**Electoral Reforms in Pakistan**

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Pakistan’s national security, stability and growth depend on democracy. Our previous experience has demonstrated how this type of governance is the only way to achieve long-term progress and development. If allowed to function unhindered for a long time, democracy will pay off in the form of good governance; across-the-board accountability; nation-building; meticulous policy formulation and its smooth implementation; elimination of the evils of nepotism and maladministration and mainstreaming of downtrodden communities.

Democracy provides a diverse and broad-based governing style, which effectively thwarts any attempt to undermine a country’s unity and geographical integrity. Despite its self-evident importance for Pakistan’s federation, democracy has struggled to establish a lasting footing in the country. Something, which has cost the country dearly – even causing its disintegration. Several issues have hampered the building of democratic institutions in Pakistan. And, the most significant is a lack of real and efficient election reforms. A brief evaluation of Pakistan’s electoral system indicates that we need to drastically improve the Election Commission’s legal, political and administrative autonomy; election procedures and the strength and makeup of parliament.

An independent state body, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) was created under Article 218 of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan’s Constitution. It is mandated by Article 219 to organise and conduct free and fair elections for the National Assembly, provincial assemblies, Senate and local governments. It is also responsible for the resolution of election-related disputes through the establishment of election tribunals or other means. Section 4(2) of the Election Act of 2017 makes it a strong organisation that has the authority of a High Court. The ECP’s orders must be followed by all district and provincial authorities. Despite its vast constitutional and legal powers, it has yet to plan and administer an election free of charges of rigging, manipulation and significant anomalies. Nonetheless, the recent use of long-unused powers to order re-election in NA-75 (Daska) was a very positive step that demonstrated its determination to serve as a bulwark against any illegal subversion of democratic mandate. Further legal, administrative and financial empowerment of the ECP can go a long way towards ensuring transparent elections in this regard.

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Pakistan is a huge country in terms of population, and it holds the world’s largest single-day election, according to Secretary ECP Dr Akhtar Nazir. In the 2018 General Election, 106 million people cast ballots at 85,090 polling locations. Thus, it’s becoming more difficult for the ECP to organise the printing, transportation and storage of ballot papers. In addition to logistical issues, the security of ballot papers and other materials has been a source of concern for ECP officials. The election process is made more difficult and time-consuming by the manual nature of counting, tabulation, compilation and transmission of results. This leads to unfounded accusations of rigging. Many people have long advocated for the implementation of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) as a viable solution. That, however, is a risky operation, as evidence from throughout the world suggests that EVMs are much more prone to manipulation. EVMs are not used in technologically advanced democracies (the UK, France, Canada and Norway among others) that prefer ballot-based elections. In 2009, the German Constitutional Court ordered the EVMs to be phased out and the switch to paper balloting. The Netherlands also did the same.

Pakistan is the only democratic country where candidates can run for numerous seats in elections. A candidate may run for election in more than one constituency under Article 223(b). Out of all the seats she has earned, she can only keep one. As a result, once that seat is retained, others become vacant. This forces the ECP to hold by-elections and waste already scarce resources. This clause should be removed as well. Pakistan cannot afford to waste resources in this manner. Unfortunately, it has become a common practice for political party leaders to run for office in numerous seats.

The PTI government’s announcement of a comprehensive reform package–including 49 revisions to the Election Act of 2017–is a positive step. However, the government should take this step slowly and consider the views of all parties. The opposition must, likewise, let go of its obstinacy and participate in a proactive dialogue with the administration. The present impasse and obstinate refusal to engage each other does not bode well for Pakistan’s democracy. In this subject of national importance, only a consensus-based approach through parliament can assure seamless legislation. Unilateralism in the form of ordinances should be avoided since it exacerbates political division and reduces the room for political discussion. The PTI administration should be commended for putting electoral reform to the fore, but it should also be accommodating enough to listen to valid concerns expressed by political parties, ECP think tanks and civil society. Electoral changes are critical, but the speed would make the process contentious; defeating the goal of delivering a rigging-free and manipulation-proof election.

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