

Consensual Unity Amongst The Elite In Pakistan: Myth And Reality

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Abstract:

The relationship amongst elite within a state is highly central and significant for a political system and democracy. This research manuscript attempts to explore intra-elite politics and its impacts on parliamentary democracy in Pakistan especially in the last couple of years. Secondary as well as primary data through interviews have been consulted, collected and interpreted through content analysis. We found that military elite seeks a praetorian state, bureaucratic elite desire an administrative state, the religious elite strive for an Islamic state, urban-economic elite seek a bourgeois polity, judges, since 2007, found a space in the power structure tries to get legitimacy as it had a bad image in the past. We argue the absence of consensus, compromises, and convergence among the elite has negative impacts on parliamentary politics of Pakistan.

Keyword: elite, mutual toleration, convergence, institutional forbearance, parliamentary democracy.

Introduction

Elite politics, during the elected regime of Imran Khan, has badly impacted the democratisation process in Pakistan. After the withdrawal of military from the politics in 2007, democratisation found its grounds in Pakistan. Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) have jointly undertaken several steps that could have strengthen democracy; however, the intra-elite politics in the last decade obstructed that process. The two major political parties have inked a pact, known as Charter of Democracy in 2006, that led to the commencement of 18th amendment in the 1973 constitution of Pakistan. 18th amendment has deterred the military from direct encroachment in politics. Likewise, the amendment has added to the judicial independence in Pakistan by developing a mechanism of the appointment of judges. Similarly, the amendment strengthened federalism through undoing the concurrent list and acknowledging the demands of smaller provinces. Nevertheless, confrontation, extinction of consensual unity, lack of convergence, absence of institutional forbearance and mutual toleration amongst the Pakistani elite has negatively impacted country's politics.

Theoretical framework: consensual unity among elite and democracy

The author argues that representative democracy could be created and consolidated due to consensual unity, mutual toleration and institutional forbearance among the powerful elites of a society. Similarly, democracy can be maintained and preserved only when the elites of

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a society acknowledge democratic rules. Otherwise, democracy dies (Higley, Gunther, & John, 1992; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Consensual unity, mutual toleration and institutional forbearance denote recognition and acknowledgment of democratic rules, principles and norms. Mutual toleration or consensual unity paves the way to acknowledgement and recognition of the democratic rules of the game which implies that the elite consider politics as a positive rather than zero-sum game. Consensual unity among elite occurs by two ways: Convergence and settlement (Higley et al., 1992).

Convergence amongst elite occurs when they respect one-another's ideology or manifesto and tolerate criticism. In other words, the less successful among the elite tries to acquire some political gains and thus accept and acknowledge their opponents. In doing so, they shun the long standing differences with the more successful elite in the political system and join hands with them in order to acquire some portfolios. Likewise, settlement among elite takes place when some social and political events occur compelling the elite to have unanimity. The elite settlement and convergence lead to the approval and acceptance of some norms, rules and principles in the society which results in consolidation of democracy (Robinson & Acemoglu, 2012). Due to the absence of elite mutual toleration and consensual unity, democracy either reverses back to authoritarianism or remain weak and fragile. Disunity among elite occurs when they do not compromise on their basic interests, i.e. power and status, which is happening in modern day politics of Pakistan.

Elite politics and consensual unity amongst the elite in Pakistan

The relationship among the elite is highly central and significant to the discussion of elite, political system and democracy in Pakistan. Elite in Pakistan do not acknowledge democratic rules of the game, i.e. convergence, mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. This happens due to the elite stubbornness and non-compromising attitude on their preferred interests. Muhammad Salar⁶, an experienced politician from Dir Lower, stated in personal communication,

“The military elite pursue its institutional interests, bureaucratic elite adhere to colonial legacy or status-quo, judges are assertive and over-confident, urban elite aspire to become richer and protect their business, religious elite seeks a state based on religion, and electable (s) strive to develop connections with the military” (Salar, 2020).

Each elite stick to its own preferred interests. In response to one of our interview questions, most of the respondents commented that elite pursue their own factional interests. They seem united and sometimes works as a group but still each elite seeks its own interests. Until, there is a consensus among them that is above their factional interests, parliamentary democracy will never find firm grounds to flourish in Pakistan.

The interviewees were of the opinions that the military seeks a praetorian state where they could protect and prolong their interests. The civil servants desire an administrative state where they could maintain colonial legacy. The religious elite strive for an Islamic state where they could rule under Islamic Sharia (Islamic Jurisprudence). The urban-economic elite seek a bourgeois polity where they could expand their economic interests. The judiciary, since 2007, found a space in the power structure who tries to get legitimacy as it

⁶Muhammad Salar hails from a political family in Dir lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, who has contested 2018 general elections.

had a bad image in the past (Jan, 2020; Yousaf, 2020⁷; Samad; 2020⁸). Hence, it is a fact that in such an environment consensus, compromises, and convergence among the elite of Pakistan is distant dream.

Moreover, the elite are internally also divided. A retired army colonel, Rustam, stated that military has internal ideological divisions. Some top brass officers are conservative and more religious minded. Some are secular-liberal. Few are nationalists. However, the respondent added that for institutional interests they are united (Rustam, 2020). Internal divisions among them impede the way of convergence and institutional forbearance. Similarly, the religious elite are also divided on ideological and sectarian lines. There are various religious sects in Pakistan such as Deobandis, Wahabis and Brelvis who have ideological controversies with one another (Ahmed, 1992). Due to the ideological controversies within them, the religious elite lack convergence and mutual toleration.

Similarly, civil servants are also divided within tribes⁹ and groups, i.e. generalist, and professional. Moreover, there are three different cadres of services in Pakistan i.e. all Pakistan services, federal services and provincial services (Hussain, 2020). Saeed was of the view that most of the reforms in Pakistan could not succeed due to the internal divisions among the civil servants as one gain while the other loss (Saeed, 2002). Likewise, judges are internally divided into two groups, i.e. rational and irrational minded.

Though each seems united in terms of accessing the state power structure, yet consensual unity, convergence and mutual toleration on democratic rules within each elite as well as amongst elite of Pakistan is lacking. Undoubtedly, military, religious, electable and urban elite are connected well but this relationship is basically determined by their respective factional interests. Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) during 1970s (Javed, 2017), garrison-mosque alliance (Haqqani, 2010), Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA) during 1990s (Ahmad, 2020), and Muttahida Majlis e Aml (MMA) during 2000s are examples where the elite formed alliances for their own political gains rather than for the betterment of democracy (Marjan, 2020).

Furthermore, power elites in Pakistan adopt non-democratic means such as co-option to ascertain their preferred factional and personal interests. In this context, most of the respondents were of the opinion in interviews that military establishment has co-opted current government of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). They commented that before the general elections of 2018, chairman of PTI, Imran Khan vehemently criticised and alleged Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari on their involvement in mega corruptions. They further added that declaring and alleging politicians as corrupt and inept and sometime security risk has been an old propaganda of the military establishment. Further, there are some state agencies such as NAB, some of the judges and mainstream media who are covertly involved with the powerful military in their campaign against previous elected regimes (Yousaf, 2020; Samad, 2020; Marjan, 2020).

⁷The respondent is a young historian and a professor in Public Sector University based in Punjab and has extensively written on the power structure of Pakistan. He is the author of several books.

⁸ A professor in Public Sector University and a renowned researcher and political activist. He has thoroughly written on the political economy, state theories, society and culture of Pakistan. He is the author of several books and research articles on the power structure of Pakistan.

⁹ Dr, Nadeem ul Haq, Vice-chancellor Pakistan Institution of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad, used this term in a discussion on a Webinar on civil-services reforms in Pakistan (Part-IV), dated 06-10-2020.

In this connection, Sayyed Alam¹⁰ a contractor by profession based in Peshawar told us in telephonic interview that economic or the urban elite always seek their interest which is why they remained highly attractive to the slogan of PTI in 2018 elections. Moreover, Pakistani citizens were also attracted to PTI as they viewed government of PTI would make them free of corrupt politicians. This is how the masses, urban elite, religious clerics are co-opted in Pakistan which naturally weakens parliamentary democracy in Pakistan (Alam, 2020).

Further, the military regime often forms its own political parties. According to Bilal Ahmad the power elite especially the military often form its own political parties as has been the cases of Convention Muslim League (CML) in 1960s and Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q) in 2000s. Several politicians have joined these political parties known as king parties and provided political support to the respective military regimes. Likewise, the military through local government produce politicians that naturally serve interests of the military even when the military is not in direct rule. Moreover, the business and urban elites develop connection with the establishment through contracts in order to find access to state resources (Ahmad, 2020). Further, a retired colonel was of the opinion that most of the political parties with the exception of Jamat-e-Islami are the products of army. He termed these parties as 'patrimonial elites' who always seek support of the army especially during elections (Rustam 2020).

Ahmad Yousaf, in personal communication, told us that patron-client relation characterises Pakistani politics. This happens due to land lordism as large segment of population live under big land-lords and feudal particularly in Rural Panjab, Sindh and KP. He argued that a portion of reforms have been done in KP and in central Punjab, but the wider society remains in hands of the feudal who are connected with state un-elected apparatuses. The respondent added that in comparison, India and Bangladesh are relatively better because they have introduced land reforms. The interviewee further commented that early reforms were the reason that contributed to the strength of Indian National Congress (INC) while All India Muslim League (AIM) had remained weak (Yousaf, 2020).

Thus, Unlike Latin American and European states, elites in Pakistan are linked with each other for ascertaining factional interests rather than public interests. In other words, factional and personal rather than public interests determine relationship among the elites in Pakistan unlike the aforementioned states in Latin America, South Europe and some of the Asian states. Further, elites are also internally divided and each elite seeks its personal interests at the cost of other. Consequently, they violate democratic rules of the game and mutual tolerance as well as institutional forbearance remains suspended or violated which negatively impact growth of democracy in Pakistan.

Convergence of elites on democratic rules of the game has contributed to the creation, consolidation and preservation of democracy in Latin American, South European and some of South Asian states. Nevertheless, Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) contend that democracy prevailed over non-democracy in the post-Cold War world order (1991) due to; a) implicit economic as well as political support to non-democracies in the world has come into end, b) developed as well as less developed countries has experienced an increased in human capital, c) citizens have become more educated today than they were fifty years ago, d) technology has contributed to the human skills, e) globalization of world economy has contributed to the democratic transition of non-democratic regimes. Along with these, greater international economic and financial links have promoted and consolidated democracy in the less developed countries (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005).

¹⁰Dean faculty of social sciences in a Public Sector University at Sindh. The academic has an extensive research on civil-military relations in Pakistan. He has also written articles on indigenous movements especially left politics in Pakistan.

However, we argue despite the increased in human capital, increase in education, human skills, technological development and globalization, parliamentary democracy could not be strengthened in Pakistan due to disunited elites. We assert that globalization brings a revolution in the field of biotech and info-tech that further creates problems and conflicts in the society and modern technologies have further entrenched the privileged few as Kurzweil in his magnum opus 'Singularity is near (2005)' claims that technological revolution and globalization enriches the already privileged class of a society. The scholar contends that those who are privileged and rich buy and control information technology, i.e. big-data¹¹. The technology enables the powerful elite and institutions to control the citizens. This phenomenon may lead to authoritarianism and state control in the developing societies especially Pakistan (Kurzweil, 2005).

Moreover, in Pakistan elites' non-compromising attitude and adherence to their factional interests hinders consensual unity among them which eventually hampers growth of democratic culture. According to Robinson and Acemaglu, when the elites have more political power than the citizens, it leads to a captured democracy where of course democratic political institutions emerge and survive for extended periods of time, but they are actually captured by the elites of the society, which is able to impose its favourite political and economic institutions or at the very least, they are able to have a disproportionate effect on the choice of such institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008).

Therefore, Pakistan's inability to develop robust political institutions was in part a consequence of the enormous powers concentrated within the hands of the members of a few social groups. These groups competed with one another causing great turbulence in the political life of the country. That turbulence would not have been so disruptive had competition among the groups taken place within institutional confines (Brass, 2010). Further, in Pakistan, the political system did not create an institutional base within which political discourse could have taken place. Resultantly, group politics became sharply defined because of the absence of institutions that could have helped to establish a dialogue among the various competing groups. The groups contending for power included the military who had dominated politics after independence, the large landlords of Punjab and Sindh who had been politically powerful when the British ruled India, the tribal chiefs of Balochistan and the NWFP, and the religious leaders in Punjab and NWFP (Brass, 2010).

Likewise, the emergence of Islamic groups has further complicated democratic institution building in Pakistan. Most of these groups do not subscribe to western notions of democracy, the rule of law based on a legal system devised by the elected representatives of the people though many scholars argued that Islam and democracy are not incompatible (Sen, 2005) however, this is not accepted by more radical Islamist groups. They view that, in the Islamic system, there is no place for man-made laws and institutions. Some of these groups were engaged in military campaigns in parts of the northwest. The competition among the social groups became so intense that it adversely affects the quality of governance (Marjan, 2020).

Conclusion

Thus, democracy can be created and consolidated when the elites of the respective society develop convergence and observe mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Therefore, we demonstrate that parliamentary democracy in Pakistan since the commencement of 18th amendment remained weak due to the stubbornness and non-compromising behaviour of the elites. The military seeks a praetorian state where they could protect and prolong their interests. The civil servants desire an administrative state where they could maintain colonial legacy. The religious elite strive for an Islamic state where they could rule under Islamic Sharia (Islamic Jurisprudence). The urban-economic

¹¹Big data implies information technology, internet, and modern means of communication.

elite seek a bourgeois polity where they could expand their economic interests. The judges, since 2007, found a space in the power structure tries to get legitimacy as it had a bad image in the past. This is fair to state that mutual toleration, institutional forbearance, elite convergence and settlement in Pakistan could not be developed due to the stubbornness and non-compromising behaviours of elite.

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