**Oh, CPEC**

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July 30, 2018

“In order for things to remain the same, everything must change” – Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

Here’s the problem: the winning party, the Election Commission and other institutions involved in last week’s national polls say there is nothing wrong in the way the results were announced, and that the outcome of the electoral exercise is the will of the people. They say it’s fair play.

Those affected by the unprecedented delay in poll results announcements and almost surreal developments in vote counting and tabulation, among other things, cry brazen foul play. They allege that the umpire’s thumb and finger both were at work in ensuring the PTI’s victory (and their loss). So while Imran Khan wants to make government at the centre and in Punjab, the broad coalition of parties (PML-N, MMA, ANP, PPP, PSP, MQM, and the rest) wants to expand their protest and question the very foundation on which the PTI’s victory stands.

Whom do you believe? What do you believe? This is a hard one. It can tear your brain apart. One safe way to get a perspective on things is to tell yourself that the many odd things that have happened before and during these critical polls, and which together have produced this outcome, have been because of CPEC. Yes, CPEC – Crazy Process of Election-related Coincidences. You can believe for the sake of staying sane that behind this CPEC lies some inscrutable universal force which sequenced political, judicial and electoral events in such a way that they all ended up giving the PTI its magnificent mandate and every other party a humbling defeat.

Reliance on CPEC as a tool of reflection and analysis is particularly helpful if you don’t like to hear words like ‘rigging’, ‘engineering,’ ‘fixing’, ‘buying’, ‘selling’ – words which we heard endlessly for five years about 2013 elections, and are now so sick of them that we simply don’t want to mention them.

So your analysis can unfold something like the following. It was CPEC that caused the collapse of the Election Commission’s famed system for transmission of results. It somehow stopped working just when it was needed the most – at the end of the polling time. It just happened that a basic system like this (for data transmission) which works fine in every nook and cranny of the world, processing hits in millions for tiny companies without fail, could not take the load of a few thousand hits here in Pakistan on the 25th of July.

From this crazy coincidence flowed every other crazy coincidence: delay in the results announcement, banishing of polling agents of the losing parties from polling stations during the counting of the votes, disappearance of the counted vote aggregate (Form 45) that has to be signed by each contestant’s polling agent, and the inability of most presiding officers to reach the offices of the Returning Officers – located four kilometres away – in some cases, even in 48 hours.

It was CPEC that created results in which the maximum rejected vote, which in at least 35 cases could have altered the outcome, belonged to the losing candidates. It was CPEC that ensured that somehow voters had to wait the longest in constituencies where a healthier vote cast would have potentially led to the victory of the N-League.

It was CPEC that produced this amazing statistic of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan causing the loss of 14 National Assembly seats to only one party: the PML-N. It was CPEC’s doing that every party that could have potentially joined forces with the N-League to form government at the centre is wiped out – the MMA, the ANP and the MQM-P for instance. It was CPEC’s fault that the chief election commissioner, the secretary of the ECP and all the resources at their command had no clue about securing ballot boxes’ record and that the security forces had to remain in custody of or stand at guard on the boxes during recounting even when their special duties had ended.

The impact of this Crazy Process of Election-related Coincidences was visible before the elections as well. From NAB getting hold of the likes of Eng Qamrul Islam contesting from Pindi on the N ticket to the seven-year old case being adjusted before the polls and resulting in the arrest and incarceration of another N-Leaguer from the same city, Hanif Abbasi. It was just a coincidence that somehow all media outlets found it convenient to start talking about the PTI’s victory two hours after the election time closed even though a mere three percent of results had been announced and full results could only be obtained after three days.

CPEC also necessitated that all media outlets somehow agreed to blackout most news of vast and very nasty public protests in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over alleged rigging. It was just a coincidence that these outlets made sure, almost in unison, to mute or take off press conferences of parties levelling serious allegations about the polling and itsresults.

It had to be CPEC, what else, that ensured that Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz never get to show their faces – even in court – to the public 15 days prior to the election and ten days after. Thanks to CPEC, every court case involving the Punjab government of the previous era became a media trial of politicians who were most vocal during their days as ministers.

CPEC created the Grand Democratic Alliance. It was CPEC that pricked the conscience of south of Punjab landlords and religious families to switch sides at the eleventh hour; the birth of the Balochistan Awami Party was also a random coincidence. So is the amazing fact of the volume of stories about Asif Ali Zardari and his sister’s cases of money laundering and other alleged crimes corresponding to their political stance on whether to join forces with the PTI’s opponents or stay quiet.

Of course, it is just a crazy coincidence that everything that Shaikh Rashid said (from the chief justice visiting the sight of the hospital that Rashid wanted to complete in his constituency to the Sharif family landing specifically in Adiala Jail) and Javed Hashmi repeatedly predicted has come true!

You have to believe in CPEC and nothing else to make sense of the events that have taken place on this country’s electoral chessboard recently and those that have preceded them. Nobody is to be blamed. No one did anything. Not even lifted a finger or made a call, or rolled out maps to create an elaborate plan to recast national politics. These things do not happen like this. Maybe elsewhere in the uncivilised world, but not here in Pakistan. No way. Nobody has anything to do with anything. All election-related things have happened because they just happened.

But let’s be clear on one thing: just because big things have simply happened on their own does not mean that they will not have consequences. CPEC’s consequences are far and wide. The election results have triggered a wave of anger and a deep feeling of being wronged in a large section of a charged electorate that cuts across at least four ethnic and linguistic boundaries – Baloch, Pakhtun, Mohajir and Punjabi. CPEC has activated religious groups with viciously sectarian or parochial worldviews and with matchless ability to agitate the street.

CPEC has broken down political debate into two unbridgeable halves and has planted seeds of terrifying distrust and enveloping hatred among the young and the old voter alike. It has laid a siege on the plan to build a stable political order by putting a big question mark on the legitimacy of the verdict of these critical elections.

These are long-term consequences that have already started to unfold. Only if this Crazy Process of Election-related Coincidences had not happened, Imran Khan’s victory would have been such a splendid thing for the country – neat, clean, undiluted and unquestioned. He could have truly led the country from the front.

But now he has to constantly look over his shoulder, cover his sides and, what’s worse, constantly depend on CPEC to keep him afloat. He is a man holding a tainted trophy even though without CPEC this trophy could well have been his, fair and square. But now we would never know that. All we know is that the Crazy Process of Election-related Coincidences has created a royal mess – of the sort that will not get sorted out easily. Wait and watch.

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