**Battle for Balochistan**

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Political developments in Balochistan have caught the attention of the national media. While the province is hardly mentioned in debates in the media, it takes centre stage before almost every national election.

Mostly Balochistan settles the political trend in the country before elections. There is strong perception that electables from Balochistan start to change political loyalties, marking the downfall and rise of a political party.

This example can elaborate on this point: In 2013, the PML-N was the main attraction for electables in Balochistan. Many of them quit the PPP and the PML-Q to join the PML-N, which then went on to form the government in Islamabad.

But before the 2018 general elections, the PML-N led provincial government in Balochistan fell apart. Many PML-N MPAs quit the party and formed the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) which supported the PTI. The ruling party was almost wiped out from Balochistan and lost the elections.

Now just a few months before the 2024 general elections, more than two dozen electables have once again joined the PML-N. It is a clear indication for many that the PML-N is likely to emerge as the largest party in the next parliament.

The political battle to win Balochistan has intensified in the last few weeks. Sixteen National Assembly seats from Balochistan have become crucial for all contenders. Balochistan has fewer NA seats than Lahore or Karachi divisions. But still the major political parties are trying everything to win those few seats. The PPP, PML-N, JUI-F, BNP-Mengal, PkMAP, BAP and National Party are gearing up for the upcoming elections.

Balochistan is known for its history of producing a split mandate in elections. The upcoming February 2024 elections are not going to be any different. It is likely that a coalition government will be formed in the province. No political party is likely to win a simple majority in the provincial assembly, and no party might be able to win more than three or four NA seats from this strategically important province. The question arises here is: why are PPP and PML-N leaders focusing so much on Balochistan for a couple of seats?

Both the PML-N and PPP are trying to make gains in Balochistan for three basic reasons. One, both parties want to prove that they are still national parties which enjoy support throughout the country; the opponents of both parties accuse them of being regional parties. The PML-N is mainly a Punjab based party which has little support outside Punjab and the PPP has a stronghold in Sindh and has lost support in three other provinces.

Two, it is likely that there will be no clear winner in elections. A close election is expected among different political parties. So, every seat matters in a closely contested election. Three, political vacuum does exist in Balochistan. The split and disintegration of BAP has created a political vacuum; the PTI is also in disarray in the province.

PPP and PML-N leaders have visited the province in an effort to win over the maximum number of electables. Both parties are trying to take advantage of the disintegration of the former ruling party BAP, which received a major blow when most of its senior leaders and electables quit the party.

A large number of BAP electables including former chief minister of Balochistan Jam Kamal and provincial ministers have joined the PML-N. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif along with other party members visited Quetta in the middle of November. Before this visit, the PML-N was almost non-existent in the province.

The big influx of electables in the PML-N has made it a major player in the electoral politics of Balochistan. These politicians are joining the PML-N not on the basis of any principles, ideology or programme but because they believe that the PML-N is likely to win elections and form government. The party is also making seat adjustments with the National Party, PkMAP, BAP and JUI-F.

PPP leaders including former president Asif Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari also visited the province. The party organized a public rally in the province to commemorate its 56th founding day. Nearly half a dozen electables including former chief minister Mir Quddus Bizenjo have joined the PPP.

The PPP and PML-N are relying on electables to win seats from Balochistan. Both parties lack popular support in the province dominated by tribal chiefs and nationalist parties. The PPP was expecting to absorb BAP, but the surprise entry of the PML-N changed the game. The gains made by the PML-N are a net loss for the PPP which was hoping to win over a majority of BAP electables. An interesting electoral battle is likely to take place between the PPP and PML-N in Balochistan.

Nawaz Sharif has promised to initiate development work in Balochistan after coming to power, saying his party believes in doing practical work instead of merely paying lip service. But the PML-N needs to think beyond development projects and CPEC for economic development in Balochistan. If elected to power, the PML-N must focus on Balochistan to resolve its long standing issues and problems.

During 2008-2013, the PPP government took some concrete steps to address the issues faced by the people of Balochistan. It launched the Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan Package and increased the share of the province in the NFC award.

Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has now promised to address the issues faced by the people of the province. The PPP has a better record than other parties when it comes to addressing the economic issues of Balochistan.

At present, it seems that PPP and PML-N leaders are making lofty promises to develop the poor and underdeveloped Balochistan. Both parties need to address the basic issues faced by the province including terrorism, security, militancy, missing persons, poverty, unemployment, loadshedding and corruption. The sense of deprivation and exploitation needs to end.

Balochistan needs social, economic and infrastructure development. It needs hospitals, schools, universities, clean drinking water, employment, public transport system and peace. Balochistan needs a healing touch.

The writer is a freelance journalist