[**Imagining the next election**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644788/imagining-the-next-election)

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THE fourth year of the government has barely begun but the prospects of the next election, which is not scheduled before the autumn of 2023, are already being widely discussed. One question that dominates the entire spectrum of the electoral discourse is whether the coming poll will be free and fair and whether the losing parties will accept the election results.

Looking at the current toxic state of relations between the ruling and opposition parties, coupled with the likelihood of immense election-related challenges, imagining the next election is, to say the least, quite terrifying.

As if routine electoral challenges were not enough, the government has committed to holding the next population census before the election and using fresh census results for the allocation and demarcation of constituencies for the upcoming election. The results of the last census held in 2017 were not accepted mainly by the Sindh-based parties. Although the next census is not due before 2027, the government has undertaken to hold the seventh population census before 2023 to accommodate the objections of some of the parties.

**Red Zone Files**: [Certain factors could haunt PTI’s re-election chances](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644010/red-zone-files-early-elections)

The census, supposed to be held at 10-year intervals, has always been a highly sensitive undertaking in Pakistan requiring a sizable military presence. It was because of these sensitivities and security considerations that the 1998 population census was undertaken after a gap of 17 years and the 2017 census after 19 years. The question is, how can the acceptance of the results of the next census be guaranteed? There is a possibility that some regional politicians, driven by their populist politics, may reject the new census results too. There is a plausible fear that the resulting agitation may spill over into a highly charged election environment.

By the look of things, the 2023 polls might become controversial even before they are held.

Even without the use of any new technology, the election is a highly contentious affair in Pakistan. A rather simple result transmission system mysteriously collapsed in the 2018 election leading to an inordinate delay in the announcement of election results. There is a strong suspicion among the opposition parties that the delay was deliberate and used for tampering with the election results. These doubts have been strengthened by not holding an inquiry into the failure of the RTS despite a lapse of three years.

In this environment of deep mistrust, the PTI plans to introduce more than 400,000 electronic voting machines in all 266 national and 593 provincial constituencies in one go. There is no other country in the world where such a large deployment of EVMs has been attempted in one sweep. India had gradually introduced EVMs from a few constituencies to ultimately the entire Lok Sabha over a period of 22 years. While the government is adamant in pushing for EVMs and the science and technology ministry has successfully produced a second prototype, the opposition both in the PDM and PPP have rejected the machines, branding the government plan as a scheme to efficiently rig the election. Despite the aggressive marketing of EVMs, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) remains unimpressed and has not endorsed the EVMs yet.

Technical arguments aside, the most important obstruction in the acceptance of the EVMs is the lack of consensus between the government and op­­p­osition as the two sides are not even ready to sit to­gether and discuss the issue. It seems that EVMs are fast becoming a major electoral controversy and if the government gets the EVM bill passed by a joint session of parliament, as it has announced, des­pite the opposition’s reservations, the election will become controversial even two years ahead of the poll.

In addition to the EVMs, the government has also tried to give legal cover to overseas Pakistanis’ voting from their country of residence in the next election through an ordinance. Legislation by ordinance is never a good idea but framing electoral laws through such one-sided instruments is simply unacceptable. Although the ordinance does not specify the mode of remote voting, both the available options pose serious risks to the integrity of the polls. The risks inherent in internet voting have been identified and internet voting rejected in a report submitted by the Internet Voting Task Force appointed by the then chief justice of Pakistan Saqib Nisar ahead of the 2018 election. A Spanish consulting firm hired by the IT ministry recently endorsed the findings of the task force.

The facility of postal ballots, which is presently allowed only to prisoners, persons with disabilities and government functionaries posted outside their place of voting, is considered an easy instrument for rigging despite the fact that a very small percentage of the total votes is cast through postal ballots. If this facility is allowed to overseas Pakistani voters whose number exceeds the margin of victory in around 15 per cent or 40 National Assembly seats, overseas Pakistanis’ votes will become decisive in winning elections and forming the next government. This huge potential will further enhance the possibility of rigging through the manipulation of postal ballots. This is a prospect which is unnerving not only for the opposition but also many ruling coalition politicians.

A package of 49 amendments to the Elections Act, 2017, has been hurriedly passed by the National Assembly despite the opposition’s protest. The bill is now before the Senate. The ECP has also conveyed its serious concerns regarding some of the proposed amendments to the government. The passage of the bill despite the opposition’s protests and the ECP’s concerns will further aggravate the atmosphere of the next election. Some amendments reportedly even violate the Constitution.

The foreign funding case, disciplinary action against the polling staff which committed irregularities in the Daska by-election and the responsibility for the RTS collapse in 2018 are three important issues which are expected to be decided by the ECP in the near future and may also significantly impact the pre-election environment. Although a robust legal electoral framework and a seemingly independent and assertive ECP are rays of hope, highly combustible challenges constitute a frightening pre-election scenario which, if not addressed in time, may lead to serious political upheaval. With a volatile situation on our western border, instability is the last thing we wish to see in our country.

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