

Democracy needs to be allowed to evolve in Pakistan

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ISLAMABAD: Participants of a roundtable discussion “State of Democracy: Challenges in South Asia” organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) here on Thursday emphasized the need for a continued evolution of democracy in South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular. They agreed that the democratic process in the country had been a combination of good and bad outcomes but that a sustained period of democracy was essential for ensuring accountable governance in Pakistan.

Mr. M. Ziauddin, Executive Editor of The Express Tribune, said that democracy was not an end in itself but a means to the end of equitable distribution of wealth and power in a state and society. He argued that Pakistan had not transitioned from a feudal to a democratic polity, and maintained that democracy had not taken root in the country because of the ascendancy of military and the civil bureaucracy in the political history of Pakistan. Mr. Ziauddin complimented the current government for developing consensus on the 18th Amendment as well as the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award. He also called the judiciary the most powerful and independent in Pakistan’s history and referred to it as a good sign for the future of democracy in the country. He added that the judiciary and the media were collectively exercising collective control over the executive for keeping its activities in check. He argued that putting the whole blame of bad governance on the political government was not correct and that the rot in the civil bureaucracy and lower judiciary etc. was equally responsible for it.

Mr. Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, the Executive Director of the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), referred to modernity as a precursor for democracy rather than vice versa, and argued that in western societies it was the democracy that had followed modernity rather than the other way round. He defined modernity as the presence of institutional structures for addressing a community’s problems rather than certain predefined notions of living a life. He advocated the mobilization of masses on the basis of people-centric programs for achieving modernity and, thus, a substantive democracy in South Asia. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Saleem Hayder added that such mobilization would need sincere leadership.

Dr. Tanvir Ahmad Khan maintained that even though Pakistan was having all the democratic institutions, they were unable to deliver effectively because of lack of attention towards institutions that enable democracy such as land reform and independent election commission. He pointed out, however, that a powerful upper middle class was becoming more and more assertive in the country that could usher in a new phase of political participation and empowerment. He applauded the presence of middle class, youth, and women in some of the recently organized political rallies by various political parties.

The participants of the discussion also included: Mr. Ashraf Azim, President of IRS; Brig. (Retd.) Bashir Ahmed, Senior Fellow IRS; Amb. Qurban; Mr. Aman Azhar, Research and Policy Coordinator at the Ministry of Information; Dr. Shaheen Akhtar, Senior Research Analyst at IRS; Mr. Aarish Khan, Research Analyst at IRS; Dr. Mavara Inayat; Ms. Arshi Saleem Hashmi, Associate Professor at the National Defence University, and researchers from IRS and other think-tanks.