**Elections around the corner**

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The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has announced it will hold elections on February 8, 2024. The ECP is likely to announce the election schedule after the completion of the delimitation process in the first week of December.

People from the working class and other sections of society have many questions regarding the upcoming elections. They want to know if there will be a stable and strong government after the elections or whether we are heading for another hung parliament and a weak government.

It is too early to predict the outcome of the elections. At this stage, it can be safely said that the PML-N seems in an advantageous position compared to the PTI and the PPP. But at this stage, it is difficult to predict how many seats the PML-N is going to win. The situation will become clear in the next few weeks.

Will the elections end political instability and chaos in the country? Will the PTI be allowed to contest elections or be kept out of the electoral process? Will the new government succeed to bring down soaring inflation, high unemployment and rising poverty?

One will have to wait for election results to get some answers. But political parties through their programmes, manifestos and narratives can answer some of the questions and concerns. People are more concerned how the political leadership will fix the economy and introduce necessary reforms; they want to know how political parties are going to solve their problems and raise their standard of living.

Pakistan needs a strong and stable government to address the fundamental problems faced by the economy; it cannot afford to hold another controversial election. One hopes that the 2024 general elections will bring much-needed political stability in the country. A free, fair and transparent election is needed to end political instability and uncertainty.

Pakistan needs an election which clearly reflects the will of the Pakistani people. Concrete steps and measures should be taken to dispel the impression that election results in Pakistan reflect the will of the powers that be, not the will of the people. Election results must reflect the aspirations and preferences of the general public.

A controversial election like the one in 2018 will not help end political polarization, instability and confrontation. Pakistan not only needs an election but an election that nobody can point a finger at. We need free, fair and transparent elections – without any interference, and without pre-poll rigging, political engineering and manipulation.

This kind of election might help overcome political confrontation and polarization. But if the election results become controversial and the losing party refuses to accept defeat, more confrontation and instability will follow.

Political parties including the PPP and the PTI are already demanding a level playing field. The PTI is complaining that it is not being allowed to organize political activities. Without addressing the concerns and complaints of different political parties, we are heading towards another controversial general election – which is not going to bring political stability in the country.

At present, political parties are gearing up for election campaigns. Meetings are taking place between political leaders to form alliances and make seat adjustments. Political activities at the moment are concentrated around winning the maximum number of electables. ‘Drawing room’ political activities are taking place, and ordinary people have nothing to do with them.

There is no enthusiasm among people regarding the election. No political party has announced its manifesto so far. It seems that leaders are not interested in coming up with solutions to the problems faced by the people of Pakistan.

To generate interest in elections and instil hope in people, leaders need to address the main issues including poverty, inflation and unemployment; they need to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. When one talks to people on the streets, at tea stalls, in marriage halls or in the public transport, many people are openly saying that they are no longer interested in participating in the upcoming elections. Power politics has discouraged many working-class voters. Unprincipled and ideology-less politics has disappointed the big sections of the population.

Political leaders and the ruling elite are not willing to undertake the reforms required to stabilize the economy and improve governance. They are not fully realizing that people are not happy with the economic situation. We have come to a point where a majority of the population has lost the hope that elections will improve their lives and a new government will work for their betterment, bringing improvements in their miserable lives.

There is a general feeling among sections of the population that all mainstream parties are the same and hardly offer anything to the poor. The economic performance and overall governance of the PTI government (44 months) and the PDM coalition government (16 months) in the last five years has disappointed many people. No serious effort was made to reform the police, state structure, criminal justice system and economy. This approach needs to be changed.

The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) has compared the 2018 manifestos presented by the three mainstream parties – the PML-N, PPP and PTI. The results are shocking. Only 20 per cent of the issues faced by the economy and people were addressed in their manifestos. Twelve per cent of these issues find space in the PML-N manifesto, 7.0 per cent in the PPP manifesto and 1.5 per cent in the PTI’s.

The aim was to evaluate whether these manifestoes have any substance and concrete plan or whether they were packed with hollow promises and sweeping statements, without any homework for the future. This casual approach towards party programmes and manifestos needs to be changed.

The writer is a freelance journalist.