

Pakistan: Contesting the ironic regime

Thursday 22 October 2020, by [JAN Ammar Ali](#) (Date first published: 26 September 2020).

Recent political developments remind us that locating the power centre is often harder than holding it accountable. The bravado shown by the opposition parties during the All Parties Conference lost much of its steam as news began circulating of ‘secret meetings’. Various narratives emerged, including claims of national security, pleas for pardon, or even that they were a “private affair”.

The lack of transparency of these negotiations will continue to fuel the rumour mill, pushing us further into the vortex of suspicion that permeates our society. Such moments of confusion point to the serious deadlock in the country’s political history, particularly on the question of sovereignty. The question is conceptually challenging because, unlike in the Arab dictatorships or monarchies, the power center never reveals itself openly to the public, condemning us to an infinite dialectic of visibility and invisibility in the political domain.

We can address this anomaly by examining the peculiar history of state and citizenship in our region. The mass mobilizations during the late colonial period gave popular legitimacy to the language of rights, constitutionalism and federalism in the newly independent states of India and Pakistan. The freedom movement created a powerful vocabulary for popular sovereignty against the authoritarian rule of the Raj, with democracy turning into an ideological force that the state machinery could no longer ignore.

Yet, the state machinery inherited by the postcolonial state remained deeply paranoid of the people and was geared towards maintaining ‘order’ rather than realizing the aspirations of the public. More importantly, the political leadership refrained from mobilizing its supporters against the moribund social structure, including the feudal and industrial elites. These developments created a paradoxical situation in which Republicanism emerged as the preferred ideological foundation of the Pakistani state. This resulted in a commitment to the social contract with a constitution, separation of powers, and elections to represent the will of the people. However, the colonial state structure meant that not all were willing to limit themselves to the constitutional domain or present themselves for accountability.

In Pakistan, this paradox has resulted in an endless tension between the form and content of governance. Formally, we are a constitutional democracy, but decisive forms of power continue to reside outside the frameworks of law. Thus, the form of (democratic) governance regularly comes into contradiction with the authoritarian content that undergirds our polity.

The last 70 years can be seen as a torturous management of this contradiction at the heart of our political system. Manipulation of the democratic process has been the preferred method of governance rather than simply dismissing the idea of democracy. Such manipulation has always included the welding together of powerful political actors into ‘King’s parties’, as well as using coercion to intimidate political opponents. ‘Accountability’ and ‘anti-corruption’ are the most important elements since the 1950s that have been used to quell the opposition. The ability of power centres to pardon anyone willing to give up on their principled position not only contributes to

sycophancy in the political domain, but also reflects the quasi-monarchical discretion of certain institutions.

We are witnessing a form of sovereignty without responsibility, where authorities can disavow their actions against the citizenry. The classic example is of missing persons, where not only are victims disappeared, but those doing the disappearing remain equally invisible, complicating the procedure of accountability. Moreover, elections that are both staged and managed to get the desired results while maintaining a veneer of legitimacy is another example. In fact, the techniques of managing an election might be one of the most important contributions of Pakistani politics to global political science, an aspect that is still under-theorized. In other words, irony, or the tension between words and action, is central to our political sphere.

An authoritarian order with a democratic facade leads to the accumulation of tensions between different sites. This is why selected prime ministers often start believing in the fiction of their own popularity, or judges who make careers out of supporting authoritarian dispensations take firm positions against dictators, or media personnel supported by those with hidden power become vocal opponents of the very status quo that propelled them to fame.

When such characters go 'off-script', they force the centres of power to reveal themselves, violently disrupting the carefully manufactured performances of the political theatre. The possibility of Frankenstein's monsters putting up a challenge troubles the consciousness of the system's managers, as they use threats, repression, and concessions to reproduce political clout. Thus, the state's obsession with order and stability leads to the perpetual management of disorder.

This history explains why major opposition leaders emerge after serving the powers within the system. Those who break away after benefitting from political manipulation are symptoms of this divide between the form and content of our democracy. This is not a moral judgment on leaders who straddle the tension between various forces and sites of power, between the decaying old and the emergent new. To the contrary, our crisis stems from the fact that whenever a rupture starts developing between the forces of democracy and authoritarianism, it almost always leads to a rapprochement.

'National security' and 'unity' are buzzwords often used to justify deals brokered by individuals who play all sides. This tendency to 'negotiate' can partly be explained by the fact that political forces are aware that they will eventually need the same apparatus that they are clashing with in order to guard their own socio-economic interests. For example, we ought to remember how trade union and peasant organizers have been terrorized by almost every government in Pakistan, blurring the gap between democratic and dictatorial regimes. This unfortunate fact has stunted politics in the country and condemned us to a cyclical consciousness in which every rupture from authoritarianism proves to be part of a circular motion that prevents us from moving forward.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that true change always emerges by emphasizing the gap between the words and actions within any given system. This is evident when recalling that the birth of anti-colonial movements was premised on observations of activists that the colonial masters were undermining their own commitments to their subjects. The impossibility of the ruling system to meet its own standards continues propelling movements towards a decisive break as it becomes clear that the promised rights are impossible to achieve within the status quo.

Today, what we need is a socio-political force that can seriously pursue the rights enshrined within the constitution and will build a mass movement to defend them. Moreover, we need leaders who shirk the 'nuance' of political wheeling and dealing and display an almost naive attachment to facts, akin to the kid who exposed the king in the 'Emperor's New Clothes'. Otherwise, we will remain

endlessly stuck in a manipulated system where 'democracy' remains the form that simultaneously names and conceals our un-freedom.

Ammar Ali Jan is an historian and a member of the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The News International

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/720164-contesting-the-ironic-regime>