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**Elections and the people**

Electoral reforms are needed, like PM Imran Khan says, but what kind of reforms do we need? The prime minister wants to focus on technical issues. And his solution is to install electronic voting machines or EVMs.

However, in order to answer the above question one must ask: what do we want to accomplish through these elections? The answer is: to implement a government of the people, for the people, by the people. Do our elections achieve this goal? Not really.

In Pakistan there is a government of the elite, for the elite, by the elite. Since its inception, Pakistan has come to be ruled by a small elite class that controls most of the country's resources and monopolizes practically all decision-making institutions.

There is no denying that we do need to improve the mechanics of elections, but more importantly, we have to restore the soul and heart of elections. Right now, politics is the playground of the rich and powerful and elections are a spectator sport. People may cheer on this or that party, or this or that candidate, by attending their rallies, campaigning for them, shouting slogans, waving flags and voting for the candidate who offers them some reward. Or they vote for whoever the head of their clan (baradari) directs them to. That is the extent to which they are involved in this process; they have no other stake. They know whoever gets elected, whichever party wins, their lives will not change, their problems will not be solved.

The fact is that elections in Pakistan have become an economic activity rather than a time to discuss issues, review past performance and chart the future course. Politicians spend a lot of money in the hope of making much more later on; all election-related businesses try to maximize their profit and the average voter tries to get the best out of it by negotiating the best price for their vote -- be it a plate of biryani, a motor bike, cash or some small favors in return for their vote. Many do not even bother to get out of home to vote. And the media, rather than educating the public about the issues, past record of the candidates and what is at stake, goes after ratings by putting on shows where candidates can argue using foul language in loud voices. The focus is on sensationalization rather than education.

For a meaningful change, people have to be put in the centerstage of not just politics but the whole election process – so that they are not there just to support and vote but also are able to contest elections. The procedure for new entrants into national politics should be institutionalized. Young bright people who wish to enter politics should be facilitated. The field of politics should be wide open and welcoming for all. So, how do we go about doing it?

The first step is to curtail the role of money in elections. This is the biggest offender. The limit on election spending should be not only lowered but also strictly implemented. We all know that millions are spent by rich candidates even though they are violating Election Commission rules but no one checks it. There are models of public and crowdfunding for election campaigns. There needs to be a public debate on this, and a model adopted that is appropriate for our ground realities.

Second, the local government system has to be strengthened. This is the entry point and training ground for average people for politics. They have to be empowered and given authority and resources to manage their constituencies. At the moment, local governments are crippled and are dependent on the provincial government and their MNAs and MPAs. This needs to stop. The talk of devolution of power stops at the role of federal and provision governments. When it comes to local government, no one wants it as the state has been hijacked by the elite who want to strengthen rather than weaken their grip on all institutions. The local government system needs to be institutionalized under constitutional protection.

Third, strengthen the trade unions. These are platforms for the working class to organize and unite on their issues. This is the class with the most problems. There are examples around the world where trade union leaders have been elected to the highest office in the land. Quaid e Azam Muhammad Jinnah was a strong supporter of trade unions. But over the past several decades they have been undermined and almost dismantled. They need to be revived again.

Fourth, revive student unions as independent bodies with single focus on student issues about education and employment. These were the nurseries for future leaders. Ban the political party wings in educational institutions through which students are used for the benefit of the politicians but never given an opportunity to come into leadership positions.

And, last but not the least, the state should take responsibility for addressing people’s basic needs and provide social security to all citizens to break the hold of clan or ‘biradari’ leaders, who are the beneficiaries of the system and manipulate people for their own use. People are forced to follow them because that is the only social protection system they have as the state has completely failed in this aspect. This will also stop people from voting for petty personal needs.

But herein lies the catch. Who will do this? Why would the current ruling class, the defender and beneficiary of this system, consider doing this? They will not willingly or easily relinquish their control. The fact is that the only way to enforce the writ of the people is to empower, organize, unite them and prepare them for a difficult uphill political struggle. There is no shortcut.

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