

Conceptualizing Democracy in Pakistan: A Rural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Democracy is inextricably linked with modernity. The prerequisites to democratic progression in a society are literacy, urbanization and diffusion of power. However the rural settings in a polity have a different and variegated conceptualization and subsequent explanations of the same undercurrents. The quality of democracy in a society is determined by the description of a common man about the political system. The undertaken research theoretically sketches democracy and attempts to evaluate its conceptualization and manifestation in rural areas. The research presciently discusses the Mowara village of Punjab Pakistan and attempts to underscore the patterns, symbols and contestations in the said vicinity while having connected it to the broader pretext of the reflective assessment of democracy in rural settings.

Introduction

Democracy is a sense of belief in freedom and equality among people, where in people controls the power directly or choose

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their representatives for political power. In addition, the rule of law, checks and balances are also integral principles of democratic culture.¹ In democracy people vote and participate through free, fair and competitive elections. Political participation is conducive for society as it corresponds to the basic human instinct of participation to choose rules and leaders to govern them. Secondly, democracy serves as a mean of interest satisfaction. Participation is the key to a democratic process that not only establishes legitimacy but also substantiates governability. The general culture of agreement is in favor of everyone living in the society. Democracy is now seen as the epithet of personal freedom, human rights, in-discriminatory religious laws, equal opportunities for participation and a fair electoral competition.²

However, the democratic process in certain could not be instituted in its true form amid different historical, geographical and demographic processes and patterns. Resultantly, different variants of the democracy exist across the globe. States and societies around the world are on a different continuum of democracy. The democracy around the world has travelled in certain waves. In the first phase it came to USA, Britain, France and Switzerland. After the defeat of Fascism in 1945, second wave took democracy to West Germany, Japan, Italy and Austria and the third wave with the fall of government in Portugal in 1974 took to the rest of the world.³

The transition of world democracies has remained arbitrary. As imperial powers withdrew from the world, several former colonies did not democratize due to a plethora of reasons. For example, Brazil gained independence in 1820 from Portugal but did not democratize itself until 1980. Another factor that played an important role in hindering the democratic transition is centralized

1 Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

2 David Beetham, *Defining and Measuring Democracy* (London: Sage Publishers, 1995).

3 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

states and national borders which were organized over territories that had not previously known them or that had experienced quite different boundaries at earlier times.⁴ The historical experiences of the certain countries shaped the consciousness of those polities in uncharacteristic way. The notions of democratic inclusivity, self-rule and accountable use of power have different manifestations across the different states and societies. The rulers of empire were coercive and used to rule ethnic and religious divisions with one principle. The conflict emerged due to the downfall of such rulers as ethnic and religious divisions tried to consolidate their land claims. India and Pakistan can be best cited in this explanation. Monarchy, military governments and rule of dominant parties are other factors that contribute as obstacles to the culture of democratic consolidation.

Conceptualizing Democracy

In a society, we can learn about democracy by asking questions to the people about how it works. Despite the resurgence of democracy worldwide until 1990s, Larry Jay Diamond, an American political sociologist believes that before it spreads to other countries, democracy must improve where it already exists. Instead of the economy, it is governance which needs to be improved first in a democracy. Every democratic country needs to be held responsible for good governance, not just when it suits them.⁵

This point has been further substantiated by Javaid Hayat that socio-political fault lines coupled with fragile governance systems hinders the institutionalization of democracy. In order to build the trust of the people over the democratic system in

4 G. O'Donnell & Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986)

5 Larry Diamond, *In Search of Democracy* (London: Routledge Publishers, 2015).

a society, it is imperative that power sharing arrangements between the stakeholders must be based on parity.⁶

It is also a tested hypothesis that without significant improvements in governance, economic growth will not be sustainable. In his book, diamond suggests:

For democratic structures to endure – and be worthy of endurance – they must listen to their citizens' voices, engage their participation, tolerate their protests, protect their freedoms, and respond to their needs.⁷

According to Larry Diamond, people in a society where issues of governance and rule of law exists, find alternatives to attain power.⁸ He also believes that we as the responsible members of this society have to learn a lot about democracy by asking questions regarding ordinary people, particularly in places where democracy is relatively a new form of the government. In principle, this does seem to be a pragmatic way to proceed. We can learn more as how democracy works in practice, by learning about people's attitudes towards it. It is likely that these attitudes will be rationally explicable in terms of the objective conditions facing the country. For example, if voters perceive their government as being economically unsuccessful, then it is entirely likely that the economic indicators will show this to be so. If that is the case, then we can specify what objective conditions are likely to orient public opinion in a given way.⁹ There is, however, always some irrationality in politics, and it may well be that there is some lack of fit between what people believe to be the case and that is actually the case. If such a lack of faith exists, then we will not be able to explain democratic legitimation purely in terms

6 Javaid Hayat, *Azad Jammu and Kashmir: Polity Politics and Power Sharing* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

7 Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2008), 38.

8 Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 204.

9 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

of objective conditions.¹⁰ We may need to look for more complex kinds of explanation. It is also important that the notion of non-consolidated democracy does not become a theory of stages. We really cannot know whether democratic systems that today seem non-consolidated will in the future: become consolidated, break down altogether, remain non-consolidated. It is consolidated in some ways and de-consolidated in others. Not only is democracy a complex category in itself, but the dynamics of democratization or non-democratization in some aspects remains obscure. There are limits to our possible knowledge of these things.¹¹

Setting the Context

Liberal democracy is associated with wealth as far as its level is concerned in the developed world. The pattern of democratization is linked to economic wellbeing in historical time frame with peculiar problems and conflicts. Urbanization does lay foundation for democracy in terms of wealth accumulation and its impacts on social growth, alteration in identity, differentiation of meaning and symbols according to the need of industrialization and market orientation. On the contrary, it is not a prerequisite for democracy there are some poor countries which also endorses democratic values.

The evolution of a political system is linked to economic patterns, the nature of market and social response. Democracy is fundamentally linked to free markets and accumulation of wealth. It is believed that economic development ultimately leads to adherence of democratic values as propagated by the USA. As opposed to communism, which attempted to be an alternative to colonialism, the liberal model contested and with appeal of democracy dominated the political order. The reason was this association of development and democracy that attracted the

10 Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972).

11 Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105.

states and populace. The linkage of development and democracy is also criticized for being too general and not addressing the specific social, historical and political context. Every region has a distinguishing character in terms of society, evolution and politics. It is believed that the world's most affluent societies typically suffer from less internal inequality and a greater diffusion of economic power than poorer societies.¹² Democratic stability is achieved by social structures which endorse income generation dynamics as standards social growth. The pursuit of happiness is adopted as a social norm linked to income values which avert conflicts among individuals and societies. People are wealthy, happy and thus peaceful. The chances of social conflicts and political wars are reduced with the flow of capital and its abundance.¹³

Literacy is a key factor in the establishment of democracy as a core political value in any country. Since communication is a very important social factor in a democracy, it is dependent upon the level of sophistication, intellect and learning in a society. In social structures, where population has grown exponentially, communication uses various tools for greater outreach; the most prevalent has been written content. For understanding this written content, it is important to be literate to understand manifestos of political forces. In addition, it also plays an important role in an electoral structure which is a pivotal systematic characteristic of modern democracy.¹⁴ Literacy is fundamentally linked with democracy in terms of communication in various ways i.e. written, oral and symbols but this relationship is relative. There are democracies which are not much literate and they are poor as well, but as a systematic factor higher literacy pave way for transformation into modernity and fortune.¹⁵ Abundance of capital provides

12 Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: 33.

13 Michel Beaud, *A History of Capitalism, 1500-2000* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

14 Raja Qaiser Ahmed, *Democratic Transition and Political Change in Pakistan* (Lahore: Peace Publications, 2018).

15 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

more space for spending on education while poverty may push masses more inclined towards subsistence rather than literacy.

Urbanization and Diffusion of Power

According to Vanhanen's view of modernization the most significant aspect of democracy is the diffusion of power closely linked to economic development.¹⁶ Its societal impact empowers the individual in a class structure and denies space for traditional elites. Development brings empowerment and that strengthens democracy, thus broadening the distribution of the power structure. Traditional elites find it difficult to control resources, and in such a scenario resource allocation is extended to a wider section of the population.¹⁷ This empowers the middle class to take part in active politics and gain meaningful say in a democratic system.

Industrialization, particularly in Europe, boosted urbanization which brought a significant social change in every aspect of anthropology. From individual to community life, everything drastically changed and moved towards democratization. Since development was linked to industrialization and that brought urbanization which required peculiar market dynamics, individual will gain more importance in political mindset. Democracy provided an ideological platform which linked all of the above and even it was adopted in the developing world where urbanization was slowly taking place.¹⁸

According to modernization theories, the political behaviour of individuals in urban centers is very pragmatic and based on a development agenda. On the contrary, the dynamics in rural settings are based on different considerations like religious affiliations, clan or tribal pressures, class differentiations local

16 Tatu, Vanhanen, *Prospects of Democracy: A Study of 172 Countries* (London: Routledge Publishers, 1997).

17 Morton H. Halperin and Kristen Lomasney, "Guaranteeing Democracy: A Review of the Record," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1998): 134–147.

18 Peter Wagner, "The Democratic Crisis of Capitalism: Reflections on Political and Economic Modernity in Europe", *LEQS Paper* no. 44 (2011): 19.

identity constructions. Urban structures are usually free from such social pressures which enables the individual to have a more independent opinion, space to communicate and do activism as well. However, urban political mindset is too rational and not able to change the system or regimes. Strong political movements have often emerged in rural settings that can change a system.¹⁹

Conceptualization of Democracy in Mowara Village of Punjab, Pakistan

Moza Mowara is in UC Mowara of Tehsil Kahuta, District Rawalpindi, Punjab. Rawalpindi is a garrison town in the north side of Punjab. This is on Potohar Plateau and falls in arid region. The village has population of 2244 persons with 1066 males and 1178 females. The literacy rate is low. The majority population is of Janjua *Rajputs divided further into sub-lineages called Baa'nd into Bagla, Thandal, Channi, Chalyyal, Gora Gora*, whereas occupational castes *Kumhar, Nai and Qasai* also reside in the area. Land is only owned by *Rajputs* of the area. The occupational castes have been provided residential land by *Rajputs* elders. Total number of registered voters are 1261 with male 645 and 617 females.²⁰

The area is traditionally a strong hold of Pakistan Muslim League N as seats of national and provincial assemblies had been bagged by the party candidates in previous three general elections. The last local bodies elections were held in 2015 but the candidates were literally fragile due to unavailability of funds. This paved way for change in the general elections of 2018 as the Pakistan Tehreek-I-Insaf supported candidate won the election for provincial assembly.

The politics in the village revolves around the conduct of elections. The political sphere is termed as *siyasi muamlat* [Urdu: Political Matters]. Every possible act that revolves

19 Fernando Henrique Cardoso, "Democracy as a Starting Point", *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 1, (2001): 6.

20 The data has been collected from the village during field work that spans over a period of year and a half.

around electoral politics falls into this premise. The electoral politics has three tiers i.e. local bodies, provincial and national assembly seats. In the village, social is political. Every personal action translates into the political arena of electoral politics and vice-versa. A resident of the area voiced his concern as '*election ah rehney ty narazgi paisi, Inna ty tur jana, assan muri ky ik dojay ki nae bulana* [Pothowari: Elections bring disputes, the candidates will go away but we will not talk to each-other].²¹

This narrative explains the electoral politics and its personalization in the village. This also highlights the binary between us and them. The political arena of contestation is regarded as an outside realm. The electoral politics brings personal animosities. Due to a colonial past, still the state has been considered as another or outside realm. Subsequently, whosoever start vying for state structure becomes 'other' for the villagers. Since, everybody cannot contest elections, therefore the general conception of political realm is of '*welian na kam*' [Punjabi: Work of wealthy and settled people]. This explains that who qualifies to contest elections. As contesting election requires finances to win and buy loyalties of the people. This is a time-consuming process as contestants are required to participate in the everyday sphere of wedding and funerals called as *khushi-ghami* the local context. They are also supposed to support and facilitate (*sifarish*) people to access government services like police, courts, excise, hospitals and gas. Poor people often seek financial help from the politicians as well. This is a lifelong process and contestants supposed to help people in need of the hour. This help is required because of poor governance mechanisms. Government departments operate by the influence of the people. The politician is either connected through links or have enough money to invest in this entire process. The term *wela* is often employed because these people have enough money apart from meeting their survival expenses. In façade democracy, the government institutions do not work properly

21 Raja Shoukat, Personal Communication, May 17, 2018.

without influence. People also describe the political arena for power pursuit. The general notion about politics was 'vote *laitay hain yeah kharpainchi ky liay* [Pothowari: they solicit votes to create their nuisance]²².

This further elaborates the peoples understanding of the democratic process in the village. people consider that votes are solicited by the contestants only to create their influential clout or nuisance in the area. *Kharpainch* is a person who has the ability to influence people's choices by invoking his personal power. These are the people who generally resolve the everyday disputes arising out of matrimony and land. These people have the ability to influence state apparatus like police, court, health, electricity, gas and so on. All these strategies have the ultimate purpose of getting into power circles.

In a democratic culture, it is the responsibility of the government and the state to provide people with equal opportunities of livelihood. However, the understanding of the people about this notion is very different. They consider that politicians are here just for soliciting votes. The vote is a precious commodity and they want to transact maximum out of this. So, they make different type of transactions for their vote. Another respondent expressed his views like, *Inna roti ty nae deni, sarak banwa dewan ey bara* [Pothowari: They will not give us bread. It would be enough, if they construct road].²³

Since the literacy level is low in the village because people do not afford to send their children for higher education in other cities. Young boys discontinue their education after intermediate and start job hunting. It is expected from a politician that he/she will facilitate to secure a good job placement for male members of the family. The government employment is preferable due to job security and politicians are considered to be helpful in this regard due to the culture of *sifarish*.

22 Raja Ahsan, Personal Communication, June 6, 2018.

23 Raja Ali, Personal Communication, February 24, 2018.

One of the respondents said, “*Mein vote uski desan jera maray putar ki noukri lawai choray* [Pothowari: I will vote for a person who will manage a job for my son].²⁴

Another mode of transaction is through kind. People either sell their vote in cash or in kind. In village Mowara, this is associated with occupational castes. Since Janjua baradari is connected with each other through kinship, their social distance does not allow them to directly sale their vote.

Another respondent hailing from occupational caste said, ‘*Meki majj chai dio, taan vote desan* [Pothowari: Buy a buffalo to me, I will give you vote].²⁵

As buffalo is a productive animal. Its byproducts can be sold effectively for survival. The business sustainability is very important. It can graze free of cost. In extreme poverty, the poor seeks to have a transaction of their vote entirely on economic transactions.

The notion of political candidature is very important. While selecting a candidate, it is often dominantly considered that the person must be from within the broader Rajput caste. ‘*Saaday Wichon*’ [Punjabi: From amongst us] is an expression used for a person hailing from same *baradari*. Since, the electoral politics has three tiers i.e. local bodies, provincial and national assemblies; So, in local bodies, candidate is precisely from the same blood. However, for provincial and national assembly, people generally vote for the candidate supported by their local body contestants. The premise of vote is always personal for the people of Mowara. In the general elections of 2018, Major Abdul Rauf (ex-chairman union council) supported Raja Sagheer, hailing from Matore an independent candidate against Raja Muhammad Ali of Pakistan Muslim League-N as Raja Ali was distributing local funds through his opponent in the area. Raja Altaf another ex-

24 Jameel Qasai, Personal Communication, June 26, 2018.

25 Zaheer Nisar, Personal Communication, June 20, 2018.

chairman joined the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf just because his opponent was supporting an independent candidate. Both the candidates for provincial assembly rarely meet common people. They just meet with their active supporters who manage their campaign in the village. Thus, for the people of the village, vote remains a choice to be made within their immediate domain. The proximity of relationship, blood and lineage, social pressures determine their vote preference.

Democratic Governability in Pakistan

Pakistan, too, is facing grave problems *vis-à-vis* governance. The rule of law is not persistent, rather it is precarious. It further weakens the democratic footprint in the society. Especially, in South-Asian region democracy has diverging conceptualizations.²⁶ In Pakistan, democracy is still struggling and exists in the procedural or limited domain. An electoral process is followed to instill a government but ends up having institutional paraphernalia without the undercurrents of democracy. Elections are held freely but the government is unable to control the state with full authority. At the same time the state is irresponsive to the issues of a common man which consequently leads to disconnect between the state and society at large. The administrative institutions operate on the notion of brutal use of power and authority. In Pakistan, the electoral process is always questionable, and role of non-elected institutions are widely perceived to be more overarching in comparison to elected institutions of the country.²⁷ The politics of *Thana and Katchery* [Urdu: Police Station and Court] is a dominant factor.

People are guided by an internal sense of right and wrong at the time of political crisis. In modern society, freedom of association and freedom of communication, inclusive electoral contestation, rule of law, legal procedures and freedom to earn are the principle tenets for consolidation of democracy in any polity. Democracy is a complex system in

26 Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

27 Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

which competing forces are operating and tussle for power is always underway. In this system one of the basic premises is to understand the voter's attitude towards democratic processes with a fundamental question of their satisfaction and confidence towards democracy.²⁸

In Pakistan, a strict dichotomy and a deeply grounded rift exist between non-elected and elected institutions in the political ambit.²⁹ This debate has gone vociferous after the advent of several social media platforms which has reshaped the understanding and conceptualization of a common man about political system and its operative dispensation.³⁰ The non-elected institutions are marked intrusive in the larger landscape of democratic *modus operandi*. The politicians are also perceived as power manipulators. Notwithstanding this deeply intrinsic mistrust and ambivalent relationship people still participate in the electoral process. The participation of the public is the core of the democratic ethos and this choice is manifested through vote which is the ultimate instrument of the exercise of the individual's power given representative government is one the basic principles of democracy.³¹

Democracy has a fundamental problem which is ubiquitous in rural areas and i.e. its inefficiency as if, the government is unable to provide a level playing field to the people, and economic development is not achieved at parity and uniformity. Authoritarianism becomes an alternative as a public choice at a time when democratic states lack the good governance and this insinuation is profoundly felt in rural areas where governance structures are not intact. The authoritarian alternative can change into a predatory state leading to creation of predatory society. Power and privilege

28 Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

29 Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience* (London: C Hurst and Co Publications, 2015).

30 Raja Qaiser Ahmed, *Democracy in Pakistan: From Rhetoric to Reality* (Islamabad: Narratives Publishers, 2014).

31 Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

becomes the mean of praetorian state. It often makes people irresponsible and non-abiding to the state laws. In this situation, state institutions and their functionality in rural areas further endure the perception of the democratic system as an ambivalent discourse.

The democratic system is partially felt, revived, and sustains at a bare minimum in the rural areas. The state's obtrusive narrative to strengthen democracy by giving financial aid and politics of patronization does not improve the governance. The stated issues to invest in basic health care and education, and dispensation of justice do not let the democracy precipitate as a grand substantive discourse. However, the important thing to keep in mind is democracy still remains a viable alternative despite all odds. This process, though stumbled but keeps people participative albeit does not deliver substantively.

This research attempts to explore the factors and processes which shape the understanding of democracy and its concomitant aspects which hinder the consolidation of democracy in rural areas of Pakistan. It is a qualitative study which adopts the narrative analysis as research methodology. Furthermore, in-depth interviews and participation observation have been carried out to collect data in Village Mowara, Tehsil Kahuta, District Rawalpindi, Pakistan. However, with an understanding, the motives of the participation in rural areas of Pakistan, this study not only explores diverse cultural factors underpinning people's participation and choice in the democratic process of the country, it also helps to understand hindrances behind the consolidation of democracy in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The research in its nutshell tried to evoke a conceptual framework of theoretical democratic understanding and its manifestation in a rural area of Punjab, Pakistan. It was found that the electoral contestation in Mowara is inclusive but not free. People do not have the homogenous understanding of the democratic process and *modus operandi*. There is no

alternative to democracy in modern times and democracy is the only viable and workable system in the contemporary era. People do respond to this basic underpinning.

The local structure of politics is deeply entrenched and are significantly accentuated in elections at all level especially local body elections. The clan, *biradri*, local, caste and personal orientation are the decisive factors. People do not tend to vote for an ideology or manifesto rather on short term gains. The superficial understanding of the political processes is the most striking reality of the village. Even people who oppose a certain candidate do not know the concrete political reasons for the prevalent opposition. The sloganeering, symbols and patterns of politics reflect widespread ambivalence. The structures of political association are not grounded and institutional rather focalized and individual resultantly making democracy, the political system and political processes topsy-turvy constructs in the said area.

Political transition in rural areas is significant but still far away from making democracy a substantive discourse. The conceptualization of democracy is still vague, obscure and anachronistic. The persistence of the system along with the functional institutions abetted by literacy and economic development will pave a way for substantive, participative and consolidative frame of the rule and will make democracy an acceptable normative construct in the larger pretext of state and society. The case study of Mowara depicts the same undercurrent that democracy is not a grounded narrative in the rural areas of Pakistan.

From the above study following policy recommendations can be given:

1. The local bodies elections should be held regularly and devolution of the power at the grass root level must be ensured.
2. All the development related work of the area should be through local bodies because national, provincial and local level elections have strikingly different niceties and intricacies.

3. The Client Patron relationship should be ended.
4. Primary state institutions like police, health and education must be made accessible to common man.
5. Provision of economic opportunity to the common masses must be ensured.

The issues of the grave concern i.e. corruption, poor governance, and non-deliverance have made people self-centered and they are more concerned about individual interests rather than a collective frame of action. Uneven economic development and faltering literacy have compounded the unclear understanding of democracy consequently making it an ambivalent discourse for people at large in the rural areas. People are not intrigued by the grand narratives rather have localized narratives and this trend is symptomatic of their alienation from the mainstream political landscape.