

Incubating grassroots politics | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi May 11, 2022

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As the distance between ruling elites and ordinary people grows, Pakistan has two pathways. One, to further dynastic politics, establishmentarian meddling, and neoliberal policies from international financial institutions; and two, to pursue an organic, people-led, mass movement for the dispossessed in which a broad-based coalition of smaller progressive forces emerges to dismantle the status quo once and for all. The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics held a Twitter Space this past month with activists (including Ammar Ali Jan, Jibrán Nasir, Mustafa Kamal, Shahnaz Khan, and Ammar Rashid) to ascertain how the latter pathway can be achieved.

The Okara farms dispute is a cogent illustration of the manner in which mainstream parties have no interest in the poor. When a series of attempts were made by authorities to evict farmers from the area, ‘democratic forces’ took up the cause and staged a defence. It soon became clear, however, that this was empty opportunism — evidenced by the arrest and 4-year imprisonment of the leader of the protest movement under the PML-N in 2016. A parallel example is the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, whose activists faced constant violence under the PTI despite Imran Khan’s words of sympathy for their cause prior to becoming Prime Minister.

All this is no coincidence. Representation in Pakistan’s political mainstream is reserved for bureaucrats, feudal lords, uniformed personnel and big industrialists who collectively form the organised power elite that has kept the opposition fragmented by equating it to anti-state activity. To quote from Ammar Ali Jan’s book, *Rule by Fear*, “Continuing the colonial legacy, the state has no other language to nominate popular movements other than that of sedition, provoking the proliferation of ‘traitors’ across the country. As a result, violence and erasure remain the dominant methods of engaging opponents...”

The first step in reversing this perverse political trajectory is to unleash the articulation of thought in society — the stifling of which has depoliticised the youth and prompted it to look towards messianic figures for salvation. This includes liberating unions — for students, farmers and labourers — that can challenge entrenched power structures on a day to day basis. Legacy media is another pivotal facet of this equation, and big channels would do well to routinise air time to alternative voices with fresh perspectives. Finally, academia — which moulds future generations and introduces nuance to public understanding — must be freed from censorship and better funded, so that knowledge production is not dictated by the preferences of big donor agencies.

The panel was unanimous in its identification of an overcentralised system as one of the root causes of Pakistan's inability to democratise. In order to redress this, it was proposed that a chapter dedicated to devolution be introduced to the Constitution and local government departments defined and clearly demarcated; Provincial Finance Commission (PFC) Awards to be granted constitutional status in order to ensure the trickling down of funds to local bodies; and general elections to only be allowed on the condition that municipal authorities are empowered and operational.

Barriers to entry into political contestation is another crippling problem, of which the most serious is the role of finances. As things stand, a candidate is expected to be able to spend a minimum of Rs8-10 crores for campaigning purposes simply in order to compete. Naturally this favours those with privileges and expansive networks, thus preserving the existing state of affairs. Indeed, one of the biggest failures of the Election Commission is its virtual inability to curtail the influence of powerful circles that are able to simply purchase votes in exchange for small favours in an intricate system of clientelism.

Technical updates to the electoral system such as those being discussed today miss the point. All these interventions are downstream more fundamental concerns, outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Power to the people: now!

Published in The Express Tribune, May 11th, 2022.

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