The role of public opinion in a democracy

In modern society, the voice of the people forms the crux of any legislation or policy in the land. While this facet of societal feedback is prevalent in all societies regardless of the degree of authoritarianism, it is especially true for democratic societies of the world.

But it is important to first realise and understand what public opinion really is. The term ‘public opinion’ was coined by philosopher John Locke in the 17th century. However, the concept itself predates Locke. Vox populi or ‘voice of the people’ is a similar Latin concept. Today, public opinion is defined in the following way: collective evaluations expressed by people on political issues, policies, institutions and individuals.

It is important to differentiate between public opinion and pressure groups. Public opinion changes policy through passive observations that accumulate amongst citizens. Pressure groups work to change policy actively through direct interaction with policymakers.

Public opinion is important in a democracy because the people are the ultimate source of political power. In theory, a government official has to take public opinion into account whilst deciding on a future course of action. This is not to say that politicians always do what people want. Clearly, there is more statistical incidence of political malcontent today than there were, say, 500
years ago. But even the most unapproachable politician needs to avoid making the majority of a country too displeased. Political parties must maintain a certain level of positive public opinion which is subject to a certain measure of manipulation through mass media and other sources and used to maintain the status quo. That is, however, not to say that public opinion, itself, should be considered a ‘positive social function’. Grantland Rice, a renowned American journalist once said, “A wise man makes his own decisions, an ignorant man follows the public opinion.”

It is important to understand the factors that shape public opinion as a whole. These include social class, education, region, age, gender and ethnic group. Society is not a homogeneous whole. It is made up of components. Each component faces different challenges in its functioning, therefore, members of each component view the world differently. To quote a real life example, on the question of building the Kalabagh Dam, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Sindh are in extreme opposition to this while Punjab stands alone in its support. These differing points of view lead to vying social opinions which look for expanding ‘political’ space. The greater the space that the holders of a worldview can secure for their argument, the greater the chance that this worldview would be incorporated within the general structure of regional or national policy.
A state is built upon the consent of the members of society. A constitution is
drafted by the collective will of the people. Just as the state and the
constitution are vital organic constructs, so is the primary method of informing
them: public opinion.