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International Day of Parliamentarism

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1. Introduction: Do Parliaments Matter?

30th June 2018, marked the first International Day of Parliamentarism. The purpose of this campaign initiated by the UN is to celebrate the roles that parliamentary systems play in improving the lives of the people. The UN system hopes that this day will provide an opportunity for parliaments to reflect on the challenges they face and to work towards finding solutions to problems that are facing the humanity, especially those that can be remedied through timely, effective and relevant legislation.

The UN system puts great emphasis on the political role of parliaments and believes that strong and sovereign parliaments are a cornerstone of democracy. Parliaments represent the voice of the people, hold governments to account, enact laws and policies and allocate funds and resources to implement the enacted laws and policies. Parliaments are able to ensure that policies benefit all the people in an equitable manner rather than favoring a select few.

In countries emerging from conflict, robust and functioning parliaments can help make possible a peaceful transition to a functioning democracy through dialogue and deliberations often between parties and individuals of varying ideologies and motivations. Additionally, parliaments link international and national agendas. They ensure that governments implement the treaties and agreements that they have signed. In addition to that, parliaments are currently playing a central role in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in association with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Hence, on May 2018 the United Nations General Assembly, passed a resolution A/RES/72/278, which recognized the vital role of parliaments and consequently decided to celebrate the International Day of Parliamentarism. The UN decided to celebrate it on the same day that the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) was formed, as a way to salute the work that the IPU has done in encouraging coordination between the parliaments all over the world and helped achieving multiple international goals¹.

2. Primacy of Sovereign Parliaments

The novelty of this day's celebration means that the understanding of how the term parliamentarism is defined and understood is at a nascent stage. However, a literal inquiry may suggest that it could well be something along the lines of the supremacy of the parliament, rule of law, justice and equality. Some of these themes are enshrined within the UN charter while others can be attributed to the growing international inclination towards a more egalitarian and equal society, both from an economic and gender standpoint.

What this gives rise to is a greater expectation from and reliance on democratic systems, institutions and governments that can be facilitated by sovereign and

¹ <http://www.un.org/en/events/parliamentarismday/index.shtml>

independent law-making bodies. Clearly, within dictatorial and monarchic regimes, parliaments may seem to exist, however, their independence, sovereignty and power to make, amend and implement laws is greatly limited. The campaign initiated by the UN would thus, add force to the voices that call for supremacy of the parliament as a critical pathway toward strengthening of democracy.

3. The Curious Case of Pakistan

Pakistan is a parliamentary democracy. The parliament in Pakistan is a bicameral federal legislature that consists of the Aiwān-e-Balā or Senate (Upper House) and the Qaumi or National Assembly (Lower House). The National Assembly is elected for a five-year term on the basis of adult franchise and one-man one-vote. It has a total of 342 seats, of which 272 are directly elected, 60 are reserved for women and 10 for religious minorities.²



The National Assembly provides representation based on a province's contribution to population. However, to compensate for the lack of population in some provinces that put them at a clear disadvantage in terms of parliamentary representation, the upper house of the parliament; the Senate, is structured to ensure democratic equality and national cohesion by allowing equal membership to the provinces.³

A parliamentary system demands separation of power that shall guarantee effective checks and balances between the executive, legislature and the judiciary. Unfortunately, this maxim is a far cry from Pakistan where the three often engage into practices that not only trespass into the each other's spheres of power, authority and influence but also into power struggles that weaken the state. This along with other factors including the lack of administrative machinery and infrastructure in the post-partition setup, the various military regimes and an onslaught of intellectually and financially compromised leaders at the top, weakened the parliament, democracy and state institutions.

To add context to this, Pakistan inherited its parliamentary system from the British. It was decided that Pakistan will follow the parliamentary system that was used during the rule of the British. However, after partition Pakistan lacked the administrative and governmental machinery needed to run the country. They had to perform the overwhelming task of establishing the government while dealing with the numerous problems of partition including the refugee crisis, the canal water dispute and the Kashmir Issue. The death of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who was an ardent supporter of

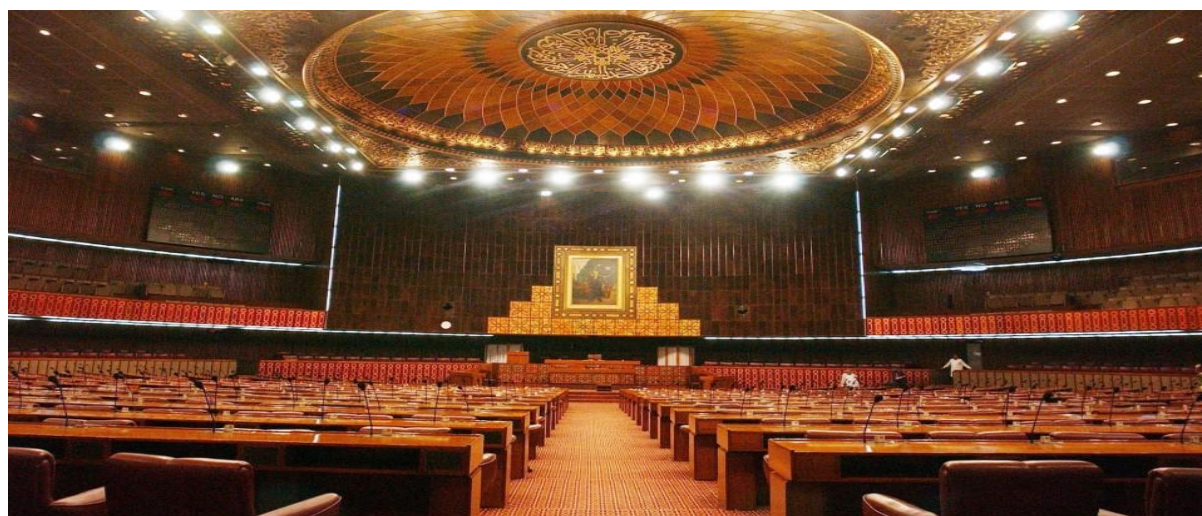
² <http://www.na.gov.pk/en/composition.php>

³ <http://www.senate.gov.pk/en/essence.php?id=10&catid=4&subcatid=138&cattitle=House%20of%20Federation>

democracy, was another factor which hampered the formation of the parliamentary system in Pakistan.

Amongst such chaos, the army was seen as the only stable administrative force that could restore and maintain order in the country. Hence, it is no surprise that the Army often bailed the country during times of distress but in the process, also arrogated immense power and control not only over matters of defense but also over the key institutions, resources and polity of the state. Over the 70 years of the country's history, it has been subjected to military rule four times: Ayub Khan (1958-1969), Yahya Khan (1969-1971), Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) and Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008). Each time there was a crisis, the military entrusted in itself the responsibility to bring an end to it, often through the immediate assumption of power.

The civilian leadership of the country is also partly responsible for the instability of the political system, and the swaying of power between the military and civilian leadership. This is a part product of their own capacity and competency deficits. Their internal political differences hindered the establishment of a stable parliamentary system which was subverted once too often on the smallest of political differences. Ofcourse, corruption within the civilian elite and their incompetency to find solutions to economic, political and administrative problems facing the state were, amongst other things, the primary reasons that led to their ultimate downfall and the assumption of power and control by the military. But most of all that it did was the weakening of state institutions including the parliament, and process of democracy.



4. Conclusion

In recent times however, Pakistan's parliamentary system has set on a path to attain stability and perpetual growth. The general elections of 2018 have resulted in the successful completion of the third consecutive term of a civilian government. A strengthened democracy will contribute towards a stable and functioning parliament and vice versa. The efforts of the UN including its celebration of the International Day of Parliamentarism can only work towards the aforementioned goals of parliamentary stability and improved parliamentary practice while also fostering the positive role that parliaments can play in establishment and strengthening of a truly democratic system of government.