**[A lousy election](https://www.dawn.com/news/1814359/a-lousy-election)**

[F.S. Aijazuddin](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1314/f-s-aijazuddin) Published February 15, 2024 Updated a day ago

PAKISTAN is the only faux-democracy that holds general elections yet learns nothing from each experience.

Many remember the general elections of December 1970 — the first (and some say only) free and fair elections in our history. The electoral mood then bordered on the euphoric. President Ayub Khan’s ham-fisted experiments with Basic Democracy had been relegated to oblivion. His renegade ex-foreign minister, Z.A. Bhutto, had launched his PPP. He crisscrossed the country, mustering support for his home brand of social democracy.

At the time, I happened to be in Gambat, in the interior of Sindh, managing our family textile mill. Political loyalty in that area was sharply divided between the feudal Pir Pagaro and the progressive Mr Bhutto.

Both sought to call on me to raise election contributions. My family was divided: the eldest brother followed Pagaro, another Bhutto. I was told to receive Pir sahib. During our discussions, Pir sahib predicted victory for his group.

‘They are all the same in the fact that they will never be the same.’

After the results came in, I called on Pir sahib at Pir jo Goth to congratulate him on the victory of his candidate (his brother Sain Nadir Shah) over his PPP rival. Seeing me, Pir sahib crowed: “We have won by a margin of 35,000 votes.” I replied: “Pir sain, by my calculation, you’ve actually lost by 95,000 votes. If in your own stronghold of Sanghar, so many dared vote for the PPP and not you, you have actually lost by that number.”

Fifty-four years later, the scenario of 1970 has been repeated. Then, the Bengali leader Mujibur Rehman was in jail in West Pakistan. Yet, in distant East Pakistan, his Awami League swept 160 of the 162 general seats.

Today, the PTI chief Mr Imran Khan is in Adiala jail. No stone has been left un-hurled at him and his wife, even the charge of adultery. Yet, his PTI nominees — bat-less, denied an uneven playing field, hamstrung and harassed — rode the crest of his popularity and secured 100-plus NA seats for him, more than any other single party.

In cricket, that number carries a special aura of success. For the other main political parties and their invisible sponsors, that number reeks of their failure.

The results have yielded inexplicable surprises. Jahangir Tareen’s coffers funded Imran Khan’s PTI’s fledgling years. He left it, founded a new party (IPP), and lost in two constituencies. PML-N’s Saad Rafique endured victimisation and jail only to be defeated by PTI’s Latif Khosa (until only three months ago a PPP diehard). The Jamaat-i-Islami chief Sirajul Haq lost. Former prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani won by only 104 votes. PTI’s Dr Yasmin Rashid from her Adiala jail cell gave the PML supremo and thrice PM Nawaz Sharif a run for his money. She secured 115,643 votes in his PML-N stronghold.

Even before the ballot papers had been distributed, Nawaz Sharif had warned his sponsors that he would not accept the premiership if he was not given a clear majority. His ambition has been scuttled. His PML-N with 73-plus seats must now cohabit with the PPP’s 54-plus in a coalition euphemistically labelled a ‘national unity government’. As one wit put it: “They are all the same in the fact that they will never be the same.”

Even before the results have been sanctified by the Election Commission, President Dr Alvi regretted that ballot papers were being hand-counted when the ECP/ Nadra has had the last five years to perfect the electronic voting machine system.

Even as the political parties jostled for supremacy, the COAS (speaking for the establishment) cautioned them: “Elections are not a zero-sum competition of winning and losing but an exercise to determine the mandate of the people. Poli­tical leadership and their workers should rise above self-interests and synergise efforts in governing and serving the people.”

Such a belated homily notwithstanding, many Western pundits believe that the election results are an indictment of hybrid democracy. They foresee an uneasy alliance between the same parties whose last PDM coalition removed Imran Khan’s PTI government two years ago.

The new coalition may all too soon fulfil the prophecy made by a 17th-century Royalist to his Roundhead captors: “Now that you have done with us, go fight among yourselves.”

Following the 1970 electoral impasse, Dr Henry Kissinger met Gen Yahya Khan on July 8, 1971. He recalled: “Am I a dictator?” Yahya Khan asked every American and Pakistani present. Naturally, everyone protested that he was not. When Kissinger’s turn came, he told Yahya bluntly: “I don’t know, Mr President, except that for a dictator you run a lousy election.”

How many more elections will be needed to delouse our democracy?

*The writer is an author.*

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