**Democracy at work**

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*Both Yasmin Rashid and Saad Rafique seemed to be caught up in the grind - it was a sweaty, exhausting and aggressive campaign with many imminent dangers*

Like most Pakistanis, for me the last few weeks have been flooded with images of rose petals, party flags, political slogans and Urdu pamphlets.

Before the elections, I visited a string of constituencies in Lahore during the campaign. One of them was NA 125 which includes highly populated areas like Riwaz Garden, Islampura, Suntanagar, Sanda Road, Mohni Road, Mozang, Waris Road, Kacha Jail Road, GOR 1, DhobhiMandi, Ganga Ram, Mozang Ada and Gulshan Ravi.

This is a Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) stronghold and Nawaz Sharif was elected from here in 2013.

I went into a small colony in Gulshan Ravi, occupied mostly by working-class people. The colony had no school for children or a nearby hospital. The children were in the streets — which needed refurbishing — and people were mostly sitting on the stairs or in the verandas of their houses.

Dr Yasmin Rashid was contesting here from a PTI seat. Rashid, a gynecologist and former government servant had given Maryam Nawaz a tough match in NA 120. She arrived in a white Prado covered with photos of Imran Khan followed by a mini Suzuki that had speakers blaring “Banega Naya Pakistan”. Another white Prado followed them.

Rashid was greeted with rose petals and went to a few women peeping through opened doors in a tight alley. She handed them pamphlets that explained her future plans.

PTI had a one-room office in one of the streets where women waited for Rashid. One wanted free dialysis and medicines for her young son who was a kidney patient. Another person wanted a school for the children of the colony.

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She then assured a voter that she will be available after the election, telling him that she is not just some “madam” but a doctor who works in a hospital nearby.

She moved between a few more houses before leaving. This entire exercise took an hour or so. Her convoy then drove off. I had Dr. Rashid’s schedule for the entire day and like every other candidate, hers was also full of corner meetings.

Later it began to rain and the congested streets of ChararPind in Defence was left full of puddles. This is NA 131 – a new but nevertheless very important constituency of Lahore which includes many affluent neighborhoods like Cavalry Ground, Defense, Airport area and Bedian Road. It also includes some very not so affluent areas around RA Bazaar, Chungi Amar Sadhu, and Bhatta Chowk.

It was almost dark now, and I followed a convoy of large white cars again. These cars were covered with green flags bearing images of tigers. The convoy stopped in the middle of a Bazaar and out came two men from the sun roof. An all-male crowd gathered, chanting “Shair! Shair!” (Lion)

One of the men standing in the sun roof was a thin balding man with an oval face. He grabbed the microphone and began his political rhetoric in his well-known Punjabi accent. Saad Rafique was contesting against Imran Khan. He was well-rehearsed and started straight away with his achievements as Railway Minister, followed by systematic attacks on Imran Khan.

“Has this man come to you? Do you know him?” he demanded.

He returned to the car and the convoy rushed forward, with even more people following it in their own cars this time.

I tried to chase them but failed due to the additional vehicles. Instead, I walked around the bazaar asking people who they will vote for. Most people were reluctant to respond. Probably because the PML-N’s political workers were still lingering around. But some people still said they wanted “change”.

I approached two ladies who were buying vegetables. When I asked them who they would vote for, one of them said her vote is in her heart and she would not reveal it. Another joked she is a Christian, and thus has no vote. They both walked away laughing.

Both Yasmin Rashid and SaadRafique seemed to be caught up in the grind- it was a sweaty, exhausting and aggressive campaign with many imminent dangers.

Rafique lost by a few hundred votes and is currently seeking a recount. I was particularly disappointed in Yasmin Rashid’s loss because it is rare for a woman to compete on general seats and campaign in the open. It is even rarer for a professional woman without land or lineage to come this far in electoral politics. She talked to me about women, their education and health concerns. I believed that her experience as a doctor in a government hospital would come in handy in the parliament. She will probably make it to the National Assembly on a reserved seat now.

Both Rashid and Rafique are now high profile politicians and command powerful positions in their respective parties. Watching them reach out to their electorate at the grass-root level and respond to their concerns was heartening. Every voter was equal and powerful in this equation. This was democracy at work in Pakistan.

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