**Overseas voting**

BY N I A Z M U R T A Z A 2021-07-13

A KEY electoral issue these days relates to voting by overseas Pakistanis. Legally, they can vote even now if in Pakistan as voting is a basic civic right under current laws not lost even by dual citizens. The Supreme Court has also asked the state to facilitate overseas voting. So the big issues of whether they should vote or must be facilitated to do so abroad are moot.

Objections on either issue are also invalid and largely reflect xenophobia. Some say since they don`t pay taxes, they must not vote. No law limits voting rights to only taxpayers and such a law will make innumerable resident voters ineligible. Also, taxes are paid for availing state services. If they don`t pay taxes, they also don`t avail state services. However, they are a major source of remittances that reduces our yawning external deficit and could also become a major source of investment, charity, technical expertise and policy ideas based on their exposure abroad. So the focus here is on how to facilitate voting abroad to enhance their interest in and contribution to Pakistan.

Research by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance shows that a big majority of electoral states, nearly 115 states and territories, allow overseas voting. More than half are developing states. But their key practices vary. The first issue is about which elections to allow such voting in; in our case. the options are national, provincial and local polls. Local elections largely deal with local service delivery issues which don`t affect overseas citizens who also may not be too aware about them. These polls are held at different times across provinces with huge numbers of seats. National and provincial polls are usually held together and relate to policy issues. Thus, practically and conceptually, it makes sense to restrict it to polls for the top two tiers.

The second issue is about voting for some reserved seats (eg women and minorities) or having expats vote for constituencies based on their places of origin. Very few states have reserved seats. They make sense for women and minorities as these are weaker groups living locally who need ongoing legislative development and its monitoring.

Thus, having specific MPs pushing their causes makes sense. But this logic doesn`t apply to overseas Pakistanis. Also, turnout in overseas voting globally is often low. Only one per cent of the eligible persons in a pilot for the initial 2018 bypolls actually registered. Reserved seats may then see, especially initially, MPs getting elected with very few votes. Voting in existing constituencies makes more sense even if ballots for dozens of constituencies may have to be sentto each voting station abroad depending on how many constituencies voters in a host country may be registered in.

The modality of voting is a key issue. The options include postal, electronic or physical voting. So I vote in US elections by receiving my ballot by email and returning it simply by fax. Yet, since fool-proof security is still not available for other options, most states, especially developing ones with more issues of rigging, use physical voting.

This is a security-wise safer though logistically harder option. It may reduce turnout somewhat in large countries like the US where Pakistanis live in dozens of smaller cities beyond the larger ones with consulates. It will also involve getting host countries to give permission for such voting which could be tricky to obtain in Gulf states. But these are logistical issues that must be sorted out. As technology and security improve, other options could be used later.

Another issue relates to who can vote.

Some states restrict it to diplomatic staff, egIndia, and others by the number of years the overseas citizens have been abroad.

But most states allow all their citizens to vote. Legally and practically, it makes no sense to restrict such voting as the purposeistoenhance the links of overseas Pakistanis. Thus, it makes sense to castthe net widely, though the net may at least initially cover only countries with large numbers of overseas Pakistanis due to logistical and safety reasons. Other issues that must be considered include political canvassing and election observation by political parties, training of embassy staff, result transmission and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Overseas voting has its clear benefits but also entails high costs and security and logistical challenges. So it requires proper planning and implementation to ensure smooth voting. All this entails time. Thus, there must be no urgency to implement it hastily driven by the 2023 electoral calculations of different parties. The guiding force must be the clear wisdom emerging from the global experiences of dozens of states which had a phased introduction of the system over several election cycles.

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