

Javed Jabbar

Essences and poisons



Parties and numbers, the two facets of electoral politics which are considered indispensable, are also invidious. If freedom of choice amongst political parties is an essence of democracy, partisanship on the basis of parties is a poison of democracy. Such partisanship may not be a fatal poison but it certainly has the capacity to paralyse. Both the Lok Sabha in India and the US Congress have often been at a standstill during 2011 due to an acrimonious confrontation. And if the number of votes obtained is essential to determine success, one winner and many losers rarely represent the true picture in a given constituency or country.

The party-based system is deemed the only way to enable coherent representation of different viewpoints, ideologies, features and interests that exist in society. Yet while parties draw people together, they also drive people apart. Divergent perceptions become divisive schisms.

Despite divergences in policies being marginal or even non-existent, it is the personalities of leaders, their own individual or dynastic ambitions and egos that promote a false sense of differences with other parties — whereas, in actual fact, few differences exist.

Even where variations between parties are distinct as in the case of ethnicity or language-based parties, the polarisation reinforces and strengthens separation because the very survival of such parties largely depends on sustaining and heightening the differences.

In cases where parties have sharply defined and instantly distinct political ideologies, the maintenance of the separate and special identity is central to the very survival of the party. The net result of the existence of more than one political party is the deepening of divisions — which is not to suggest that only a monolithic single-party system is preferable or better than a pluralist multi-party system! It is only to underline the fact that political parties tend to intensify discord between human beings, not to dilute or remove it, as ideals urge us to do.

Existing in conditions which already contain inherent diversities of race or language or religion or sect or class, most parties sharpen these already-strong lines.

Yet, to their credit, parties occasionally rise above inherited or man-made walls. They sometimes unanimously adopt fundamental frameworks such as the 1973 Constitution and the 18th Amendment. Parties also often work together in election alliances or in government coalitions while continuing un-changed with their respective individual identities. Where such flexibility may, in certain instances be seen as opportunism, the willingness to compromise reflects the remarkable quality of adaptation possessed by political parties as a particular type of social organisation.

As numbers rule in elections, the candidate who gets the most votes in a constituency in a single round and the party winning the most seats in a general election become the winners or the rulers. This is an absurdity of the first-past-the-post system as it exists in Pakistan, and elsewhere. In a constituency, the losing candidates may together secure more votes than the single winning candidate. Yet the losers remain entirely un-represented. The absurdity is compounded by the tendency of less than 50 per cent of voters to cast their votes. And this means that a winning candidate or a winning party neither represents the majority of those who voted nor do the winners represent the majority of registered voters. But the winners, in spite of being non-representative of the majority, carry on for five years — or until the next election, sanctified by an utterly irrational, unfair electoral method.

Whether through the introduction of a second or third round of polling till a candidate obtains 51 per cent of the votes cast or the registered vote, or by the adoption of compulsory voting as is the case in about 35 countries, there is a glaring need for reform of electoral processes.

The intrinsic paradox remains of political parties being unavoidable in democracy while at the same time, party-based partisanship contaminating the political process. Therefore, there is scope for exploration in political philosophy of new concepts as well as practical pilot-scale experiments to examine possible alternatives and improvements to make electoral democracy less conflictual and more representative of public opinion.