**A flawed system**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-02-10

IT is not for the first time that the Senate elections have generated such intense debate over their transparency. But the issue had never hit such a low before. The spectacle of rowdiness witnessed in the National Assembly during the government`s abortive move to introduce open balloting for the coming Senate elections last week yet again demonstrated the dysfunctionality of our legislature.

The presidential ordinance striking down secret balloting is yet another demonstration of the arbitrariness that has become the hallmark of the PTI government that refuses to adopt a bipartisan approach to important constitutional issues. It is a desperate attempt to prevent possible defections from its ranks in the polls.

A major question is why the government waited for so long to move the amendment. The role of the opposition parties has also not been appropriate. It is now lef t to the Supreme Court to act as arbiter in yet another constitutional matter that should have been resolved by parliament.

Pakistan`s Senate elections manifest all that is flawed in the country`s democratic process. Horsetrading and the selling and buying of votes have become the norm, raising questions about the legitimacy and sanctity of the upper house. Yet, there has not been any serious effort on the part of our political leadership across the spectrum to make the process more transparent and credible.

Interestingly, all political parties have been critical of this corrupted system of voting yet are not willing to come together to change it. In 2016, a committee of the whole in the Senate had recommended several reform measures including open balloting for Senate elections but no step was taken by parliament to change the rules. The 2018 Senate elections were perhaps the most tainted in recent years.

What allegedly happened in that Senate elections was yet another example of how money can change the outcome. As I had mentioned in a column a few years ago, it was interesting to see that `the PPP won two seats and came very close to winning a third one in KP with only seven members inthe provincial legislature. While losing one in its stronghold, the PTI staged the biggest upset in Punjab by snatching one seat from the PML-N`.

A sweep by the so-called independent group in Balochistan too was foretold after the political reengineering that removed the PML-N government in the province. Millions of rupees allegedly changed hands to purchase former Fata seats.

This controversial set-up then elected a Senate chairman who allegedly had the backing of the establishment. Both the PPP and PTI joined hands to defeat PML-N-supported candidate Hasil Bizenjo.

Interestingly, both the PML-N and the PTI called for an investigation into the vote-purchase allegations in 2018. The PTI also expelled some 20 members of the KP Assembly who allegedly sold their votes to rival candidates. It set a good example but other parties failed to act against the defectors in their own ranks.

It`s not just about money buying votes; in some cases a different outcome to the one expected is also caused by revolt within the ranks against the selection of candidates by party leaders. Allpowerful party heads mostly handpick candidates.

Cronies are accommodated in the house.

Loyalties shif t overnight and one is not surprised to see deserters come back to the house under a different party banner. Money can buy party tickets or a seat even in the legislature.

In 2015, the PML-N and PTI initially appeared to agree on making the process of voting more transparent. Perhaps they feared an internal revolt that could cost them many seats. But the PML-N`s move to end secret balloting through an amendment to the Constitution could not get the required consensus from political parties. The PML-N leaders again called for abolishing secret balloting after the controversial election of the Senate chairman.

For the past three years, there has been no move to build a parliamentary consensus on changing the Senate election rule. The ruling PTI, which had been the most vocal critic of lack of transparencyin the elections, suddenly woke up to the need for a change in the rules.

A major reason for the last-minute move by the PTI government was reports of brewing revolt within party ranks that could cause a setback in the elections. With the opposition up in arms there was no possibility of reaching consensus on changing the rule that required a two-third majority in both houses of parliament.

One cannot understand the logic behind the government moving a constitutional amendment bill after filing a reference on the issue in the Supreme Court. With a few weeks left for the Senate polls the situation has become more complex.

It is unfortunate that allegations of horse-trading and vote-purchasing have marred parliament`s image. Instead of trading blame, it is time political leaders strengthened democracy within and outside their ranks. How can those who buy their way into the legislature uphold the Constitution and democratic norms? Besides the issue of horse-trading, there is another democratic challenge. As I have mentioned before, it is debatable whether the Senate is truly representative of Pakistanis. Clearly, indirect elections facilitate people with resources to gain entry into the august house.

There are instances where several members of one family have been in the Senate as well as the National Assembly. In one case, a wealthy businessman-cum-politician occupied a Senate seat together with his two sons. It didn`t matter which party was in power; their success appeared guaranteed. His wife too had been elected to the National Assembly on a reserved seat for women.

There is certainly a need to revisit the entire Senate election process to make it more credible and representative. But more importantly, it is for the political parties to end controversial practices within their own ranks.  The writer is an author and journalist.

zhussain100@yahoo.com Twitter: @hidhussain