**Beyond the open ballot**

BY A R I FA N O O R 2021-03-09

THE Senate election is over but the dust is yet to settle. The Islamabad seat didn`t go the predicted way (mea culpa: I was among the confident few wrongly so to predict its outcome). Yousuf Raza Gilani won the seat in what is being described as an upset or a surprise. The numbers game on the surface turned out to be less reliable than the rumblings and activity beneath.

Since then, the government has been on the warpath. The video recording of a conversation between Gilani`s son and some PTI MNAs has added to the government`s fire. The opposition has been bolstered by the Islamabad win and doesn`t seem impressed by the vote of confidence the prime minister took after the embarrassing defeat.

But the ongoing and unending tussle between the government and opposition aside, the dust kicked up this year over the Senate election has covered us all. It is one thing to hear and speculate about the sale and purchase of votes and seats and quite another to have a recording come to light revealing just how blunt such negotiations may be.

However, as the other side has rightly alleged, the government (any government) is guilty of similar acts when it promises development funds in exchange for loyalty.

While this criticism, on both sides, has merit, it is hard to wholeheartedly support the debate on how to stop such practices. The only solution the political parties have come up with is `the open` ballot.

(The PPP and PML-N had agreed to this in the Charter of Democracy while the PTI has jumped on the same wagon since it tasted power.) Get rid of the secret vote by making it traceable or replace the election with a list system as with the reserved women seats, parties should be allocated Senate seats on the basis of their strength in the respective assemblies which would be filled from a list of names prepared and provided by the parties.

There is little doubt that this would be more `transparent` at some level but it would also increase the party leadership`s control over who makes it to the Senate. Nominations rather than an election wouldbe the result. It may curb `corruption` but also encourage authoritarianism. This is not an easy choice in a country where we already rue the lacl< of democracy in parties.

So why not look at the `problem` differently? The recording of Ali Haider Gilani and the `gillay shikway` (complaints), ostensibly, by the treasury benches seem to highlight another aspect of our politics the concerns of constituency politics.

The `inducement` being offered in the purported tape appeared to be the development funds controlled by provincial governments one clip of the recording which was played on a channel later seemed to indicate that Rs10 crores were being offered to the MNAs in the guise of development funds.

On the other hand, the prime minister is also said to have reportedly offered development funds to parliamentarians (which was later denied when the issue was taken up by the Supreme Court). But this is not where the matter ends unpack the reports of the considerable disgruntlement with Imran Khan on the part of the parliamentarians and it seems similar issues are at stake.

Many backbenchers don`t necessarily want to meet the prime minister for chit-chat or policy mat ters or to simply criticise his failure to control inflation. Meetings are sought for less lofty considerations such as constituency affairs. Development funds and schemes are issues that always need the prime minister`s immediate attention. And if there are reports of complaints against Hafeez Sheikh, greater investigation will reveal he too is unwilling to heed such concerns. He has a reputation of being stingy with money, as he follows IMF dictates.

Conversely, if there is praise for Gilani as prime minister, it is because he was willing to not just spare time for such matters but also the funds.

This is not to say that the politicians are wrong for taking an interest in these issues or Khan is right for ignoring them. Rather, we need to ask why this happens in the first place. Why should a parliamentarian`s primary concern be basic amenitiessuch as constructing drains in his constituency? And even if we are to accept this as reality, why should he or she not get these funds automatically instead of having to be dependent on the largesse of the prime minister or chief minister? If our political leadership would provide for constitutionally protected local governments, along with predetermined financial awards, perhaps our parliamentarians wouldn`t be seeking government attention and begging or negotiating for funds. And neither would chief ministers and prime ministers be able to dole out state funds in exchange for votes or misuse them in other ways such as favouring some parliamentarians over others. (It was said in the run-up to the Senate election that the Punjab chief minister was in Islamabad and held a meeting with MNAs from his province to `address` their concerns.) Indeed, for me, the entire fracas over the Senate elections seemed to highlight so much more than the vote and its secrecy. It simply seems to highlight how funds are offered or withheld to control behaviour. Consider the PML-N dissidents in Punjab; they argued more than once that they met the chief minister to discuss matters related to their constituency.

And this should be addressed by more democracy than more centralisation. Devolve power down to the local level so that parliamentarians are compelled to focus on policy over drains and roads.

Second, reduce the role of the chief executive in deciding how many funds go where and this should include the chief ministers as well as the prime minister.

This is not to say that this will end the use of money in the Senate election. It will not. But it is a step in the right direction a direction which takes us towards the devolution of power, less centralisation and more democracy. At least, it would be a direction other than a tight control of the party leadership over individuals.  The writer is a joumalist