Against the Norm? Populism and the Coronavirus in Pakistan

ASIA’S PATH FORWARD

By S Akbar Zaidi | 17 August 2020
In the last decade, the pandemic of populism, both of the left and the right, has spread far and wide across continents, across different types of countries of varying levels of ‘development’. From Venezuela and Brazil in South America, to Mexico and the USA in North America, right across South Asia engulfing India and Pakistan, into South East Asia affecting Indonesia and the Philippines populist politicians have risen to power.\(^1\) Even in Europe, where bastions of democracy such as the UK, where Brexit has reformed and re-engraved identities for an island cut adrift from a continent, and in young democracies across Eastern Europe and Russia, populism has become an electoral choice. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic since February this year, has affected all countries, albeit, quite differently. It may have given political space to those countries referred to as ‘populist’, allowing authoritarian tendencies to be strengthened, as ‘leaders across the globe are invoking executive powers and seizing virtually dictatorial authority with scant resistance.’\(^2\) In fact, populist leaders have been accused of ‘exploit[ing] the pandemic for political purposes.’\(^3\) It has been argued that it is not just electoral politics but democracy itself which is under threat and is seen to be faltering ‘facing a decline’.\(^4\)

Yet, surprisingly, the pandemic in Pakistan - the fifth most populous country in the world with a population of 220 million and thirteenth in the list of coronavirus cases, has not had the sort of authoritarian resurgence on account of the pandemic. This is not to suggest that Pakistan has not had an increase in authoritarianism and anti-democratic tendencies in recent years or is a bastion of democracy, but that the pandemic, unlike many other countries where populist governments hold power and has resulted in authoritarianism, in Pakistan has had different political consequences. In many ways, Pakistan has bucked the trend associated with such regimes. Before we examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences on democratization in Pakistan, it is best to start with a recent history of the state of democracy in Pakistan itself.

**ELECTIONS, SELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC CHOICE 2018**

Two years ago, on 25 July 2018, Pakistan held its eleventh general elections under universal suffrage allowing all citizens to vote in a parliamentary system with scores of political parties contesting.\(^5\) Most

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\(^2\) [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/world/europe/coronavirus-governments-power.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/world/europe/coronavirus-governments-power.html)

\(^3\) [https://www.ui.se/utrikesmagasinet/in-english/2020/juli/populist-leaders-exploit-the-pandemic-for-political-purposes/](https://www.ui.se/utrikesmagasinet/in-english/2020/juli/populist-leaders-exploit-the-pandemic-for-political-purposes/)


\(^5\) Indirect elections were held in 1954 and 1962, which did not allow universal suffrage and are not considered ‘proper’ elections, although even amongst the elections since then most are considered unfair and rigged.
elections in Pakistan have been considered to be unfair and partisan and the results have been challenged by the losing political parties. Moreover, the Pakistani military has been the dominant political force in between elections and is usually also considered to be the main ‘power broker’ even when governments are ostensibly democratically elected. For 32 of its 73 years of existence, Pakistan has been ruled directly by military regimes, usually under martial law. Hence, even when their elections and civilians make political choices, the military is usually the overseer of such processes and is not always hands-off or neutral.

Regarding the elections of 2018, there has been much evidence made public which suggested that institutions of Pakistan’s military manipulated or influenced the electoral results even before the elections were held, called ‘pre-election rigging,’ and that this interference had a clear bearing on the eventual results. The elections resulted in the victory of the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) party headed by Imran Khan, who became Prime Minister of Pakistan, suggesting that he wasn't so much as elected by the people, but ‘selected’ by the military, hence the term used for him by many opposition members: the ‘Selected Prime Minister’ of Pakistan. Since his election in 2018, the relationship of the government and military has grown even closer. A right-wing populist leader elected by the Pakistani people with clear support by the Pakistan military saying that the government and the military are ‘on the same page,’ will give a sense of how close (and important to the government) this relationship is.

There are many similarities with other countries which have been run under military dictatorships and moved towards electoral transition and are now run by right-wing populists.

In the case of Pakistan, ‘being on the same page’ may have extended the tenure of the incumbent government, but it has also allowed the military to curtail press freedoms and any sort of dissent and human rights groups and bloggers has been met by the ‘security forces’ in typical ways.

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6 The media in Pakistan has been stifled in recent years since the military and its institutions have dominated the narrative which they find palatable, so a ‘free press’ has been highly stifled, and this has grown over time. Yet, before the 2018 elections, some brave and independent newspapers and journalists were able to identify numerous electoral malpractices which all pointed to the dirty hands of the military. See the pages and reporting of the daily Dawn from Karachi in 2018 and of The Friday Times from Lahore.


have accumulated more power and emergency protocols on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, or used the pandemic as an excuse or justification for more power, this has not been the case for Pakistan. One possible explanation why this has not happened could be that the civilian government in Pakistan, along with its dominant partner, the Pakistan military, already has enough control over the media, civil society groups and other supposedly independent civil institutions – such as the parliament and judiciary – that it has not needed to exploit the pandemic to amass further power. Nevertheless, the pandemic and its management has indeed had political repercussions, particularly one with respect to constitutional matters.

**POLITICAL RE-ENGINEERING AND COVID-19**

Pakistan has a federal structure with a central government in Islamabad and four provincial (state) governments, along with some areas and regions which have a different, at times nebulous, status.\(^1\) As a result of the 2018 elections, Prime Minister Imran Khan’s PTI was also able to form provincial governments with its coalition partners in the Punjab, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In Sindh, an opposition party, the Pakistan Peoples’ Party, has been in power for many decades. As per amendments to the Constitution of Pakistan made in 2010, the four provincial governments have been given substantial power devolved from the center. Key areas and social services like health, education, local government, agriculture, and a host of other services and duties were devolved to the four provincial governments, even when many of these responsibilities were beyond their (then) existing capacity. In addition to devolved services and responsibilities to the provinces, a mechanism of substantial financial transfer to the provinces was also constitutionally mandated, making the provinces less financially dependent on the whims of which political party was in power at the center. Then came the coronavirus pandemic.

Since the health system and service delivery in Pakistan is a provincial matter, all four governments were tasked to deal with the coronavirus crisis as it unfolded. The federal government in Islamabad was accused of being confused and unfocused and making contradictory statements, often ridiculing the impact of the virus. Mixed signals became the norm.\(^12\) The Sindh government, in contrast, because it

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\(^{1}\) The new province of Gilgit-Baltistan does not have provincial status like Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan – Pakistan’s four provinces – and is semi-autonomous, as is the area called Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) which constitutes a part of the disputed (former) Jammu and Kashmir state in India. For most purposes, when one refers to the ‘government’ in Pakistan, it is the federal government with the four provincial governments.

belonged to a different political party, took a different stance altogether and very early on, followed World Health Organization protocols and procedures. The results in Sindh province seemed to have been far better than the other three provinces, something that got international recognition, but Prime Minister Imran Khan himself ridiculed the efforts of the Sindh Government. Clearly, this was not about healthcare and delivery but about politics.

It was the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan in 2010 which gave the Sindh Government legitimacy and responsibility as well as financial freedom to successfully respond to the pandemic. Had a highly centralized model of top-down delivery still existed and the diverse political economy of Pakistan been treated in a uniform manner, as it always had been, it is unlikely that Sindh would have emerged as a success story. Another consequence of the financial devolution process and model has been that some of the provinces of Pakistan, those which have been able to manage their finances better, have emerged in fairly good financial health.

With finances devolved and distributed to the provinces, the central government in Islamabad has performed less well financially. In the political economy of Pakistan, where the military dominates and is the hegemon, a poor economic situation, and poor financial resources of the central government implies that such institutions have been short-changed, literally so. With Pakistan’s severe economic conditions even prior to the pandemic, low growth rates, and high and increasing debt, a fiscal crisis at the center has meant there has been less money for the military and its vast empire. As one observer of the Pakistani military argued, “Khan’s government, in collusion with the military, is desperately trying to take control of more funds at a time when provincial governments are struggling to meet the most basic needs of their constituents. There is a consistent effort to undo the 18th amendment to the country’s 1973 constitution, which gives financial autonomy to the provinces and reduces the federal government’s share.”

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14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0emeX3Ea_K4

15 https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-military-millionaires-who-control-pakistan-inc

CONCLUSIONS

The response to Pakistan’s coronavirus crisis has followed the norm in other countries ruled by populist governments in terms of signaling and in terms of response – bravado, mixed messages, confusion – but the resulting rise of authoritarianism and anti-democratic practices, using the pandemic as an excuse, which has happened in many countries did not take place in Pakistan. One possible explanation could be, that unlike those countries which had weak strands and streaks of authoritarianism and used the pandemic as an excuse to strengthen their hold, Pakistan did not need such an excuse as authoritarianism was already quite well-established. Pandemic or not, anti-democratic military authoritarianism thrives in Pakistan behind a civilian façade.

Civil society continues to be weak and under threat as even basic rights – such as the freedom of expression and thought – are curtailed with daily occurrences of so-called ‘missing persons’. Even attempts to curb free thought in education, has been mandated through a ‘single national curriculum’ in a country which has huge diversity. Clearly, such an analysis need not be so pessimistic and, in fact, allows for the opening of spaces which challenge the hegemony of authoritarian forces. As argued above, despite a long history of direct control under martial law and indirect control of civilian governments, there has been much resistance to such military control. Democratic politics itself, even though it is tainted, allows for such social and political spaces to be challenged.

The prognosis about Pakistan’s democratic and social spaces is certainly gloomy at present, with constraints being imposed by a civilian government on the ‘same page’ with Pakistan’s dominant military leadership. Unlike many other countries, COVID-19 is not needed as the excuse for such forms of authoritarianism. However, Pakistan’s history provides numerous examples of when and how such regimes have been confronted. Pakistan’s democratic forces need to revisit their own history.


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**AUTHOR**

S Akbar Zaidi

S. Akbar Zaidi is currently the Executive Director (Vice Chancellor/President) of the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi. He was Professor at Columbia University, New York from 2010 to 2020, where he held a joint position at the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies (MESAAS). He was also Adjunct Professor at the IBA from 2013 to 2020. S Akbar Zaidi is a Political Economist who has had nearly four decades of teaching and research experience in Pakistan and abroad. He has taught courses on colonial history, Pakistani history and on the political economy of South Asia. Amongst his books are: Military, Civil Society and Democratization in Pakistan (2011), The New Development Paradigm: Papers on Institutions, NGOs, Gender and Local Government (1999), and Pakistan’s Economic and Social Development: The Domestic, Regional and Global Context (2004). His recent books include Issues in Pakistan’s Economy: A Political Economy Perspective published by Oxford University Press (2015), and a co-edited volume entitled New Perspectives on Pakistan’s Political Economy: State, Class and Social Change, published by Cambridge University Press in April 2019. His history manuscript Making Muslims: Reading Publics and Contesting Identities in 19th Century North India is to be published by Cambridge University Press later this year.