**Levelling the field**

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Monday, Oct 30, 2023

A level playing field in politics means that all the political parties in play are treated equally and fairly. No political party is provided any undue advantage, specifically during elections. All the competitors in the elections are treated equally and fairly in accordance with the laws and regulations, and there is no discrimination on the basis of ideology, ethnic and linguistic background, programme and political narrative.

According to the Cambridge dictionary, “a situation that is fair because everyone has the same chance of succeeding” is called a level playing field. Wikipedia defines a level playing field in the following words, “level playing field is a concept about fairness, not that each player has an equal chance to succeed, but that they all play by the same set of rules.”

Before every general election in Pakistan, we hear the demands of there being a level playing field for all the contesting parties. In every election since 1988, at least one or more political parties complain about not getting a level playing field. In the 1988 and 1990 general elections, the PPP was not provided equal opportunities. The powers that be favoured the IJI in both elections.

In 1993, the PML-N complained about the lack of a level playing field. In 1997, the PPP was again at the receiving end. In the 2002 general elections, both the PML-N and PPP were targeted, and undue favour was provided to the PML-Q. In 2013, both the PPP and PTI alleged that elections were rigged for the PML-N. In 2018, the PPP, PML-N, ANP, MQM-P, JUI-F and other parties complained about pre-poll rigging and manipulation of results. Before the 2018 elections, the PML-N was targeted to make sure that the PTI won the elections. Now, the PTI is facing the same situation.

Our electoral history clearly shows us that our political leadership hasn’t learned the necessary lessons. One or two political parties get undue favour and the others cry foul. The beneficiaries of rigging and pre-poll engineering take full advantage of the situation without realizing the flaws of the process.

Political parties including the PPP and PTI are demanding a level playing field in the next general elections that are likely to be held in the last week of January 2024.

They are alleging that the PML-N has been provided undue advantage. The perception is getting stronger by every passing day that the powers that be are favouring the PML-N over other political parties. The PPP and PTI are not happy at the way Nawaz Sharif has been provided relief by the courts. Nawaz Sharif’s opponents were expecting that he would land in prison on his return from London. But instead he got protective bail before his journey back home. Both the PPP and PTI are alleging that Nawaz Sharif came back after striking a deal; this is something the PML-N denies.

As far as the level-playing field is concerned, the PML-N’s stance is quite clear: ‘undo the injustices meted out to the party in the past’. The PML-N strongly believes that Nawaz Sharif was targeted before the 2018 elections and his disqualification was the result of a well-hatched conspiracy. The PML-N in the last five years made repeated demands for justice. The party suffered a lot under the PTI government, and many PML-N leaders spent months in prisons on cooked-up charges. So, the PML-N is happy at the way the PTI is being dismantled in the last few months.

Nawaz Sharif’s return and successful powerful show in Lahore has put the PML-N in an advantageous position in Punjab. For the PML-N, it is the beginning of a long due process to provide a level playing field to the party.

PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari is vocally complaining about the lack of a level-playing field to some political parties for the upcoming general elections. According to some reports, former president Asif Ali Zardari has raised the issue of level playing field with the concerned quarters. The PPP is not happy with both the federal and Punjab interim governments. The party was hoping to make a strong comeback in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. But the situation is not very favourable for the party at the moment.

PTI spokespersons appearing in the media are also making the same demands. They are demanding the same opportunities and complaining that the interim governments are not allowing them to organize political activities.

The PTI is desperately looking to restart its political activities before the general elections. The PTI was the most active political party in the country before the May 9 events. The party used to organize rallies, meetings and protests on almost a daily basis. But since May 9, it has found it hard to mobilize its workers and supporters.

Even though Caretaker Prime Minister Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar, caretaker CM Punjab Mohsin Naqvi and Minister for Information and Broadcasting Murtaza Solangi have ensured the political parties several times that the federal and Punjab caretaker governments are committed to providing a level-playing field to all registered political parties during the general elections. But the ground reality is somehow different. The caretaker governments should sympathetically address the complaints and reservations of different political parties.

It is the right of all political parties to get equal opportunities in the elections. The election process and legitimacy of an elected government largely depends on free, fair and transparent elections. Tainted elections raise questions over the legitimacy and democratic credentials of an elected government.

A compromised election, marred by favouritism or undue advantage, erodes public trust and may lead to disillusionment. Consequently, the legitimacy of the elected government can be called into question. It erodes the credibility of an elected and electoral process. But the level playing field is still a distant dream as major political parties are not ready to mend their ways to gain power. The ECP needs to thump its authority to organize free, fair, impartial and transparent elections.

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