**Election ex machina**

BY R E E M K H U R S H I D 2021-04-19

THE government has recently accelerated its drive to introduce electronic voting into our electoral infrastructure. Argument s forusing electronic voting machines (EVMs) and internet voting (i-voting) suggest that these technologies will ensure fairness and transparency, and improve access to voting (namely, to overseas Pakistanis). The rationale that computers can record, count and relay votes with far greater accuracy, speed and impartiality than a system overseen by fallible and potentially compromised human actors appears straightforward enough.

To use the prime minister`s parlance, they are `neutral umpires` But are they? Neither EVMs nor 1-voting are new innovations, yet their use remains deeply controversial. Many developed democracies have either rejected them or reverted back to paper balloting. To know why, it is important to first understand what factors are involved in a free and fair election during the voting process.

For a poll to be considered `fair`, citizens must be able to trust that they can vote without coercion, and that their vote will be counted. This confidence is ensured in traditional paper-based voting systems through a series of checks, from secure polling stations, booths and ballot boxes, to the involvement of multiple election officials,politicalparties`representatives, and independent monitors.

We know that the system is not foolproof, but this is not due to an inherent design flaw.

In fact, rigging scales very poorly with paper ballots, with each attack being restricted by geographicallocation. Innuencing, altering or destroying a significantly large number of votes is resource-intensive, time-consuming and costly, and at the very least is likely to produce witnesses and physical evidence.

In contrast, the process behind electronic voting is entirely opaque to the average voter, more error-prone than many might guess, and is far, far more vulnerable to large-scale attacks. (For more on security and other considerations, as well as the experience of other countries, read Taha Ali`s recent EOS article as well as the Internet Voting Task Force`s [IVTF] audit report on overseas voting in 2018.) Proponents claim blockchain technology can solve cybersecurity issues, but researchers at MIT recently argued that this too would `greatly increase the risk of undetectable, nation-scale election failures` that can `gravely undermine ... democratic legitimacy` Then there is the question of an election being considered `free`. A cornerstone of voting rights is the guarantee of ballot secrecy; it is what enables citizens to vote without fear of coercion, intimidation orreprisal. In Pakistan, this principle is enshrined in the Constitution as well as in the Elections Act, 2017, and in international law in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Of the options the IVTF outlined to enable overseas voting, such as postal and embassy voting, i-voting is the worst for security and secrecy. And even if the software for EVMs is opensource and therefore open to scrutiny, can voters trust that the machines are running the same programme meant to preserve their anonymity? The context in which this push for electronic voting is taking place is also difficult to ignore. In its zeal to have the Senate election conducted through open balloting, the government dangerously misrepresented the Supreme Court`s opinion to the extent of attacking the ECP for not making ballots traceable whereas any rational reading of the text regarding ballot secrecy not being `absolute` would view it with the intent of maximising citizens` voting rights (ie, rightto vote superseding ballot secrecy), not conferring power to the state to identify votes.

In theory, electronic voting could work if all citizenshad areasonable degree of conHdence in our institutions (and the individuals running them) to uphold the principles of free and fair elections, as well as thetechnical and financial capacity of these institutions to design, implement and constantly test and upgrade the system. Our reality, however, is a history of wide-scale election manipulation and violence; significant pre-poll rigging and the RTS collapse (details of which remain unaccounted for) in 2018; February`s Daska by-election debacle; no data protection for citizens, an increasing tendency to view individuals not as citizens but data subjects, and growing mass surveillance.

This is not to say that electronic voting can never be a viable option, but that implementing it without thorough consideration and long-term piloting can have seriously adverse consequences. Besides, electoral reforms that seem to focus less on empowering citizens than they do on centralising control in the hands of an invisible, unknowable umpire not only fail to address but also obscure deeper, more systemic issues undermining democracy in Pakistan. The writer is a journalist.

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