**The Problems of Political Parties in Pakistan**

In democratic societies, political parties play a significant role in articulating citizens' aspirations. Upon gaining people's support and electoral trust, they serve as a vital link between the state and society.

**Islamic Politics**

Since Pakistan's inception, the interplay of self-interest and Islamic politics has complicated the establishment of a politically broad organization. Opposition parties attempting to challenge the League's power faced frustration, physical restrictions, and accusations of being unpatriotic. The League governments employed repressive measures against groups like the Red Shirt (NWFP), Majlis-i-Ahrar, Jama'at-i-Islami, and the Pakistan National Congress.

The weakness of the League became evident in East Bengal's 1954 elections, where the United Front, comprising all provincial parties, triumphed. The League's influence in West Pakistan waned with the appointment of Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy as prime minister in 1956. However, in 1958, the military-led establishment halted the constitutional experiment, abrogating the 1956 constitution, closing legislatures, and banning all political parties.

**Pakistani Version of Political Party**

Between 1958 and 1971, President Ayub Khan centralized the government through autocratic rule to avoid instability from ministerial coalitions. In 1962, he introduced his own constitution, lifting martial law. Initially without formal political parties, Ayub later created his own party, first named the Muslim League and later changed to Convention Muslim League. It performed well under military rule but lost support in the 1970 elections. Dissolved in 1977, it was recreated by Mohammad Khan Junejo in 1986 and dissolved again in 1988 by President Zia. The growth of political parties within the parliament is unique to Pakistan, with the Pakistan People's Party and Awami League gaining fame in the 1970 elections, leading to the tragic break-up of the country in 1971. Later, Awami League assumed power in Bangladesh, and the Pakistan People's Party remained a potent force in Pakistan.

**Political Parties and Mass Contact**

The development of political parties in Pakistan is influenced by the level of societal development, mutual relations, and the nature of the state structure. Historically, the uneven political development between rural and urban areas persisted, impacting party growth during the colonial period and continuing into the 1990s. This trend resulted in predominantly urban-based parties with limited connections to the rural population. The absence of regular elections further reduced the pressure on city-based political parties to engage with the majority rural population, hindering their integration into the political process.

**The Problems of Political Parties**

- Lack of democracy within party structure

- Preoccupation with the sole objective of gaining power

- Failure to encourage the growth of alternate leadership

- Lack of a clear political vision in most political parties

- Rampant corruption within political parties

- Alienation of citizens from political sharing and participation

**Lack of Inner Democracy**

Pakistan's major political parties grapple with accusations of democratic malpractice, manifesting in:

**Leadership Entrenchment:** The leaders appoint themselves as life chairpersons. Heirs are groomed to take over their father's mantle.

**Monetary Transactions for Positions:** Party positions are often secured through financial transactions rather than merit.

**Lack of Internal Elections:** Most parties avoid conducting internal elections, relying on nominations and appointments.

**Influence in Nomination Process:** Key positions are influenced by party elites rather than elected processes.

**Contradictory Practices:** Despite advocating against military dictatorship, parties maintain dictatorial nomination practices internally.

These challenges left the political landscape ill-equipped to respond to the power shift under General Pervez Musharraf in 1999.

**Lack of Building Up of Leaders**

Major party leaders like Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto failed to cultivate new leaders within their parties. This lack of a systematic approach hinders the growth of politicians from grassroots to leadership. This complicates worker mobilization and commitment to the party's cause. They seem to be in no mood to make sacrifices for the leadership.

**Corruption and Lack of Transparency**

Political leaders in Pakistan prioritize personal interests over national concerns, undermining democratic norms. Their focus on self-interest has led to accusations of corruption and incompetence. This behavior erodes public trust and damages political institutions. After the 1999 military coup, the two major parties were criticized for corruption, leading to widespread disappointment among the public. The issue of political party funding in Pakistan remains unclear, contributing to a lack of transparency.

**Political Parties and their Manifestoes**

Political parties issue manifestos during elections, but these documents often conceal contradictions and lack clarity. Manifestoes, aiming to appeal to diverse audiences, become intricate and nuanced, challenging interpretation. Despite addressing numerous issues, they avoid prioritization and fail to outline resource allocation for promised solutions. Parties rarely resolve contradictions within their manifestoes, indicating a lack of seriousness in addressing the complexities of their pledges.

**The Political Vision or The Lack of It**

Political parties in Pakistan lack a clear vision, struggling to define their stance and goals. While some focus on eradicating corruption, others emphasize infrastructure development or the implementation of Islamic teachings. The myopic vision stems from the limited freedom of expression and political constraints in society. The absence of a free and open environment hinders the development of robust political parties, preventing the free expression of diverse views and ideas. This restriction contributes to a narrow perspective and limited vision among political parties in Pakistan.

**The Lost Vision**

In the 1990s, Pakistani politics shifted focus from clear goals to power struggles, corruption, and infighting among major parties like PPP and Muslim League. This led to unstable governments, facing dissolution multiple times. Political parties became weak, splintered, and regionally limited, lacking broad appeal and clear policies.

Leadership dynamics varied, with some relying on charisma, others on wealth, and many following family traditions. Inherited positions were common, except in Jamat-e-Islami. Succession in parties like PPP moved from Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto to Benazir Bhutto and later Bilawal Bhutto Zardari after each leader's death.

**Lack of Citizen's Participation**

Citizen participation in political parties is low because there are not many organized campaigns to attract members, and those who join often have demoralizing experiences. The inner workings of these parties also don't make members feel included.

**Lack of Mutual Understanding**

Political parties in Pakistan face a challenge of lacking mutual trust and understanding. Unlike in the U.S., there is a dearth of peaceful dialogues and debates among parties. Internal debates over policy alternatives are scarce, and priorities are often identified with party leaders rather than being outcomes of collective discussion. The absence of a culture of dialogue hinders the development of mutual understanding among political parties.

**The Way Forward**

To pave the way for an accountable democracy in Pakistan, fundamental changes are needed in the structure and operation of political parties. The current system lacks representation of educated professionals and progressive-minded middle-class citizens. The absence of internal democracy within political parties contributes to corruption and nepotism. Restructuring the political party system on democratic principles is crucial, as it fosters accountability, prevents misuse of public funds, and bridges the gap between the rich and the poor. The failure to recognize and address these issues has perpetuated political challenges and hindered the country's progress.