**A pre-election watch**

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Since elections are likely to take place in January 2024 – at least per the announcement by the Election Commission of Pakistan – the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has taken the right step of starting to monitor the pre-election situation in Pakistan. It has formed a pre-election watch group that is keeping an eye on the emerging scenario in the country.

The main thrust of this group will be on how the caretaker government, the establishment, the ECP, the judiciary, and the political parties themselves are maintaining or violating the rights of individuals, groups, and political parties in the months leading up to the next general elections. Respecting constitutional, fundamental, and political rights before the elections is as important – if not more – as the process on Election Day. All stakeholders must abide by the written and unwritten codes of conduct that all democracies must follow.

Most elections in the history of Pakistan have remained controversial and questions have emerged about the levels of fairness and transparency not only on Election Day but during the pre- and post-election hours and days. A fair and free political environment is a prerequisite for a credible electoral exercise and that is a major reason why the HRCP has taken the initiative to issue its first report of the pre-election situation in the country. The observers are following a rights-based approach that derives its strength from international human-rights standards and operationally tries to promote and protect human rights.

The right to freedom of assembly, association, and of expression play a vital role in the pre-election environment and any violation of these rights must catch the attention of the caretaker government and the ECP. The judiciary too cannot keep aloof if a particular individual or group finds itself on the receiving end of injustice. The polarization that certain quarters have promoted in the country during the past few years has engendered a bitter environment that the first bulletin of the HRCP has underscored. Civil society in the country must raise its voice if there are attempts to once again create hurdles in the way of Pakistan’s democracy.

A watchful eye by the observers on all election-related matters can play a vital role in the creation and maintenance of a conducive atmosphere for democracy to take root – if not thrive. The first bulletin of the HRCP covers some major developments since the beginning of this year that may affect the credibility of the next elections. The current uncertainty that surrounds the elections is not a new phenomenon; it is the result of the past 20 months that have made Pakistan even more unstable – both economically and politically.

Much like the PDM was on the receiving end during the Imran Khan government, the PTI is now facing nearly the same treatment, if not worse. No individual or political party can afford to incite the displeasure of the country’s powerful institutions and that appears to be a major issue in the pre-election scenario. No group can face a falling out with the establishment and apprehensions are mounting about a so-called ‘level playing field’.

The role of the Supreme Court under the former chief justice of Pakistan remained questionable as some ‘like-minded’ judges kept delivering verdicts that left many observers perplexed. Imran Khan’s role before and during the May 9 incidents and violence threw the country into chaos and the agitation worsened the political environment in the country. Punjab became a major battlefield as the caretaker provincial government tried in vain to control the situation while the PTI kept its pressure mounting. The provincial caretaker governments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab continued much beyond their constitutional mandate and took steps that caretaker governments should not be taking.

Another worrying trend observed this year was the continuation of the campaign to malign politicians belonging to all sides. Audio and video leaks kept surfacing and nobody could question the origin and source of these leaks; this was gross violation of the fundamental right to privacy. Interestingly, the audio and video leaks mostly targeted civilian politicians and their family members. This has put political individuals and families under a constant threat of being bugged and recorded wherever they happen to be. For new politicians, especially women, this is likely to serve as a disincentive to continue in politics.

An economic meltdown kept hovering over the nation as the rupee came tumbling down for over a year touching a historic low of 300 to a dollar. The economic hardships people faced directly impacted their lives and their right to live with dignity as their financial resources contracted. Dwindling foreign exchange reserves and an overall poor economic condition of the government prompted questions about the expenses on the forthcoming elections and the government’s ability to provide the required funds in time to the ECP for a smooth and uninterrupted holding of elections.

The courts and the ECP remained at odds as the orders of the court to hold provincial elections in KP and Punjab within the constitutional timeframe did not find a sympathetic ear from the ECP and the government. Political engineering – a bane in the country for a long time – once again surfaced as selective accountability became the name of the game and there were allegations of victimization of those who did not toe the line. The cases against many PTI leaders such as Pervaiz Elahi resulted in their repeated arrests and remands. The HRCP notes that investigations in most of such cases were never completed even after the lapse of several months.

Movements such as the PTM also faced the wrath of the state as their leaders found themselves behind bars. The case of Ali Wazir is a prominent one that drew attention nationally.

As the last quarter of 2023 began, rumours circulated that there may be a long delay in the general elections. While the PPP demanded elections on time, the PML-N and JUI-F endorsed fresh delimitations before elections. Many PTI leaders including Imran have been accused of masterminding the May 9 violence as there appears to be some evidence of their involvement inciting their supporters to violence and vandalism. The use of social-media platforms for targeting opponents is serving as an excuse for internet shutdowns that have occurred intermittently. Restricted access to social media is not in the interest of democracy as it violates fundamental rights.

The use of amended laws such as the Official Secrets Act and others will not be in the interest of democracy and is likely to hamper free electoral process in the country. The use of MPO laws is another issue that needs attention as its misuse has been creating an environment of fear among political activists and leaders.

The staging of hurried press conferences in which various leaders announce their sudden change of mind is also a cause of concern as it prompts defections. These are just some of the observations made in the HRCP bulletin that all concerned must read on the HRCP website under thematic reports.

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