**[Only time will tell](https://www.dawn.com/news/1779409/only-time-will-tell)**

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IN war, truth is the first casualty. In Third World countries, truth all too often is smothered at birth. Never more often than when general elections are due.

The midwife of our elections — the Election Commission of Pakistan — has informed us that our general elections will be delivered in the last week of January 2024. The exact date is a secret to which we voters are not yet privy.

Traditionally, our Election Commission has always been headed by judges. We have had 16 in succession since 1969. For the first time since then, however, the chief election commissioner in 2020 was handpicked from amongst the bureaucracy.

The present CEC Sikandar Sultan Raja joined the DMG/PAS in 1987. His last posting was as federal secretary/chairman, Pak­­­istan Railways, in 2018. After 14 unsu­­ng months there, he was appointed CEC in January 2020 for a period of five years.

Parties are apprehensive about the unevenness of the playing field.

According to the ECP website, the only election he has ever conducted was in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, where in 2016 as chief secretary AJK “he ensured peaceful, free and fair elections”. (AJK has 2.7 million registered voters; Pakistan has 127m.)

The last ‘free and fair’ elections in Pakistan were conducted in 1970, under president Gen Yahya Khan. The CEC at the time was a Bengali, Mr Abdus Sattar. The political maelstrom that followed left Sattar stranded in West Pakistan. Eventually, he returned to Bangladesh, where in time he became its seventh president.

Under our Constitution, the CEC enjoys the status of a judge of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. That did not prevent CEC Raja, however, from flouting the orders of his judicial brethren in the Supreme Court, when on March 22, 2023, he postponed the provincial elections.

Some fear that, sometime before the last week of January 2024, the bureaucrat CEC will revert to the lessons he absorbed during his training. He will follow precedent — this time, his own.

The CEC’s tenure will end in January 2025. Like his predecessor CEC Abdus Sattar in 1970, he might have to manage the afterbirth of the elections, should there be a controversy over the results.

The political parties — especially the PPP — are already in a state of apprehensive agitation about the unevenness of the playing field. It is not unlikely that the PPP leadership (father, aunt and son) may refuse to accept the results of the 2024 elections, just as Mr Bhutto did in 1970.

The PML-N — its former coalition partner and again its main opponent — has promised Oct 21 (the scheduled date of supremo Nawaz Sharif’s return to Pakistan) as the ‘Day of Deliverance’. Considering that the PML-N has been in power on three occasions in the past, it is approaching the next elections as Britain’s ruling Conservative party is before its own polls — as political ‘underdogs’.

This disheartening admission was made by the chairman of the Conservative Party Greg Hands. He told delegates at the party conference a few days ago that (1) everyone praised Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, (2) no one trusted the Labour party, and (3) whenever Labour opposition runs the country, it does the job badly.

It could have been a script tailored for the PML-N’s penchant for hero worship and its condescending dismissal of every opposition.

There are still four months to go before our elections. Although there is a quasi-em­bargo on news about the PTI leader Imran Khan, the little news secreted into the me­­dia indicates that he has accepted the te­­d­ium of incarceration, like some schoolboy after his first homesick days at boarding school.

It has taken Imran Khan some time to adjust. He has, sooner than expe­cted. That became apparent when he was informed that he was being transferred to the comparatively more congenial Adiala jail. He told his captors that he preferred to remain where he was.

The longer his imprisonment, the stronger his resolve. When he is released — as he shall, when the patience of his captors runs out — he might like to recall the words of an Olympian athlete Louis Zamperini: “All I did was pray to God, every day. In prison camp, the main prayer was, ‘Get me home alive, God, and I’ll seek you and serve you’. I came home, got wrapped up in the celebration, and forgot about the hundreds of promises I’d made to God.”

From his tenure as prime minister, Imran Khan learned the same lesson Winston Churchill had, after the unexpected surrender of Singapore in World War II. Churchill wrote of that debacle: “My advisers ought to have known and I ought to have been told, and I ought to have asked.”

Other leaders, if elected, should remember to remain “connected to the political class, the bureaucracy, the media, the wider public, and of course the establishment. To be isolated … is to be doomed to impotence”.

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