**Making sense of AJK polls**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-07-28

T HER E is nothing surprising about the outcome of the Azad Kashmir elections except for a largerthan-expected margin of success for the PTI. It was strictly according to tradition: the party ruling Islamabad wins the AJK polls. There has not been any deviation from the pattern. The PTI with its comfortable majority is now all set to form the government there.

After winning the polls in Gilgit-Baltistan last year, the PTI`s electoral success in AJK has come as another morale booster for the party. Conversely, it is a setback for the PML-N, which had high stakes in retaining its hold over the region, while the PPP`s better performance has been a big surprise.

There are familiar accusations of foul play from the losing side. But there is no evidence of the elections being engineered. The AJK election results simply reflect the poll trend where voters go with the centre of power. It must not be interpreted as a vindication of Imran Khan`s policies or his political ideology as is being projected by PTI leaders.

It is expedient for voters to have a government that can work with Islamabad. Hence it was not surprising that the PPP with its government in Islamabad also won the 2011 AJK elections.

Similarly, the PML-N swept the AJK polls in 2016 with an overwhelming majority. The party has now been consigned to third place despite Maryam Nawaz`s spirited campaign. She held massive rallies but could not reverse the trend. It also reinforces the view that personal charisma alone is not enough for winning the elections.

Surely some other political factors, including Imran Khan`s public appeal, may have contributed to the PTI`s victory, but it was not the major reason.

It was also not unprecedented for candidates to switch sides. Of course, big money, as in any election in the country, also played some role in buying loyalties.

But the latest AJK elections will be remembered primarily for the vitriolic campaign run by political parties and their leaders. It was perhaps the dirtiest electioneering in AJK`s history with leaders accusing each other of treachery. Their entireendeavour was to accuse political rivals of betraying the Kashmir cause and of being India`s agent.

It revealed all that marks the degeneration of Pakistan`s political culture. The vulgar, no-holdsbarred language used by the top leadership across the board could not have been more offensive.

There was nothing on the Kashmir issue or local problems. The bitterness and rivalry that define Pakistani politics were injected into the AJK election campaign too. It was only a matter of who was more obnoxious.

Unsurprisingly, it was Federal Minister for Kashmir & Gilgit-Baltistan Affairs Ali Amin Gandapur who was more abusive in his campaign speeches. It was not for the first time that the controversial minister has been in the eye of the storm for making offensive and derogatory remarks about leaders of rival parties.

Butmoredisconcertingisthefactthatheenjoyed the blessings of his party leader. It was shocking to see ministers hailing him for his aggression. The minister addressed a rally in the presence of the prime minister despite a ban slapped by the AJK election commission on his participation in poll campaigns. Such defiance is not unprecedented.

Meanwhile, the prime minister himself used language unbecoming of his position.

Unfortunately, the other party leaders were not rational either. Some of them were no less vitriolic in their remarks against their rivals. Maryam Nawaz`s aggression and personal attacks on the PTI leadership were equally distasteful. Her antiSemitic comments involving Imran Khan`s children and former wife cannot be justified and were rightly condemned.

It`s a sad commentary on the calibre of the new generation of political leadership. The AJK electoral episode has also exposed the internal rift within PML-N ranks regarding the party`s political narrative. Interestingly, the entire AJK election campaign was led by Maryam Nawaz with her uncle Shehbaz Sharif, who is the president of the party, conspicuous by his absence. Her entire campaign narrative revolved around the defence of herf ather Nawaz Sharif.

There was hardly anything on local issues linked to the elections taking place in the region which is not administratively part of Pakistan. It probably was one of the reasons for the PML-N`s poor showing in the polls. Predictably, Maryam Nawaz rejected the election results, saying the polls were rigged. But the president of her party is silent on the matter. There is not yet any evidence giving credence to her allegation. Making the AJK elections controversial is certainly not going to help the democratic process in the sensitive region. There is also the question about whether the region should be made a battleground for Pakistan`s political parties.

Ironically, it all happened as the situation on the other side of the Line of Controlin occupied Kashmir continued to be extremely precarious after New Delhi`s August 2019 action to revoke whatever autonomy the disputed territory had. There was hardly any mention of that in the election campaign except for the allegations hurled at each other about selling out Kashmir. Undoubtedly, it was the foulest election campaign witnessed in recent history it doesn`t matter who won the contest.

Meanwhile, the outcome of the AJK elections is not going to have any significant impact on Pakistan`s politics. It`s not a measure of the prevailing political dynamics in Pakistan. The PTI must not take the AJK election victory as indicative of public support for its government.

With the formation of a new government in AJK, the PTI faces the serious challenge of providing better governance and resolving some critical problems confronted by the people of the region. It will not be easy given the party`s abysmal record in the provinces it has been ruling. More importantly, there is a need for stemming the rot in the country`s political culture. The writeris the author of No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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