

International Day of Democracy

(Muhammad Arshad Jan Pathan – Joint Secretary (IPR))

Democracy, particularly at its primitive stage, could be enjoyed by implementing its vital processes. These processes are meant to involve true opinion of masses on various national, regional and international issues. Free, fair and transparent election is just one of them. However, besides general elections, other processes need to be designed to generate public awareness about their rights and the benefits citizens may derive from democracy. In an ideal democratic system, will of each and every citizen of a State is heard and considered at policymaking level because such policies directly relate to every aspect of human life in a society, be it social, economic or political. Real democracy has no shape or specific model but it is a set of rules and processes defined by common attributes. That is why every passing day, the subject of democracy is drawing more consensuses and its promotion has become high on the agenda of international bodies. Once democratic practices are truly adopted at micro level, States gain strength in promoting their national and foreign policies at global platforms, as any position taken by a State carries the voice of strong democratic institutions and reflect genuine opinion of its citizens.

Today in the 21st century, nation States have achieved varying levels of development but the common factor to judge their governance is by assessing effective and representative democratic institutions. The whole edifice of democracy rests on three pillars; legislature, judiciary and executive where each pillar has to function autonomously. At individual and collective level, civilized nations perform their responsibility by becoming part of the processes that lead to attaining real essence of democracy. Active participation of youth, enjoyment of fundamental and human rights, robust accountability system, women empowerment and a vibrant civil society are some of the basic tools required to fortify the structure of democracy and enliven it to further prosper.

Youth participation in politics at global level has increased manifold due to technological advancement and by use of social media. However, youth presence in world parliaments remained only at twelve percent. Youth, which constitutes over half the world population,

are the leaders of tomorrow. Their voice, guiding today's policymakers, may be incorporated at all policy matters. For example, active participation of youth as electoral candidates and youth's massive turnout on voting day, nevertheless, has a potential to affect the expected results' statistics and its subsequent impact on future policies. There is an utmost need to capitalize youth potential by considering them actual stakeholders of democracy. Another key attribute of democracy is the representation of people's voices and aspirations. Rejecting people's voice has remained one of the major causes of weak democracies and State failures. To strengthen and stabilize democracy, inclusiveness plays a vital role as it leads to tolerance and the notion of unacceptability of opposition and dissention has to be changed. The world has recently witnessed scenarios, when people were denied basic rights and their voices were not heard, the situation led to extreme violence and eventually fall of regimes. Peace is inherently linked with the inclusion of all segments of society in a democratic manner. The values of freedom and respect for human rights can be cherished once tolerance is observed as a common practice. Democracy can only move forward if it's tolerant and dissenting voices are heard and addressed at all platforms.

Resolving issues through dialogue is the blood-line of democracy and its growth. The beauty of democracy lies in the diversity of opinions that remain under consideration. Parliaments are mandated to resolve contentious issues through dialogue as pluralism is intrinsically entrenched in it. In contemporary world it is widely accepted that authority of a government is derived from the will of its people. Whereas the will of people, could only be encompassed into one single force when democracy and dialogue are rendered interchangeable. In addition to this, freedom occupies the core of democracy. Whatever is the culture, history and religion of a nation, the desire to have a society based on the rule of law, justice, equality, human rights and democratic values, is universal. This is exactly how democracies determine their path to serve people.

Therefore, to encourage governments in the promotion and consolidation of democracy, United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution (A/62/7) in 2007 and decided that 15 September, each year, should be observed as the 'International Day of

Democracy'. Since then, the Day is being observed in over 100 States in the world in various ways. Inter parliamentary Union (IPU) has played an important role in bringing awareness of democratic principles globally through its 166 Member Parliaments. This year's theme of 'International Day of Democracy' declared by the IPU is, '*Public Participation for Democracy*' and that of UN is '*Space for Civil Society*'. Both these largest governmental and parliamentary forums have focused on the role of civil society and public participation that serve as conduit for attaining democracy. More inclusive political system means strong democratic Parliaments –ensuring peace, development and respect for human rights. Such political system will lead to better governance and transparency as the process will be owned by the people.

The House of Federation - Senate of Pakistan shall commemorate the International Day of Democracy during its House proceedings on September 15, 2015. Parliamentary leaders shall be invited to express their commitment towards democracy and its guiding principles. In addition to this, and keeping in view this year's IPU theme; 'Public Participation for Democracy', it would be appropriate to mention some of the measures adopted by the Senate of Pakistan, after its recent elections in March 2015, to promote participation of common citizen in democratic process. Few initiatives worth mentioning include:

- Tagline of 'House of the Federation' has been added to the emblem of Senate of Pakistan.
- Mechanism for implementation of directions given by the House and the Committees
- Vibrant and effective Business Advisory Committee.
- Dedicated House timings for issues of national and public importance.
- Self imposed discipline.
- Introduction of E-Parliament.
- Introduction of 'Committee of the Whole House'.
- Establishment of 'Public Petition Table'.
- Know your Parliament – Parliamentary Outreach Initiative.
- Live web cast of Senate proceedings.
- Research support to the House, Members and Committees.
- Orientation programs for the new Members.

Pakistan Senate website has been upgraded and made user-friendly for general public. It now serves as an online information hub on legislative business, House proceedings and reports of Senate Standing Committees. Senate of Pakistan has an effective in house policy research think tank named Senate Forum for Policy Research (SFPR) which is a liaison with the civil society organizations and academia of the country for policy formulation. The Senate of Pakistan is working on Parliamentary Education Program (PEP), the program aims to inform, engage and empower the people of Pakistan towards political enlightenment to enhance, develop and strengthen their trust in the parliament and democracy.

In conclusion, Pakistan has to raise its democratic standards to a higher level by engaging its citizens in the democratic process. The dream of an Asian Parliament could only be achieved when the will of Asian citizens is assembled and translated into legal frameworks by its Member Parliaments. At the global level, the next 15-year targets of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that shall be adopted this month at the forthcoming UN General Assembly in New York, would be difficult for a State to achieve unless it is prepared for the same, particularly once the output of MDGs and on the table. Policies, legislations and institutions that represent only the true will of its people shall embrace real success. Since democracy is an ever evolving process, the Senate of Pakistan would welcome suggestions in strengthening democracy as part of its observance of this momentous day.
