**Elections now or later?**

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While voices for snap polls are echoing with every passing moment, without pre-electoral reforms, the biggest democratic exercise in the country would be futile. Over the years, elections were marred with allegations of pre-poll, polling day and post-polling rigging claims and counterclaims by nearly all the contesting parties. The winning side would call the elections transparent while the losing side would term them a sham exercise. Besides, there have been regular grievances of not providing level playing fields to all the parties in the near past. For example, in 2013 PPP was forced to restrict its political campaigning owing to TTP’s continuous attacks on the party’s candidates, especially in KP. In 2018, PMLN cried over judicial activism and targeted accountability meant to prevent it from active campaigning. Today, PTI is emphasizing the same issue and is pleading for a level playing field.

This blame game should end now and to do that a grand dialogue between all the political parties and stakeholders is a must. Because, if not addressed, the issue will come back to haunt all, one after another. Given the nature of widespread political polarization, a dialogue seems a distant dream but going into the next elections without fixing this issue would be no more than another mock exercise and the losing side would shy away from respecting the winners’ mandate.

[AMAN-23 Exercise to pave way for more peaceful, secure region: PM](https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Feb-2023/aman-23-exercise-to-pave-way-for-more-peaceful-secure-region-pm)

There have been rounds of debate on electoral reforms among the political parties but true implementation remained dubious. In August 2017, the National Assembly passed the Election Reforms Bill which empowered the ECP greatly. The bill encouraged the electoral watchdog to use technology for the next polls whereas PTI, which came into power in 2018, vowed to use Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) in 2023 but other parties rejected EVM calling it a premature idea. In October 2022, Imran Khan ran for 7 NA seats and won 6 of them. In upcoming by-elections on 33 NA seats, he will be running again as PTI’s solo candidate. Going by the electoral laws, Khan or anyone can contest as many seats of the National or Provincial assembly as he wants but this, in turn, deprives people of electing a person of their liking from their respective constituency. Besides, one contestant can keep only 1 seat even if he wins all and the ECP will continue holding by-elections until all assembly seats are not legitimately occupied. The exercise, however, costs the ECP about RS. 4 million per NA seat. Pakistan cannot afford to spend this hefty amount just for a mock exercise.

[Everything's nothing but play for Imran Khan, says Sharjeel Memon](https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Feb-2023/everything-s-nothing-but-play-for-imran-khan-says-sharjeel-memon)

And just like electoral reforms, the census is equally important before the next polls take place. According to the constitution, a population census must be conducted every ten years. Unfortunately, successive governments since 1981 did not pay greater attention to this constitutional obligation. From 1981 to 2021, there should have been four censuses but instead, 2 were held that too with a gap of 17 and 19 years respectively. However, the current PDM government is all set to start the country’s first-ever digital census in March and the full results are expected to be announced in a four-month time period. The outcomes of censuses will be utilized for future policy planning, resource distribution, sampling strategies, and constituency delimitations. There were repeated instances of complaints by nearly all political parties about the constituency delimitations. With the digital census taking place, there is a likelihood that the delimitation question will be sorted out to an agreeable extent.

[By-polls: Nomination papers of 74 candidates accepted from KP](https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Feb-2023/by-polls-nomination-papers-of-74-candidates-accepted-from-kp)

The return of the terror wave in the country and economic turbulence are also genuine reasons to put off elections, at least for a brief period of time. Pakistan had successfully quelled militancy in the northern belt and terror was a gone thing before the Taliban captured Kabul again. Taliban’s return helped TTP secure lost ground and their resurgence. The hardcore militant wing along with other like-minded groups are carrying out almost daily basis attacks in parts of the country. A recent blast in the red area of Peshawar that claimed over 100 lives and the terrorists’ failed attempted infiltration in Punjab’s Mianwali district rang alarm bells. On the other hand, Pakistan is reeling from an economic mess, which of course hasn’t happened overnight but persistent failure on successive governments’ part led to the situation this far. Rupee’s unbridled devaluation, depleting foreign reserves and balance of payment crisis is pushing the country to a near default. The IMF is asking for tough measures while the country has almost run out of viable options. Putting in place a caretaker set-up for talks with the IMF would not help at all.

[NA session summoned on Wednesday as President refuses to approve ordinance](https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Feb-2023/na-session-summoned-on-wednesday-as-president-refuses-to-approve-ordinance)

Elections surely bring stability, both political and economic, but only if they happen in a transparent and admissible manner. This course, however, should only be adopted when pre-electoral challenges are taken care of. Political parties must think beyond their personal egos because only dialogue before elections is a realistic way out. A recently called APC by the Prime Minister is a good starter, all stakeholders have a fair chance to make use of it and to move ahead in the right direction.