Sindh completely politicized the issue to the extent that today the issue is considered 'dead'. Polarisation increased over the share of water between the provinces. So much so, that administrative bodies such as IRSA have become battlegrounds for political feuds, on water, to play out.

If one were to combine all of the traits of today's political culture, they would find negative aspects only. The quality and substances of debate within the country has only deteriorated. The debates in the<sup>1940s</sup> and 50's of the constituent assembly highlight the depth and understanding of the political class at the time. Politics was once a gentlemen's game; it was way to politely disagree and yet achieve a middle ground. However, today's culture rewards



DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

uncouth behaviour. The new generation of politicians have accelerated this downfall. They have breathed new life into the existing divisions in society. Today's, political culture revolves around mud-slinging, pitting ethnicities against one-another and below the belt discourse. This culture also reflects the public opinion of their leaders. They speak the tongue which the public wants to hear. This toxic culture has made politics, and society beyond repair.

Democracy faces new challenges due to political polarization. The current state of it can be best described as it is on its a hospital bed. Social media and infighting among public institutions are some of the many challenges that can send it to the morgue. All of these are vehemently exacerbated by the undertones of political polarisation.

Social media has connected the world, and yet divided it at the same the time. What was once a phenomena limited to the traditional media outlets, has now found a new force on the digital platforms. So Platforms like Facebook, Twitter <sup>are known</sup> ~~have~~ <sup>platforms</sup> for spreading polarizing content. Bandwagoning on this opportunity, traditional news media journalist have ditched their 9-5 jobs and launched their own digital (youtube) channels.

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

They have become the source of yellow journalism and set agendas that further propagate polarization on the internet. Gone are the days, when journalists were supposed to be neutral, bipartisan observers. They have now become quasi-mouthpieces of the political parties. These journalists have created echo chambers that cater to the like-minded individuals within society. These individuals and in turn society have created divisions within themselves.

Politicians ~~spread~~<sup>make</sup> the rhetoric the media spreads and the society consumes it. The question that needs to be asked is why is there a lack of accountability regarding the political discourse. The media acts as the gatekeeper to the information that the politicians propagate. It fact checks and calls them out for fake/misinformation. However, all of this is lost, when the media (print and digital) forgo their roles in search for easy to get rating points and revenue. Moreover, the absence of a strong institution that acts as watchdog also aggravates the situation. PEMRA, (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority), one can argue does its best to regulate the discourse over the airways, but it is too little and not enough. The lack of internal checks and balances in the parties

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

is also telling; parties do little to regulate the political discourse by their members instead promote this behaviour by posting these sound bites with click baity titles.

The public sees these soundbites and make their decision. In a democracy, candidates contest elections and campaign for public support. Some use genuine arguments while some resort to generic, <sup>populist</sup> strong-man phrases. Once they <sup>later</sup> get selected, they become strong-men. The lack of civic involvement, education and absence of rule of law all play into the strong man's favour. They argue with great zeal that the only way to solve the country's problems are by granting them more powers. They target rivals, institutions and segment of the society that they see as a threat to their hegemony. Pakistan, saw many of these strong-men, many of them in uniform while some in civies. These strong-men increase political polarization by dividing the public against their rivals. They use the media to broadcast their narrative and shape public opinion. Ultimately, these cause the death of democracy and bring in autocratic and authoritarian regimes to replace it.

Every segment of society suffers when <sup>political</sup> polarisation takes hold, especially public institutions. These are the courts, bureaucracy

④

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

and other functionaries of the government. These institutions guarantee their legitimacy and autonomy by staying neutral and out of politics. Many of them resist, if they are dragged into such and often wrangle themselves out of it. However, when polarisation takes a grip at the societal and household level, these institutions themselves become a victim to it.

Divisions within the institutions start to appear and they finally start break down. Resultantly, they start to accuse other institutions of encroaching on their space. This steps sets off an never-ending feud between the public institutions. Public trust starts to wane and skepticism starts to take over. They are viewed as the reason why the country cannot progress. Eventually, they become relics and defunct organizations of the past.

It is<sup>a</sup> common sight to see individual disagreeing amongst one-another. Politics is a game of compromises. In today's political arena, rivalries have become full of personal hatred and vengeance. Political victimization and witch-hunting have the go-to tool for pursuing vengeance and revenge. In the early days, rivalries were always there, <sup>but</sup> political parties and leaders disagreed with each other on the basis of political thought. They kept

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

their personal differences out of the public eye. Presently, politicians have shunned this practice of keeping personal rivalries out of politics. They have adopted a new approach of using this rivalry to solidify their electorate. They divide the public opinion through their ordeals. They decry that the other person is no less of a monster and project their rivalry onto the masses. Thus, polarising them too in the process.

Political leaders who get elected on the basis of this process not only pose a threat to democracy, but to the very electorate they are elected from. Parties have formed various patronage and reward systems that allow for <sup>this</sup> behaviour. Often their constituents get left out of the whole process. Elected officials spend more time at the assemblies, which they should do, but not at the expense of their constituency. Moreover, the internal dynamics of political parties rewards those who go out of their way to propagate the party's goals and narrative. While those who work for the public are often disenfranchised. The lack of internal democracy within parties is a clear sign that they have no interest in solving the challenges to democracy. Accountability takes a sidestep, as loyalty to the party is

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

preferred over public service. In this era of polarisation, factions within parties start to develop and some voices are sidelined leading to a complete breakdown of internal democracy.

The very people, who manage to get close to the inner circle of the political party, start campaigning on the basis of hate and identity. They use the 'ethnic card' to fan the flames of ethnocentrism. They play with the sentiments of the people in order to compel them to support that candidate. These very divisions are deliberate, pitting one against the other is a tried tactic. The political parties foster this polarising narrative, rather than debate on legitimate issues that concern the public. The discourse revolves around demonising the rivals and inculcating a divide in the minds of electorate. Religious parties, in the country, outdo themselves when they campaign on the narrative of singling out a particular sect and then declare them as disbelievers. This in turn fans the flame of hate and anger against that particular sect. The electorate is duped and the party repeats this on and on practice.

Democracy, as mentioned before, is on the limping from pillar to post, so that it can get P's grievances heard. However, <sup>The</sup> grim

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

situation present in the country gives little hope or whatsoever. However, all is not lost, there are <sup>some</sup> ways in which democracy can regain its footing back and limit/reduce <sup>the</sup> prevalent polarisation in the country.

The Charter of Democracy was a landmark document signed between the two main stalwarts of Pakistani Politics. Today, more than ever, there is a need to revamp and reorganise the charter to meet the current needs. The charter must be holistic and encompass the cure to counter polarisation. Political parties need to set their differences aside and work towards a common national goal. Unlike the current one, the new charter should be binding and codified, so that it becomes part of the law. The charter should be explicitly clear on the role of those parties who exploit ethnic, religious tensions for the sake of political gains. Moreover, it must set up a regulatory body that regulates the discourse of politicians while keeping in the <sup>constitution in</sup> view. Moreover, to reduce the current polarisation, institutions must be strengthened and depoliticized.

For this charter to succeed, an enhanced and accommodative dialogue must take place between all political stakeholders.

5

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

of the country. Democracy and its rewards/benefits can best be achieved through reconciliatory dialogue. Aggrieved members are brought to the table to alay their concerns. Moreover, parties must work through dialogue to reduce the prevailing polarisation in the country. Rather than agitational politics, parties should adopt methods that doesn't endanger the fabric of society. In the late 2000's, staunch political rivals came together in London to sign the Charter of Democracy. If that could be done, it provides even more reason that now political parties regarding their differences should come together and work towards an engaging and fruitful dialogue. The future of the country and democracy in general hinges on political parties working together.

It has been often noted that whenever political parties transition from the opposition to the treasury benches, the incumbents start a campaign of political victimization and witchhunting. Through the use of state institutions, like the FIA and NAB, governments of the day victimize and destroy the opposition. During this whole process, they forget that 'what goes around, comes around.' The cycle of victimization will form and the next time, they will be at the



receiving end. Now, it made has the country's institution and polity completely inept as both are have become dysfunctional. It is high time that the government and more importantly the political parties realize that this cycle of repression needs to stop. One of the two sides needs to take the big step and stop this. The onus falls onto the government to eliminate this violent cycle/culture. Political parties need to cooperate and work together for the preservation of their legacy and democracy in the country.

Lastly, large scales reforms need to be taken in various sectors of the country. Education quality and outreach needs to be increased, as to educate citizens regarding the negative aspects of polarisation in the country. The media needs to be regulated, there is a consensus that the media has not abided by the code of ethics and played a divisive role in polarising society. Tough regulatory measures need to be taken and fact checking desks need to be established to counter the fake news propagated by the media. Political reforms also need to take place. Political parties must encourage activities on the basis of ideology and not on the basis of ethnicity, religion and so on. Political

DATE: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_

parties need to set up internal accountability mechanisms, to regulate the discourse of its members. Moreover, depoliticization of state institutions is urgently required, so that the trust on those institutions is not compromised. By implementing these, one ensure that democracy will start to prevail and political polarisation will start to lose its footing.

All in all, combatting this negativity requires a war footing approach that involves every segment of society. This polarisation has intensified the rifts between families, people and state institutions. All of this combined poses a significant challenge to the health and survival of democracy within Pakistan. All of this requires a sincere effort made by politicians to right the wrongs made by them. Revamping the charter of democracy, and engaging their political rivals in a meaningful dialogue will surely yield. Lastly, politicians need to make sure they keep their personal feuds out of politics. By doing so, they can hope depolarise and strengthen a society and democracy.