**Lessons and fears post-NA-249**

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Recent by-elections in Karachi and Sialkot have exposed the administrative incompetence of the Imran Khan government. The ruling PTI has failed to hold a single constituency election without controversy, despite being in power for three years.

First of all, we had the Daska NA-75 by-election in Sialkot. This was mired in such extensive claims of vote-rigging that left the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) was left with no choice but to call for fresh polls. Then, more recently, it was the turn of the NA-249 by-election in Karachi. Here, four parties – including those which finished the race in fourth and fifth place, respectively – claimed victory. This clearly underscores how our political parties have not developed the required maturity to accept defeat. Winning is the only thing that matters to them. It is most unfortunate that we have never seen any of our politicians accept and address their own failures.

In Karachi, the PPP win caused much upset; leaving the PTI and PMLN up in arms while the ECP decided to stay official announcement of results for a recount. The PMLN has even called for ballot papers (and all related material) to be placed in the custody of either the Rangers or the Army. Interestingly, when the PPP contested the 2018 elections from this constituency – it lagged behind in fifth place. The PTI, against all expectations, held NA-249, for the first time in the party’s history; securing a narrow margin of nearly 700 votes. Today, it suffers the humiliation of standing in fifth place. The ruling party has responded by blaming the PMLN for stolen votes, reversing complaints levelled back in 2018. It appears, however, that the PMLN has moved on and is currently accusing the PPP and ECP of foul play.

The subsequent delay in announcing results from the April vote has naturally raised doubts over the Results Transmission System (RTS), as occurred during the last general elections. Yet who bears the blame? Is it fair to point fingers at the ECP alone? In NA-249, almost all the political parties failed to mobilise voters, as was reflected in the low turnout. Campaigning by Dr Miftah Ismail, nonetheless, remained impressive. The PMLN is neither part of the federal nor the Sindh government. Even so, the party lost by a modest margin of 683 votes. Thus, I for one, say bravo to Miftah Ismael. From the electorate’s perspective, the battle was fought along local and civic lines rather than the political. Meaning that ongoing water shortages in the area were among residents’ priorities. Thereby prompting the PPP to boast that it had the election in the bag since it was the only party trusted with resolving this issue; no matter it has been at the helm in Sindh for more than a decade. It is time that Pakistan’s political parties to begin publicly holding up their hands when they fall far short of voter expectation, instead of relying on personality politics.

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The resounding PTI defeat is similarly explained by the failure of Faisal Vawda, until recently the federal minister for Water Resources, to address the urgent concerns of constituents. Moreover, the party faced an internal revolt against the nomination of local party worker, Amjad Afridi; with the PTI’s four internal groups effectively ruining the election campaign with no prominent leader coming to rally the people. Meanwhile, the TLP (Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan) repeated its 2018 performance to secure a comfortable third place. This is all the more impressive given that the government had banned the party and arrested its leader ahead of the battle for NA-249; although the two of the party’s MPAs have been allowed to continue their duties unhindered. As for the PMLN, it has long enjoyed a strong vote bank in the area and claimed victory back in 2018 when Shehbaz Sharif lost by 700 votes against PTI’s Faisal Vawda.

The delay in announcing the by-election results represents a monumental failure on the part of the ECP, especially as voting took place in urban constituencies where polling stations were easily accessible. The process of recounting just a few thousand votes took far too long. The ECP could have easily extended polling so that people would not have had to brave the heat to cast ballots, thereby encouraging more people to come out and exercise their democratic right. In addition, it would surely have made more sense to hold the polls on a weekday since the majority of voters are daily wage earners.

Nevertheless, credit must go to the ECP for holding polls in a peaceful manner. There were no reports of a single incident of any serious clashes in the run-up to the vote or on the day itself. The police and Rangers did an excellent job on this front, too. The ECP is always under fire after each election yet electoral reforms must be constituted by the government and the opposition. Yet we must recognise the important changes that have been introduced, such as holding elections under an interim set-up, empowering the ECP, appointing the head of the Commission as well as other members. Yet the question of the role of local administration and presiding or returning officers still remains unresolved.

If Pakistan is to develop a political culture, this must start with the political parties themselves, with a view to establishing a truly transparent democratic system; accusations of hidden hands and political engineering notwithstanding. This will require a long debate. Credit must be given to the PTI for trying to reform the ECP and the electoral process by way of electronic voting machines. It is to the PMLN’s great discredit that it is resisting the move.

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