

PAKISTAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2018: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Pakistan is inching closer to general elections next week (July 25). This is being held as per schedule signalling smooth democratic political transition for the second time since 2008. As per the data provided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), about 106 million eligible voters are going to vote for 3,459 candidates contesting for 272 national and 8,396 for 577 provincial assembly seats, for which direct elections are being held. The trend of popular participation suggests that the voter turn-out is likely to grow; in the last election in 2013 it was 12 percentage point higher than the average of 41% during the last 25 years.

This election is significant given the fact that the state has experienced a decade of democratic politics uninterrupted by military intervention. Pakistan has been under direct military rule for 32 years since its creation. No doubt the civilian governments which have assumed power through the democratic process since 2008 have not been able to exercise as much autonomy as has been vested in them under the Constitution. It is also true that the army has re-emerged as a dominant player in Pakistani politics after the exit of the unpopular military regime under Gen. Musharraf, which had soiled military's reputation. However, there is a hope that this second transition will help strengthen the roots of democracy in Pakistan. It is also significant that the people of Pakistan are getting used to the process of changing governments through ballot rather than looking towards the Army to unseat any civilian dispensation they would perceive as 'corrupt and inefficient'.

Be that as it may, a new actor in the horizon influencing internal politics in a big way now is the Judiciary which has indirectly weakened the civilian leadership and strengthened the hands of the military. It has managed

to remove a popular leader with majority support in the Parliament by disqualifying him under the provisions of the constitution (Art 62) for not being *sadiq and ameen* (honest and righteous). The efficiency and eagerness with which the judiciary took up the case of corruption against Nawaz Sharif on the Avenfield property case and removed him from power and Presidency of the PML-N suggests that judiciary is trying to establish itself as an influential player in Pakistani politics limiting the power of elected governments in future irrespective of the elections. It is also believed strongly that the army was complicit in this move in as much as it played a critical role in investigating the issue of graft and supplying critical evidence that was used to convict Nawaz Sharif and his family. Between 2008-18, the two civilian governments which were allowed to complete their terms could not do it with one Prime Minister in office, which shows how there were efforts afoot to undermine civilian leadership and undercut its influence. In the following sections, an attempt is being made to analyse the upcoming elections against this backdrop.

2013 Elections: What does the numbers Say

Going by the results of various pre-election opinion polls as well as assessments in the Pakistani print and electronic media, it appears that the primary electoral contest in Pakistan today is between the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI). The latter, it is believed, has the backing of the deep state and the electronic and social media are being used aggressively to berate

PML-N rule and project Imran Khan and his party, PTI, as a genuine alternative. The latest poll survey conducted

by Global Strategic Partners (GSP) on July 4, as well as by Gallup Pakistan and Pulse-Constant in May-June 2018 suggests that PTI has managed to close the gap with PML-N over the last few months at the national level while it continues to lag behind in Punjab. While pre-poll surveys in the region have not invoked much respectability, the trends identified by these need careful analysis.

In the 2013 elections, the PML had won 126 out of 272 NA seats securing about 146 million popular votes, mostly in Punjab (118 seats). Out of it, in 6 seats, they had lost with a margin of between 1000 and 5000 votes. Interestingly, the PTI which is emerging as a favourite won only 28 seats in the NA while Pakistan Peoples' Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) secured 34 seats.

Out of 272 National Assembly seats, in around 117 constituencies majority votes have shifted from one party to the another in the last three elections and there is no single party or the candidate who is the favourite of the voters. In 2013 elections, in 83 seats a single candidate won twice in the same constituency in the last three elections (2002, 2008, 2013 elections), out of which 41 were from PML-N and 31 from the PPPP.

In 21 constituencies, some candidates mattered irrespective of their party affiliation. In 25 constituencies, PPPP had strong presence, winning all the three elections in the past. In 17 seats, PML-N was dominant, winning all the last three elections out of which 10 seats belonged to electable candidates. In 14 seats, the MQM, in 3, the PML-F and in one Quami Watan Party (QWP) won all the last three elections.

In South Punjab, five sitting members of PML-N have so far joined PTI; 11 have returned the party ticket offered to them and have asked for the Jeep symbol. In these four constituencies PML-N does not have any candidate (NA 181, 190, 193 and 194). So far 16 sitting lawmakers from Punjab have left the PML-N and joined PTI. From PPP, important leaders like Babar Awam, Noor Alam Khan, Imtiaz Safdar Waraich have also joined PTI. In southern Punjab because of defections from PML-N to PTI, and further division of its votes among PPPP and TLYR, the PTI is likely to fare better than PML-N. PML-N will bank on its developmental work during the tenure of Shahbaz Sharif's chief ministership in Central Punjab which has 82 seats.

In this election, the symbol of Jeep has acquired an important dimension since this symbol was given to Choudhury Nisar one of the prominent rebels from the PML-N, who is fighting independently. Many would believe that the candidates fighting on this symbol some of whom are from PML-N may have had the blessings of the powerful military establishment. However, it needs to be mentioned that the total number of candidates contesting with the Jeep symbol is 137, out of which there are 7 rebels each from PTI and PML-N. Most others are independent. It is true that the independents may play a critical role in case the elections throw up a hung house. In the last election, 29 candidates had won as independents, including 12 from Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The religious parties of Pakistan, under the leadership of Fazlur Rahman of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazlur (JUI-F), have made an effort to recreate Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) which had, in its earlier incarnation in 2002, secured about 12 percent of the popular vote with the alleged backing of the Musharraf administration. In addition, some of the groups, earlier averse to the idea of democracy like the Milli Muslim League (MML) affiliated to the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) are entering the fray on platforms provided to them by relatively less known conservative parties like Allahu Akbar Tehreek (AAT) after denied recognition by the ECP. The Bareilvi Tehreek Labaik Ya Rasool (TLYR) party, which has notoriously staged the Faizabad sit-in over the issue of perceived anti-Islamic changes in the electoral rules in October-November 2017, is also participating in this election with a vengeance. Both TLYR and AAT-MML are possibly being encouraged by the establishment to divert right-wing votes from the PML-N. Pakistan Rah-e-haq party which is the political wing of Sipah-e-Sahaba is also contesting. The record of the combined performance of these religious groups, however, has been rather unimpressive since 1970. In the last two elections (2008 & 2013) they could poll only about 6-7 percent of the popular votes.

Scenario in the Provinces

In Punjab, PML-N had so far displayed an unassailable lead because of its emphasis on fielding electables as candidates and its ability to pander to the conservative constituency in the province. Its right-of-the-centre image was carefully built to pool votes from the various

religious groups in the previous elections. This time round, however, PTI has adopted an overt tactic to offset this advantage. It has taken recourse to the Barelvi propaganda that one of their proud followers who had killed Salman Taseer for having supported a blasphemer openly, was sent to the gallows by the Nawaz government, while in reality it was the army (and the judiciary) which expedited the process of his conviction and execution. Moreover, there is a conspicuous move to field candidates of the Milli Muslim League (MML) affiliated to the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and denied recognition by the ECP, from the platform of Allahu Akbar Tehreek (AAT) to divert right-wing votes away from PML-N.

In Punjab, which would be the determining province in the forthcoming election having 141 National Assembly seats, the TLR has fielded 97 candidates whereas PPP is contesting in 98 seats. These parties will divide the votes and are unlikely to emerge successful. In the last election in 2013, PML-N had won in 117 seats out of the total 148 seats in Punjab. Central Punjab which has 82 seats is going to be crucial for the PML-N which is going to rely on the development work it has done in the province. PTI had only 6 seats in the last election from Punjab.

In Sindh, PPP is likely to retain its predominance, especially in the rural areas where the party-affiliated feudals hold sway. The Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), smarting under factionalism, may not fare as well as it did in the last two elections; however, post-Senate elections there is a realisation that the MQM sympathisers would have to vote together in the wake of the threat posed by Pak Sarzameen Party (PSP), a breakaway faction of MQM, which has formed a Grand Democratic Allaiance (GDA) with PML-Functional and few other small parties in the province.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), despite its relatively unimpressive performance, PTI has managed to retain its appeal. The Awami National Party (ANP) has, like in the election in 2013, lost its leaders to attacks by Islamist terrorists. Its candidate, Haroon Bilour, was killed by a suicide bomber and few others have been attacked. It has not been able to run its campaign because of such threats. The religious parties under Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal may not improve their performance given PTI's bid to pose itself as a party willing to commit itself to

the Islamist cause.

In Balochistan, it seems the verdict will be as uncertain and divided as it has always been. The newly formed Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) comprising defectors from PML-N, possibly favoured by the establishment, has now come full circle and struck an alliance with PML-N. With PPP trying to revive its presence in the province and nationalists making an effort to put up a better show, the province will most likely witness post-poll competition among various groups to form an alliance to come to power.

Manifestos and India Factor

Looking at the manifestos of various political parties, their commitments on the foreign policy front is too minimal compared to their promises on the developmental front. Most parties have referred to Kashmir in their manifestos but their commitment does not go beyond securing its solution through United Nations resolution. There is a great deal of similarity in their proclamations about India that they would seek to resolve all issues through dialogue. Imran Khan has taken jibes at Nawaz Sharif by portraying him as a friend of Prime Minister Modi (with the crowd shouting *Modi ka yaar, gaddar gaddar*) on several occasions and has promised to talk to India on equal footing without sacrificing Pakistan's core interests on Kashmir. The pressure on PML-N on this front seems to have worked and, in its manifesto, it has held India responsible for reduced water flow into Pakistan. However, like in previous elections, India does not feature that seriously in Pakistani electoral politics.

Trends

The results in Punjab will likely determine the results at the national level given the fact that it accounts for 141 National Assembly seats. In the last election in 2013, PML-N had won 118 seats out of 148 seats.

In view of the discussion above, in spite of all the political engineering that is going on with the support of the establishment, PTI may not emerge as a clear winner even if it manages to better its performance over the last elections. However, such engineering might have spoilt the chances of PML-N to secure a majority. With neither PML-N nor PTI securing a majority, the army

will, in every likelihood, emerge as the arbiter and the post-poll alliance efforts may throw up parties like MQM, JUI-F/MMA and PPPP as king makers. Such a scenario suits the military for it would find a coalition government weak enough to pose a challenge to it..

Implications

A coalition government will remain dysfunctional at the best. Political instability will worsen the security situation in Pakistan. The Army will retain an upper hand in the

foreign policy and therefore Pakistan's India policy will remain the preserve of the army and it is unlikely that there will be any visible improvement in bilateral relations.

Alternately, if Imran Khan's party emerges as the winner, Pakistan's approach towards India is unlikely to change given his party's bid to connect to the radical groups on the one hand and its links with the army on the other. In both the cases, India does not have much to cheer about. ■

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