

## **The project: Democracy and political literacy Project aim and modus operandi Target audience Assessment and impact**

### **The project: Democracy and political literacy**

We share a broad commitment to progressive ideas and democracy which we see as a “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience”[1]. A conjoint communicated experience cannot be realised without a shared – not necessarily agreed upon – discourse which allows people to participate in public discourse in an informed and critical manner. The creation, criticism and sustenance of this shared vocabulary is the task of political literacy – a task that becomes urgent when ideas such as democracy, human rights and egalitarian policies are not seen by many as native to the land, rather these are seen to be in tension with the received notions of culture and religion in particular.

We believe that decades of fragmented education systems have resulted in many mentalities in the countries, from global Jihadism to liberal cosmopolitanism and from military authoritarianism to civic idealism. These differ in the way they envision the origin and destiny of the country but do not even share vocabulary to convey their views to each other. Violence or silence rather than public debate then become the alternatives.

As our first project we would like to work on the nurturing of political literacy in the country. By political literacy we mean ability to participate in a country’s governance in an informed and critical manner.[2] Such an ability consists of a) an understanding of key concepts (such as constitution, nationalism, state etc.), b) critical thinking skills to appraise different political positions and ideas and c) confidence in articulating one’ own position. Ability to listen, suspension of judgement and willingness to compromise are some of the attitudinal dimensions of political literacy.

As the electorate, in order to maintain political control, must be able to understand and evaluate options presented to them by various political actors, we consider a politically literate public as sine qua non for modern democracy. Political literacy is rooted in the belief that each person is able to think about his or her interests and desires to have a say in the governance of matters that affect him/her. Political literacy gives tools through which these interests and desires can be articulated and defended. It can be aided by numeracy and literacy learnt through schools but is not necessary for it. It can be acquired through media, social events and reflection. In fact, the best predictor of political literacy is participation in political process. Thus, encouraging political participation will be a key feature of our work.

There are several theories of political literacy, from cognitive mobilisation to traditional socialisation. Current scholarly consensus is that cognitive mobilisation – i.e. education and participation – are the best routes to political literacy.[3] This sits well with the Group’s strength and hence will be the main pedagogical approach for the project.

## **Project aim and modus operandi**

The overall aim of the project is to draw upon the activities and intellectual capital of the Group to promote political literacy in Pakistan through the promotion of public discourse and political participation.

The achievement of this aim will require that we create an organic link between production of debates in the Group's home in London and its dissemination into the public sphere in Pakistan. This formulation can immediately lead to the charge of centre-periphery arrangement whereby London is seen to be producing knowledge for consumption in Pakistan. This, however, is not the case because the producers of debate are themselves mostly Pakistani and often centres on the presence of a keynote speaker from Pakistan. The concerns and topics for debates are rooted in developments in Pakistan. London thus serves as little more than a convenient physical location.

### **More specifically we intend to the following:**

1. Identify a list of key concepts for political literacy such as the state, the society, democracy, justice, Will of the people etc.
2. Commission accessible articles explaining these concepts in language and examples drawn from Pakistan's context
3. Organise events – seminars, workshops, guest speakers, TV shows – on these concepts or on events reflective of them
4. Disseminate commissioned articles and the outcomes of events: a) on the Group's website and b) through print and digital media, particularly radio and TV, in Pakistan in Urdu and regional languages
5. Encourage members to directly participate in public discourse through writing, interviews and comments in media

### **Target audience**

Though aimed at the whole of Pakistan's electorate, the main focus will be on the urban youth who have access to media and are engaged in social media. This Group has become extremely active in recent years and, given the youth bulge in Pakistan's demography, an impact can be very effective.

### **Assessment and impact**

Finally, how would we assess our work? Like any other abstract concept, political literacy cannot be measured directly. Further, the work of the Group will, even at its best, will be one of the many inputs that would be affecting the quality of political literacy. Thus, a thorough assessment – though possible – is unlikely to be of much value. Instead, we should go with general assessment of key journalists and political commentators about any change in the level of political discourse. Bernard Cricks notes that “to have achieved political literacy is to have learnt what the main political disputes are about, what beliefs the main contestants have of them, how they are likely to affect you and me. It also means that we are likely to be predisposed to try to do something about the issue in question in a manner which is at once effective and respectful of the sincerity of other people and what they believe...political literacy is a compound of knowledge, skills and attitudes” [4] Going forward, we should expect increase in all these indicators.

[1] Dewey, J. (1916) Education and Democracy

[2] Cognate terms for political literacy include political expertise, political awareness, and civic competence

[3] Cassel & Lo (1997) ‘Theories of Political Literacy’ Political Behaviour, December 1997, Volume 19, Issue 4, pp 317-335

[4] Crick, Bernard (2000) Essays on Citizenship p.61