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**Demystifying the Daska fog**

The recent by election in NA-75 Daska was an eyeopener for everyone. The optics revealed a weak electoral system in Pakistan where political entities tried to deliberately affect the voter turnout, and where the polling staff were caught carrying bags containing votes.

In what can easily be described as a first, the polling staff of 20 polling stations went missing for a few hours as well. This was highlighted by the PML-N and the next day the Election Commission too responded with a statement stating that they tried to communicate with the top brass of the Punjab bureaucracy but did not receive any response. This clearly shows that the bureaucracy of Punjab was not impartial during the by-election. When pressure was built, the Punjab administration came up with the infamous ‘fog’ story which was later discarded by the ECP.

These circumstances raised many questions on the fairness of the Daska by-election, leading to the PM offering a repoll in the 20 suspicious polling stations where apparently results were tampered with. But the ECP, acting fairly, voided the Daska by-poll altogether and ordered for a re-poll in the entire constituency as there were widespread discrepancies throughout.

The ECP also took strict action against the bureaucracy for their negligence, and ordered the establishment division to suspend Sialkot’s deputy commissioner, district police officer and assistant commissioner. Furthermore, the Punjab chief secretary and IG have been summoned by the ECP on March 4 for “ignoring their duties”. This gives the impression that the ECP is heading on the path of change. However, there is still a long way to go and the ECP will need to sharpen its claws to make sure such irregularities do not happen in future elections.

The current ECP Chairman Sikandar Sultan Raja is a retired bureaucrat and he apparently understands the complexities of the bureaucracy and is dealing with the situation better than his predecessors who were mostly retired judges. However, the decision of the PM to move the Supreme Court against the ECP’s order for a re-poll has raised quite a few eyebrows, especially since the PM has always claimed to be champion of electoral reforms, carried a 126-day dharna in 2014 just for the sake of four constituencies and drummed the same old rhetoric about bringing a neutral umpire system in cricket. Ironically, the PTI which is anxious to implement an open ballot in the Senate is not ready to strengthen the ECP which is trying to develop the trust of the voters in the electoral system.

Now, the million-dollar question is: will the Buzdar administration be neutral this time or not? Interestingly, the Daska re-poll will be held after the Senate elections which will majorly change the political dynamics. If Hafeez Shaikh gets defeated then the PTI’s morale will further sink and the situation will give a boost to the PDM which will ultimately affect the upcoming political events especially the Daska repoll. Also, the contest of Hafeez Shaikh is not just with the PDM but with the doomed fiscal policies, the brunt of which is being faced by the common citizen.

Electoral tampering should not be ignored; in fact, strict measures should be taken to bar any possibility of rigging and influence on the electoral process as the entire process of election will remain disputed and this is not a positive sign for democracy. Parliament must work on the improvement of the electoral process.

The electoral process of India shows that they have brought gradual changes into their election system such as implementation of e-voting. For further verification, they added the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail which is an independent system attached with the Electronic Voting Machines that allows the voters to verify that their votes are cast as intended. The game-changer in their electoral process was their 10th chief election commissioner T N Seshan who transformed the election commission in India.

Pakistan needs an upright, no-nonsense, rule book chief election commissioner who can take innovative steps, a shadow of which can be seen in the current ECP chairman who has used his powers firmly by not taking any pressure and making valiant decisions. If Electronic Voting Machines are used in Pakistan, it will reduce the chance of rigging. Also will help in cost cutting as there will be no need for millions of ballot papers or the deployment of thousands of people across the country to deal with the ballot papers. As a test case, the electronic voting system needs to be introduced in the local bodies elections. In today's modern world of IT, the system of carrying the public mandate in bags that can be compromised does not serve the purpose.

There are a lot of improvements and changes that need to be brought in the electoral process of Pakistan to bring back the trust of voters if we are keen to protect this already fragile democracy. Every election in Pakistan becomes controversial in some way or the other which discourages the voters, especially the youth who play a vital role in the progress of any country. The ECP should be practically independent in financial and administrative matters with zero tolerance. If an institution is fully autonomous then it won't be under the influence of the executive or the judiciary.

The Daska episode must be taken as a test case for it has mirrored the political and administrative interference hindering the electoral process that has been weakening the democracy of Pakistan. It's high time all political stakeholders reached a consensus on how elections must be conducted on a modern and technically advanced pattern and how to make the ECP powerful and able to execute its decisions without any duress.

It seems that the current ECP is demystifying the fog that made the Daska by-election suspicious. Pakistan needs an autonomous, innovative, effective and authoritative ECP with a courageous and neutral chair so that future elections are not compromised by fogs and faulty RTS.

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