**AJK Elections, not a Win for PTI**

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Last week’s Azad Jammu & Kashmir Elections may have garnered an expected result with the Federal government winning. However, it also revealed how Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is losing its hold over the country. Agreed, the party managed to obtain the most votes, but this result was generated after several controversies shed a negative light on the ruling party.

For starters, social media on Election Day was cluttered with reports of vote-rigging. The main opposition parties, Pakistan Muslim League – N (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), filed official complaints of violence and vote-rigging by PTI. The PPP submitted 40 complaints to the Election Commission and uploaded videos of ballot-rigging and harassment on social media. Whereas Marriyum Aurangzeb from PML-N issued a statement in which she stated that the party candidates, voters and polling agents were harassed by the police.

The turmoil caused during the election did not end there. The situation worsened when PPP leader Chaudhry Yasin faced an assassination attempt; followed by a fight between PTI and PPP workers. Two individuals lost their lives due to the chaos, and several were injured. After these tragic events took place,

Later on, AJK Prime Minister Raja Farooq Haider also accused the PTI of stealing AJK polls through money laundering. He also said a federal minister openly distributed money before the elections. This was followed by former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi’s rejection of the election. He called it a “robbery of the rights of Kashmir” and said that the rigging had started much before the election took place.

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Events like these have led many to believe PTI’s win isn’t an accomplishment but generated after thorough planning. This, of course, sheds light on the political capability of the current Prime Minister of Pakistan and brings into question why the political party resorted to cheating when they have always claimed to have won the General Elections on merit.

The media also labelled the AJK election 2021 as one of the “dirtiest” elections of recent times that included the politicians slinging mud at each other. Hence, it wasn’t a surprise when the constant below-the-belt comments by leaders ended up causing angst amongst the workers of numerous political parties. The negative campaigning started even before the electoral process began. For instance, Chaudhry Ismail Gujjar from PML-N threatened to call “India for help” if rigging took place. The leader of the party Maryam Nawaz on the other hand made anti-Semitic comments regarding the premier’s sons and said they were being “raised in the lap of Jews.”

From here on, the mud-slinging worsened. PTI’s Ali Moeen Gandapur threatened to slap Maryam Nawaz to undo her “surgery done from tax money.” He also hit out at PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari saying that during his trip to the US, “he wandered for 10 days and no one met him.”

The situation further escalated when Gandapur’s convoy was attacked in Jhelum valley by the people of Kashmir after the federal minister agitated the public with his abusive speeches. As the law and order situation escalated in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the Election Commission banned Gandapur’s participation in election-related activities. A similar restriction was placed on Murad Saeed. However, the ministers refused to follow the law and continued campaigning in AJK – violating the poll’s code of conduct.

On July 19, the AJK Prime Minister threatened to stage a sit-in to counter the meddling of Prime Minister Imran Khan and his ministers in the elections. He accused the party of desecrating AJK’s Constitution and highlighted the fact that Gandapur was brought back into the province by the PM despite being banned. “Do they consider us [AJK people] slaves who can be bought with money?” questioned Raja, enraged at the lack of implementation of rules.

Even if the narrative of state entities rigging the election is not valid, the fact that the federal government could not obtain as many seats as the earlier ruling government exposes PTI’s position in the country. It may be quite telling that despite using state machinery, openly flouting the Election Commissions rulings, and blatantly offering money for votes, the PTI could still only manage 26 out of 45 seats. Previously, the ruling PML-N government in 2016 swept the AJK elections with 31 out of 41 seats. It is also surprising that PPP managed to win 11 seats this year even though the PTI government has remained critical of the opposing party throughout their tenure.

The question is, do the high number of votes attained by PPP show that the party may be gaining more popularity in the future as PM Imran Khan continues to take U-turns? Would the results have been different if the elections were entirely fair and free?