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IF one goes by the poll dates fixed by the president of Pakistan and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governor for election to the provincial assemblies of Punjab and KP, about 74 per cent of the country’s registered voters will get a chance to elect their legislators within the next two months.

Soon after that — in another five months — all 122 million voters in the country will vote to elect their representatives in the National Assembly, along with voters in Sindh and Balochistan who will choose their respective province’s assembly.

How will these voters decide who to vote for? The Gallup exit polls for the last three general elections provide useful insights. Contrary to popular belief, a decreasing proportion of voters make their choice of representatives along party lines.

In 2008, this proportion was 24pc which was the highest among the seven choices provided to survey respondents. This percentage declined to 19pc in 2013 election and went down further to 11pc in the most recent general election in 2018 when it ranked fifth among the seven indicated bases of voting.

The exit poll in the 2018 election further showed that the largest single block of voters — a whopping 30pc — opted for those candidates who had facilitated or had the potential to facilitate local development such as roads, water supply, schools, etc.

The second most popular reason for voting was the patronage received for personal issues, such as help in dealing with the local administration and police or helping in getting a job, etc.

Some way down the ladder, at number three, was performance within the assembly that found favour with 14pc of voters. In the past three elections, this trait had consistently ranked at either number three or four. Ideally, performance within the assembly should have been the top consideration for electing an assembly member, but one of the reasons why voters tend to give less importance to parliamentary performance is that very little information is publicly available about the elected representatives’ activities within the assemblies. Whatever little information is available, a major part of it is either in the English language or some less user-friendly mode, or both.

How much do we know about our parliamentarians?

The attendance of legislators had been regarded as a secret until recently and a protracted struggle had to be waged to get the principle accepted that it is the right of the people to know how regularly their elected representatives attend assembly sittings.

It was in 2012 that this writer had sought the attendance record of MNAs from the National Assembly Secretariat but it was denied to him, as the information was stated to be ‘private and personal’.

A somewhat weak Freedom of Information Ordinance existed at that time. The federal ombudsman accepted the appeal against the secretariat and upheld the right to obtain the attendance record but the secretariat persisted in denying this very basic information.

A final appeal, in accordance with the ordinance, was made to the president of Pakistan who very emphatically not only reprimanded the secretariat for denying this information but also directed it to make the members’ attendance record public for future as well.

It took more than a year to obtain this verdict. This particular case is narrated in detail to illustrate the reluctance of some of our democratic institutions to part with very basic information, which is the right of every citizen.

Another important piece of information regarding the performance of their elected representatives, which voters need to make up their minds about, relates to each legislator’s voting record. In developed democracies, each legislator’s record of voting on bills, resolutions, appointments and dismissals is taken very seriously.

Our legislatures’ system of voting is so deficient that except for some rare occasions, there is no way of knowing who voted for or against a particular bill or resolution, because most of the voting is executed through voice votes and louder shouts translate into the majority.

The decibel volume is an extremely unscientific and unreliable system to ascertain the level of support for a motion but, on top of this, the voice vote cannot record individual votes.

An expensive electronic vote casting, counting and display system is available both in the Senate and National Assembly but it is not put to use. There is a need to amend the Assembly rules to ensure that each legislator’s accurate voting record is available for voters and the general public.

A significant part of the legislators’ performance is devoted to the committees. Each legislator is supposed to contribute to committee deliberations and it is in these forums that some of the most serious work, such as scrutiny of legislation, takes place.

The committees’ attendance record of legislators is not accessible to the public in most legislatures. Even the record of committee meetings in a compiled form is not available in many legislatures.

The National Assembly had adopted a very significant amendment to its rules in early 2013 when the PPP was the ruling party and the rules and privileges committee was chaired by PPP MNA Nadeem Afzal Chan.

This amendment, for the first time, authorised National Assembly committees to receive a briefing on the Public Sector Development Programme from the relevant ministries ahead of including development projects in the annual budget.

The committees were supposed to send their recommendations to the ministries for possible incorporation in the PSDP, and the ministries were required to explain if a recommendation was not accepted. It is the citizens’ right to know the number of committee meetings held to discuss PSDP, the number of recommendations made and incorporated or not incorporated in it; but sadly, this information is not accessible and not provided to citizens when sought.

These are just a few examples of the information needed about legislators to form an informed opinion about their performance. Each honourable legislature speaker should ensure that the members’ performance is displayed for their voters’ information.

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