**[Elections and fair play](https://www.dawn.com/news/1799341/elections-and-fair-play)**

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THE good news is that the elections will be held on Feb 8. The bad news is that they could end in yet another farce. The Supreme Court’s ruling last week, followed by the announcement of the election schedule, may have removed the uncertainty, but the fairness of the process remains in question. It seems that the field is being cleared for the chosen ones.

With every effort being made to keep the PTI out of the race, it is now left to the PML-N and PPP to battle it out. The charade seems to have gone too far, making a mockery of the entire electoral process. It may not be the first time we are witnessing this game but it has never been so vicious. It is all about producing a ‘positive’ outcome.

But the game is not over yet. The monster could not be culled. The spontaneous show of power by the PTI in KP provides a glimpse of growing resistance, defying persecution and restrictions. A gag order is not effective in this era of social media. A trailblazer in the use of social media platforms, the [PTI is now using artificial intelligence](https://www.dawn.com/news/1799034/pti-blazes-a-trail-with-novel-use-of-artificial-intelligence) to defeat the ban.

Recently, the party [organised its first virtual gathering](https://www.dawn.com/news/1798747/disruptions-mar-ptis-virtual-power-show) launching its election campaign. It also reportedly used AI to clone the voice of its incarcerated leader Imran Khan. Although internet disruptions marred the five-hour long event, it nevertheless managed to deliver the message to some extent.

Such brazen distortion of the electoral process has not been seen even under military governments.

Such novel use of AI-based communication technology also demonstrates the limitations of the curbs imposed by the state, affecting political dynamics in the run-up to the elections. It would make it much harder for the powers that be to completely manipulate the political process.

With the other two mainstream political parties, the PML-N and PPP, almost novices in the use of social media, the domain is completely dominated by the PTI, thus increasing the reach of the party’s message to the young population. The party’s call for voters to turn out in large numbers could complicate the game on polling day. But it seems the establishment has some more cards up its sleeve to stop the PTI from turning the tables on it on election day.

There are already some signs of the state turning more repressive in order to block any challenge from the party. With the approach of elections, the crackdown has now been extended to even the third- and fourth-ranking local party leadership. Those refusing to surrender face severe intimidation. The plight of women prisoners is worse.

The Supreme Court’s latest ruling restoring the law that allows civilians to be tried by military courts could be used as an instrument to further intimidate political prisoners. Yet, despite all these draconian measures, the situation doesn’t appear to be completely under control.

Although the PTI doesn’t seem to have any clear programme beyond rhetoric, state repression has, in fact, increased its support base. Forced exodus from the party and attempts to bar its candidates from taking part in the elections do not seem to have worked in eroding the PTI’s support.

This is the environment in which elections will take place. The growing perception that the elections are already being managed has severely damaged the credibility of the process. The big question is whether such elections can lead to political stability in the country, or would they deepen the polarisation.

In this age of social media, it is hard for the state to suppress dissenting voices. The doubtful credibility of the elections could cause the situation to become extremely volatile, making it hard for the future government to deal with the multiple challenges the country faces.

Any government coming to power through dubious elections will be on a very weak footing, making it increasingly dependent on the security establishment. It will be a great leap backward for the democratic process in the country.

Most worrisome is the fact that both the PML-N and PPP have become a willing partner in this game of thrones, supporting the establishment in all its repressive actions.

In fact, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is the major beneficiary of the establishment’s new game plan. Given how the entire system can be manipulated, his quick acquittal by the judiciary in all the cases against him has not come as a surprise.

Once declared a ‘proclaimed offender’, he is now declared kosher by the courts which had earlier convicted him. It is evident that his ouster from power and conviction were part of a plot by the same forces that now seem to be backing his party in the elections. With the [removal of his conviction](https://www.dawn.com/news/1797454/nawaz-gets-clean-slate-after-final-acquittal), Nawaz Sharif is now seen as eligible to stand in the elections, strengthening his bid for a fourth term in office. The party seems assured of returning to power.

In an ironic twist, it is now Imran Khan’s [turn to face charges](https://www.dawn.com/news/1789110) that range from corruption to sedition. He has already been indicted in the cipher case. Being convicted would disqualify him from holding public office. The dubious credibility of our judicial system and how it has manipulated his conviction would be seen as a yet another case of political victimisation.

Unfortunately, almost all elections in the past are seen as manipulated exercises, yet the ongoing pre-poll management has little precedent. Such brazen distortion of the process has not been seen even under military governments.

With the security establishment so deeply entrenched in every sphere of power, the elections are not likely to consolidate civilian supremacy, and will likely lead to another era of hybrid rule, with the civilian administration playing second fiddle.

A country facing an existential threat needs a strong representative government to deal with the challenges it confronts. The country needs political reconciliation and not polarisation. The irony is that our political leaders never learn from their own history. It is all about short-term interests rather than the goal of strengthening democracy.

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*Published in Dawn, December 20th, 2023*