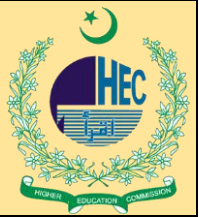




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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17013587>**Political Parties Role in Strengthening Democracy in Pakistan****Saiqa Bibi**

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saiqabibi8@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Political parties have long been recognized as the backbone of democracy, tasked with representation, policy-making and the development of civic culture. The current paper critically evaluates the complex and paradoxical role of political parties for consolidation of democracy in Pakistan. While parties are a necessary tool for gathering heterogeneous interest groups, promoting constitutional changes like the historic 18th Amendment, and organizing popular participation, their ability is significantly hindered by endemic internal weaknesses. The work critically examines how the personalized nature of dynastic rule, the near total lack of intra-party democracy and the corrosive use of financial patronage and polarization are a deliberate attempt to subvert their democratic potential. The findings indicate that the internal pathologies prevent the development of parties as mature institutions, which in turn gives Pakistani democracy an inherent fragility and renders it more vulnerable to crises. Thus, a necessary condition for achieving democratic consolidation in Pakistan is a radical change in the character of its political parties from personal fiefdoms to programmatic and internally democratic parties.

Keywords: Political Parties, Democracy in Pakistan, 18th Amendment, Dynastic Politics, Intra-Party Democracy, Political Polarization, Democratic Consolidation, Institutional Strengthening.

Introduction

Political parties constitute the essential infrastructure of modern democratic governance, functioning as the primary vehicles for interest aggregation, political socialization, and elite recruitment (Dalton & Weldon, 2005). In an ideal typology, they translate disparate public demands into coherent policy agendas, provide a structured choice for the electorate during competitions for power, and foster accountability by offering a clear platform against which a government's performance can be measured. This theoretical framework, however, is severely stress-tested in nascent democracies grappling with institutional fragility and historical legacies of authoritarianism. Pakistan's political trajectory since 1947 exemplifies this dissonance, characterized by a persistent and often violent dialectic between intermittent civilian rule and protracted military hegemony that has systematically stunted the development of robust democratic norms (Jaffrelot, 2015). Consequently, the role of its political parties is profoundly contested and paradoxical; they are simultaneously the most critical agents for democratic consolidation and, due to their own structural and operational pathologies, significant obstacles to its full realization. This analysis therefore contends that any examination of Pakistani democracy must center on this duality, investigating how parties facilitate representation,

strengthen institutions, and cultivate democratic culture, while simultaneously acknowledging how internal weaknesses actively subvert these very processes.

The representative function of political parties, their most fundamental democratic role, is manifested through electoral competition and the articulation of diverse societal interests. In Pakistan, this is executed by a tripartite structure of major players: the centre-left Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), with its enduring populist appeal and stronghold in rural Sindh; the centre-right Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), championing Punjabi-centric economic development and infrastructure; and the populist Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which disrupted the established duopoly by mobilizing an unprecedented youth and urban middle-class cohort on an anti-corruption and reformist platform in the 2010s (Shah, 2014). These parties, through their manifestos and campaign rhetoric, provide channels for different class, regional, and ideological constituencies to access the state apparatus. However, this representation is often superficial and compromised. The 2024 general elections, marred by widespread allegations of pre-and-post poll manipulation and severe censorship, spectacularly illustrated this crisis of representation (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The process, widely perceived as engineered to sideline a particular party (PTI), demonstrated that the genuine aggregation of public will is often secondary to the agendas of powerful unelected establishments, fundamentally corrupting the link between the citizen and the state that parties are supposed to embody.

This failure of genuine representation is intrinsically linked to the parties' own internal democratic deficits, which remain the single greatest impediment to their role as democracy-strengthening institutions. A critical pathology is the pervasive culture of dynastic succession and personalized leadership, which has turned major parties into family fiefdoms rather than programmatic organizations. The PPP and PML-N are quintessential examples, with leadership uncontested passed between Bhutto and Sharif family members for decades, a trend that the PTI, despite its initial promises of a "new Pakistan," ultimately succumbed to as well. This directly stifles meritocracy and fosters a sycophantic culture, preventing the intra-party debate and renewal that is the bedrock of a healthy political organization. Furthermore, the operational reliance on vast networks of patronage and illicit capital, rather than member subscriptions or transparent funding, ensures that politics is a pursuit of rent-seeking rather than public service (Waseem, 2021). This absence of intra-party democracy, as noted by the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN, 2023) in its annual audit of political parties, means the organizations tasked with upholding democratic principles at the national level are themselves profoundly authoritarian in structure, rendering their democratic potential inherently hollow and performative.

Literature Review

The academic literature on political parties in Pakistan is essentially dominated by the tension between the democratic possibilities of party and the actual realities of party functioning within a hybrid regime. On the one hand, a mainstream tradition of scholarship, epitomized by Jaffrelot (2015) and Tudor (2023), places Pakistani parties in the wider explanatory tradition of civil-military relations and maintains that their development has been systematically thwarted by periodic military interventions. Using the concept of "interrupted democracy," this thesis argues that parties have been continually under threat of praetorian overreach, forcing them to focus survivalist rather than long-term institution-building, producing a culture of patronage and weak

internal structures to deal with these short-term issues. While this line of thinking is important for understanding the external constraints on party development, it is at some risk of presenting parties simply as victims of a powerful establishment. More recent studies, including Siddiq's (2024) post-2024 electoral crisis analyses, complicate this narrative by showing how party leaderships have frequently been complicit in this, trading democratic integrity for short-term access to power, thus establishing a symbiotic relationship that drives institutional fragility.

Second, a fairly robust thematic in the literature critically interrogates the internal organisational arrangements of leading Pakistani parties, repeatedly identifying the lack of intra-party democracy (IPD) and the dominance of dynasty politics as their key pathological features. As most scholars such as Hassan (2023) and Waseem (2021) have documented, parties such as the PPP and PML-N are not programmatic but family fiefdoms in which leadership is defined according to bloodline rather than through merit or democratic decision-making. This patrimonial culture as Hassan (2023) puts it suppresses internal debate and blocks the emergence of a second-tier leadership, and ensures that any succession crisis is necessarily forthcoming. Empirical data from organisations for election monitoring like the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN, 2024) continues to support this, and has done so annually, demonstrating that internal elections remain largely a theatrical exercise. This authoritarianism from within leads to the crucial paradox: The organizations that are supposed to guarantee democracy at the national level are themselves deeply undemocratic; that makes their role as "schools of democracy" completely empty and performative.

A burgeoning literature moves beyond structure to explore the behavioral and cultural aspects of party politics, with a focus on the corrosive forces of polarization and the weaponization of political discourse. Recent studies of Zaidi, (2024) and analyses of think tanks like PILDAT (2024) posit that the political space is one of no longer an ideological contest but a zero-sum existential one, which is being exacerbated by the use of social media and sections of the media. What Zaidi (2024) calls the "securitization of political discourse" presents political adversaries as threats to the state, which excludes dialectical confrontation and makes consensus-building a crime. Excessive cost of politics creates a toxic environment that produces a need for illegitimate financing and then rent-seeking, and which further undermines public trust. As a result, following Khan and Shah (2023), parties are characterized by an "entrenched bias towards patronage at the expense of policy," and legislative agendas are consistently traded off to political deal-making. Literature has thus shown how these pathologies, which are closely interconnected (personalization, opacity of money, excessive polarization), actively undermine the representative and deliberative functions that are the core of a resilient democratic culture.

Problem Statement

Though constitutionally considered to be the essential pillars of democracy, political parties in Pakistan have persistently shown their inability to perform their fundamental functions of representation, governance, and development of a democratic political culture. Literature on the subject has shown that this failure has not only been a result of external pressures but is embedded in endemic internal pathologies. These include an entrenched culture of dynastic rule and personal leadership, a total lack of intra-party democracy of any significance, and an operational dependence on patronage and polarized rhetoric. This internal authoritarianism and financial opacification produces an important contradiction: the organizations that are responsible for preserving and enforcing democratic procedures are themselves structurally

undemocratic. As a result, they have caused instability, eroded public confidence and actively discouraged the institutions of a mature, responsive and resilient democracy taking root in Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

1. To critically analyze the internal organizational structures of major political parties in Pakistan and assess their impact on democratic consolidation.
2. To evaluate the efficacy of political parties in performing their key functions of representation, legislation, and oversight within Pakistan's democratic framework.
3. To propose a framework of institutional and legal reforms aimed at transforming political parties into more accountable, transparent, and internally democratic organizations.

Research Questions

1. How do dynastic leadership and the lack of intra-party democracy within major Pakistani political parties undermine their democratic potential and legitimacy?
2. To what extent have political parties in Pakistan successfully strengthened democratic institutions and processes, as evidenced by their role in parliament and constitutional reforms?
3. What specific legal, institutional, and internal reforms are necessary to transform Pakistani political parties into effective and accountable agents of democratic governance?

Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative research design based on a thematic analysis approach to investigate the role of political parties in strengthening democracy in Pakistan. The methodology will involve a systematic review and critical analysis of existing literature, including academic journals, books, policy reports, and documents from reputable institutions such as the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) and the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT). Primary data will be derived from official reports, party manifestos, constitutional documents like the 18th Amendment, and historical records of parliamentary proceedings. Thematic analysis will be used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data, focusing on key areas such as intra-party democracy, dynastic politics, electoral integrity, political polarization, and institutional performance. This approach will allow for a nuanced exploration of how these themes interact to either support or undermine democratic processes. The study will prioritize contextual depth and critical interpretation, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping political parties' functionality and their impact on Pakistan's democratic trajectory.

Political Parties as Agents of Representation

The foundational purpose of political parties in a democratic framework is to function as the principal conduit for representation, translating the heterogeneous will of the populace into coherent policy agendas and governmental action. This representative function is operationalized primarily through competitive electoral contests, where parties vie for a public mandate by presenting distinct visions encapsulated in manifestos and candidate slates. In the context of Pakistan, however, this process is perpetually mediated by a complex interplay of ethno-regional identity, patronage networks, and the overarching influence of the military establishment, which collectively distort the ideal of pure interest aggregation. The result is a

system where representation is often more symbolic than substantive, with parties struggling to maintain their role as authentic agents of the people amidst powerful countervailing forces. As noted by Tudor (2023), the persistent "structural imbalance" between civilian and military institutions in Pakistan creates an environment where electoral outcomes are frequently contested and the representative mandate of winning parties is inherently fragile, undermining the very core of democratic legitimacy.

The landscape of political representation is dominated by three major parties, each commanding broad but geographically and demographically concentrated support bases. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has long anchored its identity in a left-leaning, populist ideology, drawing its core strength from rural Sindh and leveraging the enduring legacy of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's slogan of "bread, clothing, and shelter" (roti, kapra, makaan) to represent the agrarian and feudal structures of its heartland. In contrast, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has cultivated a power base in urban and industrial Punjab, building its brand on a narrative of macroeconomic growth and large-scale infrastructure development, thereby representing the aspirations of the business class and upwardly mobile urbanites. The emergence of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) in the 2010s signified a seismic shift, as it successfully mobilized a previously disengaged youth bulge and a significant segment of the urban professional middle class across various provinces, albeit with varying intensity, on a potent platform against entrenched corruption and dynastic politics (Niaz, 2024). This tripartite structure suggests a party system that is increasingly responsive to distinct sociological cleavages, yet one where national cohesion remains elusive due to this intense regional patterning.

The mechanism of representation extends beyond mere electoral competition into the ongoing process of channeling public demands into the legislative and policy arena. Parties theoretically act as transmission belts, ensuring that governance remains responsive and connected to the governed. This is evident in how party platforms are crafted to appeal to specific constituencies: the PPP's advocacy for provincial autonomy and social safety nets, the PML-N's focus on motorways and energy projects, and the PTI's initial emphasis on transparency, austerity, and a welfare state (Ehsaas program). Through constituency services, parliamentary debate, and media engagement, these parties give voice to the priorities of their supporters, preventing the state apparatus from becoming entirely detached and self-serving. The passage of the 18th Amendment, achieved through rare multi-party consensus, stands as a testament to this function, as it represented a monumental shift in responding to long-standing demands for provincial autonomy and rebalancing the federation (Chaudhry, 2022). This demonstrates that when political will aligns, parties can effectively synthesize diverse regional interests into transformative national policy.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of Pakistani parties as agents of representation is severely compromised by systemic flaws that perpetuate a crisis of credibility. The most damaging of these is the widespread public perception that electoral processes are often manipulated, a sentiment starkly highlighted by the aftermath of the February 2024 general elections. International observers, including the Human Rights Watch (2024), documented "widespread and intense interference in the electoral process," including censorship of campaigning and irregularities in vote counting, which severely undermined the public's faith that parties could genuinely compete for and secure a mandate based on popular will. When the electoral arena itself is not seen as a level playing field, the essential contract of representation—that the people

choose their governors—is broken. This environment fosters alienation and cynicism, suggesting that for parties to truly fulfill their representative role, a fundamental guarantee of electoral integrity is the non-negotiable prerequisite without which all other functions are built on unstable ground.

Political Parties and Institutional Strengthening

The role of political parties in the consolidation of democratic institutions is most clearly studied in the institutional context of the legislature, where the transformation from agitating campaigners into responsible law-makers defines the quality of rule. In this context, the effectiveness of a parliamentary system depends on good deliberative processes, close legislative scrutiny and constructive oversight of the executive, through the mechanisms provided by the political parties - whips, committees, floor leadership. The regular parliament is based on the principle of vigorous debate, close scrutiny of proposed legislation, and efficient oversight of executive authority; all these are mediated by the party system. The dominant pattern in Pakistan, however, is one of corrosive bifurcation: in dense, confrontative periods the resistance becomes acute and obstructive, while periods of quiet acquiescence and perfunctory rubber-stamping eventually follow. This dysfunction is not so much a mere loss of decorum as an expression of a more profound institutional pathology, which constrains the autonomy of the legislature in response to the influence of external forces. Javaid (2023) argues that the inescapable "overreach of non-elected institutions" has created a context in which parliament works under the shadow of an entrenched establishment, which forces party leaders to seek survival rather than engage in meaningful legislative activities. As a result, the main role of law-making is often short-circuited; major bills are passed with little discussion through fast-track "guillotine" procedures. Moreover, the crucial work of standing committees (supposedly the engine of close examination) is often marginalized or channeled by partisan imperatives and not technical merit.

Despite these challenges, Pakistani political parties have demonstrated a latent capacity for profound institutional strengthening when existential threats or rare consensus-building opportunities emerge. The most monumental achievement in this regard remains the unanimous passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010. This was a watershed moment orchestrated entirely by political parties, representing a collective, cross-party endeavor to reverse the centralizing legacies of military rule and restore the federal and parliamentary spirit of the 1973 Constitution. The amendment not only devolved significant powers, ministries, and financial resources to the provinces but also took crucial steps to enhance parliamentary sovereignty by curtailing the president's arbitrary powers to dismiss elected governments. As analyzed by Lodhi (2022) in her retrospective, the amendment's success was predicated on a "grand national consensus" that temporarily superseded bitter partisan rivalries, proving that parties could act as stewards of the state rather than mere competitors for its spoils. This singular act of constitutionalism demonstrated that the institution of parliament, when empowered by a unified political will, could enact transformative reforms that recalibrated the very balance of power within the federation.

Beyond landmark constitutional moments, the day-to-day strengthening of institutions relies on the mundane yet vital process of bipartisan committee work and normative adherence to parliamentary procedure. It is in these less glamorous arenas—such as the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) chaired traditionally by an opposition member—that parties can perform a

critical oversight function, checking executive excess and ensuring fiscal accountability. The efficacy of these mechanisms, however, is entirely contingent on the prevailing political climate. For instance, the period following the 2018 elections saw some engagement in these channels, but the political crisis erupting from the 2023-2024 electoral cycle and the ensuing allegations of a "mandate theft" have led to a near-complete breakdown of cooperative governance (Siddiq, 2024). When a significant portion of the political spectrum, particularly the PTI, believes the fundamental rules of the game are invalid, it withdraws from the institutional process altogether, boycotting sessions and refusing to engage in committee work. This renders parliament a hollow shell and halts the incremental institutional building that is essential for democratic resilience. Ultimately, the contribution of political parties to institutional strengthening is a story of paradoxical potential stifled by systemic constraints and short-term political calculus. The 18th Amendment stands as an irrefutable testament to their capability for statesmanship and visionary reform. Yet, this achievement remains an outlier rather than the norm. The persistent failure to build upon this success—for instance, to enact a similarly consensus-driven reform of the electoral system or to empower local governments—highlights a recurring weakness. The parties' operational mode remains overwhelmingly executive-centric, focusing on controlling the prime minister's office rather than nurturing the legislature as an independent, co-equal branch of government. This is compounded by what Khan and Shah (2023) identify as the "persistent preference for patronage over policy," where legislative agendas are often sacrificed at the altar of political deal-making to maintain fragile coalitions. Therefore, while political parties in Pakistan possess the formal capacity to be the architects of strong institutions, their effectiveness is neutered by a political culture that privileges personalistic rule and external accommodation over the slow, deliberate, and often thankless work of institutional cultivation.

Political Parties and Democratic Culture

Political parties are the formal vehicles for the development of democratic culture and they are charged with the functions of encouraging civic participation and raising political consciousness of the citizens. This pedagogical role is attained through mass mobilization in the course of election campaigns, public rallies, and the circulation of policy manifestos, which in total educate the electorate about issues of national concern and provide a range of governance alternatives. In Pakistan, the degree of political campaigning - especially in the days of social media and 24-hour news channels - has undoubtedly contributed to an increase in political awareness and engagement - especially among the young. Parties like the PTI have shown what can happen when millions of previously apathetic individuals are mobilised into active participation, and a new discourse around accountability and governance is generated as a result. However, such participation tends to degenerate into populist enthusiasm rather than substantive and issue-based discussion. Waseem (2023) warns that often this political awakening is marked by "charismatic mobilization", in which loyalty is to a leader and not to institutions or ideological commitments. This fosters an emotionalized and severely polarized participant culture that cripples the growth of a mature, reasoned and critically informed public culture which is the necessary prerequisite to a robust democracy.

Beyond mobilizing voters, another sign of a healthy democratic culture is the ability of the political parties to forge consensus on national issues of paramount importance, thus overriding partisan considerations in the interest of state stability. This function is best achieved through institutionalised mechanisms such as All-Parties Conferences (APCs) where the aim is creating a

unified national approach on issues such as security policy, constitutional crises and economic emergencies. The effective negotiation of the 18th Amendment is a good example of this consensus building ability, showing that one can get historic compromises. However, such moments of conjoined efforts are unfortunately rare and are often inspired by intense external pressure rather than sincere internal buy-in to collaborative governance. Political discourse is still deeply antagonistic, in the sense that the aim is not simply to be against policies but to delegitimize the opposition itself. The result of the 2024 elections has starkly demonstrated this failure, as the rejection of the contested electoral result has triggered an intensely polarized society. According to the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT, 2024), current levels of political polarization and absence of dialogue is at an all-time high in the last 10 years, making institutions like APCs ineffective and unable to develop a coherent national agenda on key issues like economic recovery and security.

Finally, the role of Pakistani political parties in democratic culture is a paradox of great energy and great weakness. Parties have an undisputable capacity to enliven the public arena and mobilize bodies into political action; but the quality of this mobilization is often poorly developed, driven by volatile emotions, and prone to exploitation. The processes of consensus-building are in principle in place but are blighted in practice by an all-or-nothing culture and an underlying distrust which is actively and often gratuitously fostered by party leadership for short-term, tactical advantage. The party is unable to model democracy (tolerance, compromises, respect of opposition) in its own behavior which results in actively teaching society the wrong lessons about democracy. They are conducive to a culture in which political competition is viewed as existential rather than a healthy contest of ideas. Thus, while parties are essential to democratic culture, the operational ethos of Pakistan's parties today reproduces a cycle of polarization and volatility, which leaves the democratic project chronically malnourished and exposed to the forces of anti-pluralism.

Weaknesses that Undermine Democratic Role

The worst structural flaw plaguing Pakistani political parties is the deep-rooted culture of personal leadership and of dynastic succession that subverts internal meritocracy and institutional growth. All major parties have devolved into personal fiefdoms or family businesses: the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and even the supposedly reformist Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The PPP leadership is still the sole preserve of the Bhutto-Clan and the PML-N is firmly in the grasp of the Sharif family. This dynastic system guarantees that leadership is decided on the basis of blood rather than on the basis of competency, ideological commitment or democratic selection within the party. According to Hassan (2023), this gives rise to a "patrimonial political culture", in which allegiance to the ruling family takes precedence over allegiance to the founding principles of the party or to its electorate. The resulting sycophantic environment stifles critical debate, discourages the rise of second-level leadership, and ensures that parties are bound for crisis succession because the lack of second-level leadership leaves parties vulnerable and unstable. This internal autocracy is essentially at odds with what we expect parties to stand for as democratic ideal, offering to the citizenry an empty shell of democracy in which the birthright is the primary determiner of power over the ballot..

Compounding the problem of personalized rule is the pervasive and deliberate lack of intra-party democracy, a failure that breaks the chain of democratic accountability at its very first link.

Despite legal requirements from the Election Commission of Pakistan, internal elections for leadership positions and award of election tickets are largely theatrical, meticulously orchestrated by the central leadership to confirm their chosen heirs and loyalists. This centralization of power means that candidates are selected not for their connection to or representation of a constituency, but for their personal fealty to the party head. The consequences are twofold. First, it produces a crop of legislators who are accountable upward to the party leadership rather than downward to the voters who elected them, crippling their role as genuine representatives. Second, as documented by the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN, 2024) in its annual assessment, the absence of transparent internal processes remains the single greatest obstacle to the development of truly democratic and inclusive political organizations. This internal authoritarianism ensures that the entire political system is built on a fragile foundation, as parties fail to act as "schools of democracy" for their own members, let alone for the nation.

These internal deformities are exacerbated by the corrosive role of money, patronage, and extreme polarization, which collectively convert politics from a contest of ideas into a vicious struggle for resources and power. The exorbitant cost of elections necessitates that parties and candidates rely on wealthy backers and illicit flows of capital, creating a system where political finance is profoundly opaque and corrupting. This creates an imperative for patronage once in power, where state resources are diverted to reward cronies and secure future electioneering funds, rather than being allocated for public welfare. Furthermore, this toxic blend of financialization is weaponized through intense polarization, where political out-groups are framed not merely as opponents but as existential threats to the state or ideology. As Zaidi (2024) notes, this "securitization of political discourse," often amplified by segments of the media and other institutions, makes substantive debate impossible and consensus-building treasonous. The objective becomes the total annihilation of the opponent, leading to a zero-sum game that erodes the minimal levels of trust and cooperation necessary for a democratic system to function, ultimately leaving the field open for non-democratic actors to mediate the ensuing chaos.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of political parties in the Pakistani democracy is defined by a fundamental and continued paradox. On one side they play an indispensable role as agents of representation, of institutional strengthening and of the development of a democratic culture. Their ability to mobilize millions, to crystallize disparate interests, and sometimes to reach historic constitutional settlement-as the eighteenth amendment does-proves their potential to be the main builders of a stable democracy. They are the crucial bridge between a diverse citizenry and the state; such a bridge prevents a complete breakdown of communication between the governors and the governed. However, at the same time, this potential is yet to be realized, systematically compromised by an internal set of deep-seated deficiencies. The very structures that allow these parties to endure in a hostile political context - dynastic control of the party, a total absence of intra-party democracy, and dependence on patronage and polarising rhetoric - are the ones that stifle their growth into truly democratic structures. Thus, they are at once the driver of Pakistan's democracy and its biggest obstacle to deepening and consolidation.

Therefore, the future of Pakistani democracy is inexorably bound to the evolution of its political parties. A system can't function well if the parts that make it up don't feel well. The holding of periodic elections is not enough, if the organizations that compete for the seats are authoritarian internally, financially corrupt, and ideologically committed to a zero-sum conflict. For democracy to become more than a ritual performance of procedure, parties have to undergo a fundamental internal transformation. This involves a conscious transition from patrimonial rule to institutionalised rule of merit, from impenetrable patronage networks to open and accountable funding and from divisive polarisation to principled compromise politics. Until parties give themselves a lesson in democracy at home, they cannot be expected to apply it consistently to their work in the national realm. Their power will be shallow and episodic, subject to manipulation and failing in the end to deliver on the deep democratic promises of accountable governance, real representation and national unity. It is the parties' responsibility to do so, but it is also a matter of national urgency that cannot be achieved without constant pressure from civil society, the media and an electorate who are not willing to settle for less.

Recommendations

The democratic role of the political parties in Pakistan needs to be reformed urgently and systemically. A first step in the right direction would be to get the Election Commission of Pakistan to go beyond nominal compliance and strictly enforce the law which provides for transparent and democratic intra-party elections to be held. Finally, the extension of franchise should be conditional on submission of audited proof of truly grassroots-based elections for all offices and candidate selections, thus breaking the chain of top-down appointments. Complementary to this, deep political finance reforms are required which is used to create a more equitable financial space. Such reforms would require the adoption and implementation of tough laws regulating the transparent tracking of party finances, campaign spending (including realistic spending caps, public listing of all substantial contributions, and a system of state-funded grants to the election agency), and elimination of reliance on patronage and dirty money.

The only way to guarantee long-term stability is to provide legal mechanisms that will reward parties to make the move from personal fiefdoms to institutionalized parties. Such a shift demands the establishment of formal organizational structures, codified rules of operation and clear ideological platforms that can transcend those who founded them. In addition, minimum quotas for women and young people should be mandated within party leadership committees and on candidate lists for general elections to actively counter the trend of elitism and dynastic control through the fostering of a more plural and representative leadership. Within the parliament, the role of the standing committees must be converted into strong technical organizations. This shift may be accomplished by requiring bipartisan membership, independent research staff, and requiring that all significant legislation be subject to rigorous debate in committee before a floor vote. A formal and institutionalised mechanism for regular dialogue between the government and the opposition through a neutral secretariat should be put in place in order to promote crippling polarization and to build consensus on important national issues. Beyond party-based action, however, what is required is a larger cultural shift. Civic education programmes at both the governmental and non-governmental level should work together on furthering civic education programmes across the country to develop an informed electorate that can critically assess political messages and appreciate democratic values. Also, parties must actively pursue decentralization by holding regular elections at the local government level and

by decentralizing both political and fiscal powers, thus providing an important school for new leaders and improving the responsiveness of governance. Finally, a national debate about electoral reform must be launched to consider the possibility of a shift away from the purely first-past-the-post system; the inclusion of elements of proportional representation would promote issue-based voting and reduce the extreme polarization on which winner-takes-all competitions are built. Fundamental to all these reforms is the non-negotiable need of ensuring full operational and financial independence to all key regulatory institutions, especially the Election Commission of Pakistan and the judiciary, ensuring insulation from political pressure and free and fair elections and the rule of law.

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