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Democratic backsliding In Pakistan

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Founding fathers of Pakistan envisioned it to be a democratic republic; however, since its inception, Pakistan is struggling to have a sound democratic system. Pakistan has been unable to successfully establish true democracy as multiple reasons hinder democracy's flourishing in true sense. The nascent state in its early years of development had to face threats and wars consequently, security centric policies emerged. These security centric policies emboldened military-bureaucratic nexus as a result Pakistan witnessed multiple military coups and bureaucratic re-engineerings. These events have tainted the democratic evolution in Pakistan thus, it would not be incorrect to say that current democratic backsliding depicts repercussions of democratic history of Pakistan. Abraham Lincoln has defined democracy comprehensively: democracy is for the people by the people and of the people. Pakistan has failed to position its people at the center as a result the democratic realm is witnessing regression. The recent events which engulfed the state of Pakistan in its brutality manifest the backsliding of democratic spirit in the overall atmosphere of the country. Essence of democracy is people voice through elections but in Pakistan elections were not only delayed but also pregnant with pre and post rissing elections. Besides, manipulation and re-engineering to disenfranchise the opposition gave birth to

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another misery. Additionally, media curbs, restrictions on civil liberties, suppression of dissent and tug of war between various institutions contributed to the backsliding of democracy in Pakistan. Vision of founding fathers for Pakistan was to make it democratic in its entirety, multitude of events contributed to its backslide. In recent years, the manifestations of regression are vivid however, Pakistan has full potential to re-establish the edifice of democracy all it needs is to follow the path of founding fathers.

The nascent state of Pakistan was weakened by the aggressive policies of the immediate neighbors ~~besides~~ besides, the saga of independence over-burdened it ^{with} multiple crisis from economic, to political and from social to administrative especially with reference to refugees. Under such circumstances Pakistan went on war in 1948 and skirmishes continued until full scale war of 1965. Thus, such circumstances paved the road for military-bureaucracy to consolidate power especially in times of crisis which were incessant in the early years of independence. These security concerns gave the undemocratic ~~power~~ institutions a lot of power as a result, their sphere of influence expanded engulfing the whole country in the form of coups. In addition to military coups, the powers of other institutions hinder the growth of democracy especially, the encroachment of

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Judiciary and Bureaucracy. Thus, all those events prevent the evolution of democracy in Pakistan. The recent backsliding was indicated by report of Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) which downgraded Pakistan from 'hybrid democracy' in 2022 to 'authoritarianism' category in 2023. ~~and 2022~~ This regression is the outcome of multiple reasons and these causes have truly harmed the true spirit of democracy in Pakistan.

To begin with, elections were delayed by election commission of Pakistan on the pretext of Census 2023. This extended period rendered people vocal as caretaker government do not represent the mandate of people. Government was also quick to ban various neutral organisations which conduct surveys to know the voters' opinion. This dented the transparency of elections as such surveys are crucial to prevent rigging. When the date of elections was finally announced, ~~people~~ ^{parties} were denied right to campaign citing security concerns even on the day of elections. Internet services were shut down rendering people helpless. Adding more, when electoral process concluded Election commission of Pakistan took a long time to announce elections. But the real misery started when the official results announced by the election commission of Pakistan were poles apart with the unofficial results compiled by various media outlets and independent sources. Thus, the saga of form

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45 and Form 47 emerged and to this day it is unresolved. UN General Secretary showed reservations for the electoral process in Pakistan and asked for transparency to put an end to rising allegations.

Adding on, Opposition parties were rendered disfranchised by manipulating some legal loopholes by the election commission of Pakistan. Judiciary was quick to strengthen the stance of election commission of Pakistan.

The main parties, (PTI) which enjoyed widespread support across the country was denied its symbol, ~~the~~ bat. This in turn left the party at crossroads. The pretext for denying the symbol was that the party has failed to perform intra-party elections. Although, Intra-party elections are basic pillars for strengthening of the democracy. There emerged a legal debate on the decision. Judiciary was quick to support the stance of election commission of Pakistan but in 2024 a full court hearing nullified the previous decision and ~~decided~~ held that election commission unlawfully denied (PTI) of its election symbol. Thus, PTI members were to stand as independent candidates if they wanted to contest elections. This rendered a populous party voiceless despite having the support of masses. Malecha (adhi) stated that disfranchisement of opposition (PTI)

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is nothing short of catastrophe for democracy in Pakistan.

Heading of, Pakistan today is under severe media censorship. The reason for the media curbs cited by government is the volatile security atmosphere. The social media network 'X' formerly known as twitter is shut after the elections. People were quick to reject the outcomes of electoral engineering by voicing concerns on X, the government was overwhelmed by the public concerns regarding the news that it banned the twitter all across the Pakistan. Various reasons were cited and security was on top of them all. Recently, the internet firewall and ban of the various social media outlets and curbs on VPN all are nothing but the depiction of media censorship in the state of Pakistan. Media is one of the basic pillar on which democratic institutions are erected. Censored and controlled media depicts the backsliding of democracy in Pakistan. Transparency International has declared that media blackout and censorship in Pakistan have reached a level never reached before during the rule of military dictators.

Heading of, Restrictions on civil liberties and violation of fundamental rights have also contributed to the regression

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of democracy in Pakistan. The epic case study for this would be the military trials of civilians. Recently, Supreme Court of Pakistan allowed the military to trial the people arrested for 9th May 2023 incidents where army's installations were attacked but on conditional basis. The trial of civilian by the military is a death knell for democracy as it would deprive them of fair trial. Basic people are denied their right to protest. The opposition party held a protest in November 2024 but the people who were exercising this right to protest were met with harsh and inhumane treatments. Although, government denies using force against the PTI members who were out for protest various ^{international} media outlets such as BBC confirmed that force was used to disperse the people in Islamabad. When Balochistan's people under the leadership of Mahrang Baloch were demanding the quick resolution of missing persons issue they had to face harsh treatment as well. Thus, in Pakistan civil liberties have been curtailed. According to the European Union the military trials of civilian is nothing but the violation of basic rights of people.

Additionally, the recent re-engineering ~~and of newspaper for the protest of~~ constitution and many more in the past have

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tainted the image of Pakistan as a democratic state. In democracies bills, acts and amendments are passed after pragmatic rational and people centric debates in the parliaments. However, in Pakistan the case is different. 26th Amendment to the constitution of Pakistan was made in just a day without any prudent debate in the ~~constitutions~~ parliament by parliamentarians. This was dubbed as encroachment by executive of the judiciary's sphere. International Council of Jurists termed 26-amendment as vivid example of politicisation of judiciary.

In addition to this, Pakistan's government has been quick to use force against the dissent and has shown no reluctance to use force and coercion to suppress the dissent. Whoever, speaks about the blaws and exposes blawb of government faces inhumane treatment. ~~The~~ Journalist are the biggest victim in this domain besides the members of opposition parties. People who speak about the blaws are picked up from their homes violating the sanctity of privacy and ~~the~~ respect which humans are entitled to just for being humans. The recent abduction of Journalist Imran Riaz and the murder of Arshad

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Shamir In Kenya are linked with their dissent with the establishment. "Space for criticism has been shrinking in Pakistan limiting the true essence of democracy", this was the observation of Amnesty International.

Adding more, there is a severe tug of war between federation and federating units which in turn erodes the grounds of convergence. Convergence and cooperation strengthens democracy but in case of Pakistan the units and center lacks cooperation as a result the true spirit of democracy has always straggled in Pakistan. Balochistan's lower standing on all the development indices is blamed by their people on government at center although it is not true in totality. TTP is voicing the grievances against the TTP and other terrorist groups. Punjab especially south Punjab cries for rights and privileges enjoyed by north and central Punjab and Sindh is also demanding for rights. Thus, there is tug of war between the units and center and among units as well especially Sindh's concern for Punjab over water sharing. This tug of war has not only weakened the state but has also rendered democracy in disarray. Majeed Lodhi says that democracy will only flourish in Pakistan if center-unit overcome its divergence.

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and converse - at sorting out differences.

Besides this, Increase in the extremist tendencies is also hurting the spirit of democracy in Pakistan. Democracy thrives in vibrant and tolerant societies but in Pakistan the space of tolerance has shrunk to very low limits. People at societal and individual level lack acceptance of pluralistic behaviors as a result extremism and intolerance is hurting the atmosphere of democracy. Non Muslims in Pakistan which constitute a very low proportion are under threat due to these extremist tendencies.

various NGOs ^{including Human rights watch} working in Pakistan has depicted that forced conversion is one of the leading issues faced by minorities in Pakistan.

In addition to this, people's lack of trust and dissatisfaction in the leadership and the government institutions marked another symbol of democratic backsliding in Pakistan. Every other day people at any city come out of their homes to protest against the failures of leadership to deliver the best to the people. For democracy to thrive people's trust is pivotal and it is basic tool. People dissatisfaction with the leadership and government institutions marks that their performance is not in accordance with the demands of people. The people of Pakistan protested

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When budget for 2024-25 was passed marking their dissatisfaction however, nothing changed. People in cities protested the whole summer over energy crisis but the issue is still unresolved. The people in Faisalabad are currently protesting for 24-hour long power outages. All these depict the dissatisfaction of people.

Despite these challenges and manifestations of democratic backsliding, way forward exists to reverse the trend of democratic regression in Pakistan.

Firstly, this is a positive step that electoral tribunals have been established to address the grievances of rising.

There is dire need to increase the efficiency and transparency of electoral tribunals so that all cases and allegations would be sorted out quickly. Besides, transparency of these tribunals especially in the legal proceedings is crucial for regaining the trust of

people. Winston Wilson ~~had~~ said that electoral processes are the mirror to judge the democratic spirit of a country.

Thus, government needs to ~~ensure~~ ensure that it is representing the voice of people and that it has not gained power through rising.

Secondly, there is dire need of inter-party dialogue to sort out all the legal, political and other issues inclusively

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Inclusivity is the actual beauty of democracy. All parties need to negotiate so that all the challenges could be sorted out without resorting to coercive measures. There is dire need of dialogue especially between the government and opposition party (PTI) over the reserved seats case otherwise this could harm the sanctity of election in Pakistan. Henry Kissinger said that what war cannot sort out could be sorted out by dialogue.

Thirdly, government need to assess its policies thoroughly especially the recent amendment to the constitution which many people consider ~~to be~~ as breach of judicial powers and participation of judiciary. Besides, the changes to PEMRA also need redressal as these are curbing civil liberties and ^{making} fundamental rights. "The division of power and mutual understanding between the three pillars of state depicts the beauty of democracy in true sense", Winston Wilson.

Moreover, government needs to strengthen the local governments to address the grievances of common people. Local governments are the actual tools through which people are empowered. This empowerment further strengthens democracy. Dr Kaiser Bengali says that strong local governments would pave the way for democratic evolution in its true sense.

Lastly, there is dire need of recharter

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which ensure the provision of democratic rights to citizens. Democracy is successful in those countries which are providing a strong system to ensure the sanctity of fundamental rights. "Man is entitled to certain rights titled as natural rights, no one can deprive a human of these natural rights"; Thomas Jefferson.

In a nutshell, Pakistan today is witnessing democratic backsliding. This regression is not a new phenomenon as the state of Pakistan since its inception has been the victim of non-democratic tendencies emerging from various leaders and institutions. The military coups and the hybrid interferences of non-democratic institutions have weakened the scope of democratic spirit in Pakistan. Pakistan needs to have people-centric approach towards all policies as democracy is nothing but government of the people, by the people and for the people. Electoral transparency is pillar of democracy besides, free media, constructive criticism from opposition, protection of civil liberties, respecting the demands of people without reverting to coercion and smooth functioning of various institutions depict the true beauty of democracy. Pakistan needs to work on the people for their empowerment as only empowered nation can experience the true essence of democracy.