**Delimitation Conundrum**

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With the country officially entering into the election season, heated newsrooms and social media warriors have added yet another heated buzzword to its arsenal: delimitation. While a press that stands tall in its resolute to hold the feet of the entire state machinery to the fire should be appreciated as mindful of its role as the watchdog, monitoring the electoral processes should not amount to making mountains out of molehills.

In the last few months, rife criticism has abounded over the performance of the Election Commission whose needle was said to have barely moved. First, came the ruckus over the much-talked-about will it/won’t it feet-dragging on the question of holding general polls. ECP maintained its ground on trying to balance two constitutional requirements: timely polls and delimitation to ensure true democracy. By citing the Election Act Amendments, it tried explaining how it held the mandate to prioritise whichever line of action it deemed more pressing for the democratic journey to resume.

Now that the uncertainty has been resolved and the political parties have a credible schedule to look towards, recent developments appear to tug at the ECP’s capacity to hold upcoming elections fairly. In Pakistan, conducting a general election involves a comprehensive series of steps: delimitation, preparation of electoral rolls, and notification of the election programme.

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There is undue criticism pertaining to the question of delimitations. To be precise, delimitation is the process of defining and redrawing the boundaries of electoral constituencies in a bid to ensure that each constituency has a roughly equal number of eligible voters. By ensuring the equilibrium, the state seeks to promote the democratic principle of “one person, one vote.”

That ECP generally forms delimitation committees to divide the electoral area into constituencies of equal proportions is a commonplace practice. Utmost emphasis is due on keeping the variance below the magical 10 per cent. Considering the ever-changing composition of constituencies, largely driven by the distribution of population, and existing boundaries of administrative units among other defining factors, every such exercise is bound to paint a different picture than before. At any moment in time, birth, death, migration and urbanisation flow tend to hold great sway over the actual population. However, any reservations pertaining to the new count should be directed towards the census, which is conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

Targetting an overseer of the exercise for which cards have been drawn smacks of a politicised narrative. If the ECP had not acted in light of the latest census, it would have opened vulnerability to a myriad of legal challenges. It is constitutionally bound to carry out delimitations after the publication of census results, which should be conducted once every 10 years. As per a petition filed in the Sindh High Court, “The Constitution and the law do not permit elections without new voter lists [once results of a new census are published].”

It should also be noted that an official statement by the poll organising authority offered the voters of any given constituency to raise any objection to the delimitation provided they belong to the said constituency. The general word on the street sides with the initial delimitation report as no overarching differences could be seen in the district distribution. According to the PILDAT President, “There are only 10 districts out of a total of 107 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh where the number of NA seats have changed; seats increased in five districts and decreased in another five. Similarly, provincial assembly seats changed in only 26 districts of the three provinces.” It goes without saying that a lot still needs to be done in order to ensure an equal size of constituencies. Unequal population numbers have to go if the state wishes to break popular enclaves and actually pave the path for people’s will to find its way to the avenues of power.

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