[**Selecting the Senate**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1607646/selecting-the-senate)

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THE Senate elections are about to happen. Excitement is in the air, as the opposition gears up to land a punch in an arena other than the street. On the other hand, the PTI government is always in a state of excitement, not averse to landing a punch on itself if the opposition is not within reach.

But regardless of the parties’ mood, it is only once in three years, at the time of the elections, that the upper house gets this kind of attention. The less-favoured child of the parliamentary system, it can rarely attract the kind of attention showered on the National Assembly despite all the protestations about it being the forum where debate is of a higher quality as are the inhabitants. It is said to be the forum where the professionals and the not so rich (in theory) have a chance to make their voice heard.

The run-up to the Senate elections is never without its fair share of stories, gossip and controversies. Some of these are purely in the realm of conjecture — a sense of uncertainty is created in the months before the Senate election which the ruling party is relying on to gain a majority. There are hushed whispers about how the party can’t be allowed to dominate the Senate and how the set-up will be wrapped up beforehand. But such rumours — fortunately — never amount to much. This time around the opposition PDM tried to create a similar air of uncertainty and as in the past, their predictions were bought by those who were already converted. But the deadlines of December and then January etc passed as they had in the past, when rumours were spread by invisible forces.

However, the controversies about the upsets, some orchestrated and some purchased, are equally pervasive and closer to reality. In the past (the 2008 period), the attention paid to the Senate election being more like a marketplace than a poll or a selection — as we are now used to claiming — has focused much attention and effort on the use of money in this forum.

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Indeed, it was this talk of money which kept the ‘famous’ family of father and sons from returning to the Senate after their retirement in 2015. One of them did get a Qaumi Watan Party ticket in 2015, while the other tried the independent route but neither met with any success.

This hasn’t deterred the less infamous ones, as the recent fracas over the PTI nomination from Balochistan shows. But around the same time, the political parties became a little more concerned about keeping a check on the profiteering men and women among their ranks.

In 2015, for example, despite the dharna and the sky-high tensions between PTI and the Noon, the two parties worked together in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to ensure the defiant or greedy ones didn’t succeed — the architect of this quiet deal was the then chief minister Pervez Khattak who didn’t just reach an understanding with the PML-N but also made sure the ballot papers were brought out to be checked. Back then, it was the PPP which objected to this behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing on the day of the election. But by 2018, this cooperation was a thing of the past and the PPP managed to get two senators elected from the province (at the expense of the PTI). Imran Khan did hurl allegations and threw out parliamentarians en bloc, which appeared politically intemperate; however, now with the emergence of the videos, that election in KP does not a pretty picture paint.

But while Khan was raging against the mysterious players who bought his party’s MPAs in KP, he played footsie with the PPP in Islamabad in 2018; the two parties came together in their ‘bughz-i-Noon’ to deliver the chairmanship of the senate to the Balochistan Awami Party. But their short-lived and pragmatic romance did not extend to KP.

Indeed, depending on the context, all the parties have made efforts to block their members from exercising their individual choice — be it due to conscience or more worldly concerns. In the post-2008 period, initially the PPP and PML-N opted for fielding just the right number of candidates who would be elected unopposed in Sindh and Punjab, blocking the space for too much hanky-panky. Despite these efforts, in 2012, the PPP was only able to get Babar Awan elected as senator from Punjab while an old party worker, Aslam Gill, lost. But they were unable to convince the other two provinces to follow suit.

Post-2013, the PML-N was so keen to put an end to the ‘horse-trading’ it tried to change the manner in which the Fata MNAs voted for senators through a last-minute presidential ordinance; the ordinance was passed hours before the 2015 Senate election but was later withdrawn by the government.

However, over time, it seems the upsets tend to upset the PPP less so than the others. The 2018 election in KP is a case in point. In 2015, the Sindh Assembly also ended up electing more PPP senators than it had the numbers for — news stories suggested that at least five opposition votes went to the ruling party.

Even in the coming elections, it is the PPP which has put up the people for the joint PDM candidates. The rest have limited themselves to supporting the PPP’s act of courage.

But none of this changes the reality — all the political parties have only one aim when it comes to the Senate election, which is maximising seats. They want to stop their parliamentarians exercising free will. They are not averse to undemocratic measures, such as presidential ordinances, seat adjustment, forcing MPAs to carry ballot papers, and the use of money in some cases to ensure a controlled election. The pattern and the intent is the same, if one just takes a step back. The lines between the parties tend to blur.

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*Published in Dawn, February 16th, 2021*