**Beyond the election**

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Thursday, Dec 21, 2023

The question of whether elections will be held strictly on time in early 2024 continues to be debated in the country, and the same question recently made its way through the courts.

For some people, elections are complex: they see it as an exercise which is in many ways crucial to national interest but also acknowledge that in many ways this exercise means nothing at all.

People have become so disenchanted with democracy that many say they have no intention to vote, and others argue that there is no candidate worth putting in their vote for. Some also say that the situation in the country is such that elections hold no meaning and carry no weight.

We all know the reasons for this pessimism. One government after the other has failed people and their interests. No government has met the promises it made and the dreams it held up for people to believe in. This then is the rather sad history of a country that somewhere along the way lost its direction and also lost a large part of what it was in 1947 (the year of its birth).

The reason why people say elections are meaningless is easy to understand given the manner in which one political party after the other has let them down and failed to carry out the promises it made during its election campaigns.

But at this point in time, we need to remember that democracy is the only way forward. And elections stand at the centre of democracy, and they need to be free, fair and transparent if they are to hold any weight for the people. We have not had a fair election for a long time, controversy marring much of what goes on. The last few transfers to power have been democratic and peaceful until the events which began with the no-confidence move against the Imran Khan-led government.

For this election, we do have some good contestants: people who have done really good for their country and seem honest in their desire to do more. In Lahore, Amar Ali Jan, a social and political activist as well as an academic, is standing for a provincial seat from Chungi, an area which houses many poor colonies, along with posh estates.

His Haqooq-e-Khalq Party has worked in the area, setting up water pipelines and talking to people about their issues. But it is obvious that this will not be enough to bring Jan to power. The same problems were experienced in the past by civil activists contesting the 2018 election. In that election, Jibran Nasir ran for two seats from Karachi and managed to secure only a few thousand votes on each seat. Overall he finished in fifth position behind other candidates with far less standing in terms of goodwill and work done.

But politics in the country is all about political power and clout rather than about what people do and how they achieve this. This is a pity. But there is no route for us to follow other than the democratic one. For too many years in its 75-year history, Pakistan has been ruled by autocrats. This has inflicted on it a great deal of harm. The change can come only if the democratic process continues year after year and decade after decade.

Yes, this will be a painful process. Failures will come. There will be an outcry from us, as in the past, against politicians. But it is necessary to go through this process in order to come up with leaders who carry real worth and are able to deliver something to the people. This will take years and a considerable level of patience.

But we must remember that even in countries like the US, which boasts that it is the bastion of democracy in the world, leaders it has thrown in the political ring do not impress. At the present moment, US President Joe Biden, is quite obviously stricken by a lack of understanding of the global political situation, and in the eyes of the press in his own country is approaching age-related issues of one kind or the other. Donald Trump was hardly any better, certainly not any wiser. We see much of the same in the UK and a great many other countries, including those in the immediate neighbourhood.

This should make us think about why we are so quick to criticize our political leaders. They after all are not guilty for everything. They need time to produce a class of people who are truly able to deliver and add a new veneer of goodwill and stability to the politics of Pakistan. How long it will take for this to happen is unclear and depends largely on how those who hold clout and use it at will, act and what they do.

The waiting process is difficult, but it has to be endured and we must go through it one step at a time. No matter how long it takes, only democracy will eventually produce new leaders.

And democracy needs to be backed in a move to liberate civil society, such as the restoration of student and labour unions, which in the past have been the nurseries from which competent leaders emerged and went on to make their names in the country’s political landscape. At present, these nurseries stand crushed. This obviously does not help matters at all.

The other question is: how many people will vote if we hold polls in 2024? Estimations which suggest that the turnout will be low are disturbing. Low turnouts enable result tampering. A high turnout in a constituency, nearing 60 per cent or more, makes it more difficult to alter the results especially if polling agents go about their work diligently and with care.

Turnout of this level occurs in only a few constituencies across the country. This is one reason why we have had so many problems with our democratic system in the past. But it is essential that we build the trust of people in the system and all that it brings with it. Until the trust is there, there is no reason for people to consider standing in lines for hours to cast their ballot. This time, a large number of young people will be voting and it is their ballots which may make the difference to the eventual result.

But whatever the result is, it is important that we respect the mandate of the people. Unfortunately, it is easy to guess at this time what that result will be. There are many reasons for this. But regardless, it is important to carry on the process and pass the torch of democracy peacefully from one leadership to the next. Only when this happens can we have the kind of parliament that makes a difference and brings stability in the system.

It is also important that other clauses in the constitution such as those which set up local governments, be respected and followed by the parties and by the provincial governments which so often act to crush local governments in order to gather more power for themselves. This will only crush democracy.

Local governments are vital so that ordinary people can approach their councillors and ask for help in solving their problems. They cannot do so if the representative nearest to them is an MPA or MNA. These people are unapproachable most of the time. Those who win at the level of union or tehsil councils are far easier to reach and should be dealing with problems such as supplying water to communities or mending roads rather than leaving this task to politicians who see them essentially as a photo opportunity.

It is true that there are many flaws within Pakistan’s democracy. These have been discussed extensively by analysts and commentators of all kinds. The flaws and cracks in the system will not be fixed immediately. And for the system to recover, we need patience and time.

Only if we allow this time to pass and for the peaceful transfer of democracy to become an established reality can Pakistan move forward.

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