**How elections work**

BY A R I FA N 00 R 2021-02-23

BACK in 2013, a friend of mine was certain that the PML-N had rigged the Lahore seat won by Khwaja Saad Rafique. Fast forward five years and he was convinced the Imran Khan victory in Lahore was engineered. He wasn`t the only one.

The conviction came not from specific incidents but the larger context in which the election took place.

In a seminar held shortly af ter the 2013 election, two senior people who monitor elections, argued that a f air and free election as much as it can be in our neck of the woods is determined in the run-up to the election. If the playing field is level, as they stated it was in 2013, the wrongdoings and irregularities on election day itself were rather insignificant in comparison. As an example, they focused on the 2002 election as one in which changes in law and zameer ki awaz (conscience) being heard clearly was enough to determine the unfairness of the election. No such thing happened in 2013, it was said.

But five years later, one of these two experts was more perturbed by what happened on election day and how it raised serious questions about the credibility of the exercise. This should not matter more than what happened in the run-up, I asked, basing my question on what he had said after the previous election. There were signs enough to show that the playing field wasn`t level why expect anything dif ferent on election day? The parties went into the election, aware of what was happening. Why now express shock? He used the analogy of the frog in boiling water to explain why political parties were relatively silent in the run-up to the election but appeared to be more aggressive after D-day itself. The reaction of political parties (a few days after the election) was strong enough, he said, and if sustained could force a new poll.

However, as things turned out, this didn`t happen. Because both he and I forgot the unspoken rule on which our electoral and political system isbased.

Despite every election in Pakistan being controversial and rigged as per the view of one party or the other each and every one of them takes part in the system, while denouncing the election that brought it into being. And the rest of us decide which seat was rightly won or not, depending on our bias. My friend mentioned in the beginning tends to believe the underdog has been robbed of its rightful vote.

One can pick a date at random the PPP knew how IJI was established in 1988 and then brought to power in 1990, yet it formed the government af ter one and sat in the opposition in the other. The PML-N knew how it was reduced to a shadow of itself in 2002 but it didn`t abandon parliament.

Imran Khan, too, despite his aversion to traditional politics and contempt for the 2013 parliament, had no choice but to eventually return to the floor of the house. Smaller parties are no different, which is why Akhtar Mengal continues to take part in elections as does the PkMAP. And so far, there is little to suggest the PDM`s future will be any dif ferent.

Indeed, it is an recognised but unspoken rule of Pakistan`s political culture that all players will be part of the system while never accepting the legitimacy of the elections that led to it. A second rule we don`t like to talk about is that while much will and should be said about the machinations of external players who manipulate elections, the meddling of parties themselves or irregularities which cannot be blamed on anyone are being accepted as benign or simply a necessary evil. Hence, we shake our heads at 2018 but ask fewer questions about the two-thirds majority of the PPP in Sindh after two terms or the fantastical wins of MQM in Karachi, till it was routed by means other than electoral politics.

Saturday in Daska was not different. The stuffing of ballot boxes; the use of violence; the dodgy behaviour of polling staf f and police tactics -not a single allegation by either side was new. The ama-teur videos shot on mobile phones revealed incidents as familiar and old as an Amitabh Bachchan film plot. If news channels` archives are searched, such footage would easily be found for 2013 as well as 2018. Or if such a search is too time-consuming, the judgement of the commission that looked into rigging allegations during the PML-N government would provide some insights into how poorly our election exercise is carried out.

Perhapsallthatisnewisthe defensivenessof the PTI government; it is probably the only party in power which has been publicly denounced (and rightly so) for its inability to manage a single election. It surely is a f ace-palm moment. And the noise over what happened is in itself circumstantial evidence that the PTI was in charge and not the shadowy forces. For in the case of the latter, the noise would have been more muted.

Now lest I be accused of being a conscienceless centrist who equates the wrongdoings of democratic forces with those of illegitimate political players, let`s return to the issue at hand.

The problem perhaps is with a system that is open to manipulation. If despite a 2017 election reform, our electoral system is still vulnerable to manipulation and we are getting starry-eyed over the `courage` of the present election commissioner (individual bravery does not a strong system make), the problem runs far deeper than we care to acknowledge. Any reform of the electoral exercise cannot be limited to preventing the interference of some forces but allowing others to continue.

For example, it is not enough to ensure parliament (government and the opposition leader) appoints the person running the commission. But that the commission has powers enough to hold those involved in conducting an election to account what can it do if senior bureaucrats do not answer the phone on the night of the election? Surely a hard-hitting press release is not the answer.  The writer is a joumalist.