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**Senate and the Gilani card**

Once again, the political temperature seems set to rise in Pakistan as the Senate elections loom nearer and nearer. But this time things have become more complex, with allegations of horse-trading and the anxious approach of the ruling party to implement a ‘show of hands’ in Senate elections.

The haste being shown to implement this procedure has created even more uncertainty. We need to realize that a continuous flow of democracy is what Pakistan needs. If the democratic process gets halted then things lead to anomalies and mistrust.

The PDM will be testing the waters in the Senate elections as they launch a heavyweight candidate from Islamabad – former prime minister and PPP stalwart, who is a symbol of democracy and loyalty as he has never compromised on his principles. His victory will be a watershed event and will end the claim of Imran Khan enjoying a thin majority in the National Assembly.

This will be a contest between a loyal democrat versus an economic hitman whose fiscal policies have led the country to an economic crisis. As far as the numbers are concerned, it won't be a tough task for Yousuf Raza Gilani to grab the victory as Hafeez Shaikh is said to be quite unpopular even within the king’s party due to his poor economic policies and the inflation that he gifted the people. Even the MNAs of the PTI are feeling the heat from their constituents and some of them might show their protest by not voting Shaikh – and the PDM will surely exploit this scenario.

Suppose Yusuf Raza Gilani wins; will the next attempt be a no-confidence motion against the prime minister? All we know is that in a democracy no person is indispensable for the country and if we peek through the pages of history, we learn that in democracies prime ministers have faced ‘no confidence’ motions and have stepped down after the success of the motion. Surely this idea would be floating within the think tanks of the PPP as they are strong believers of parliamentary procedures and norms.

The prime minister and his coterie are claiming that Balochistan MPs are wooed by the unprecedented ‘price’ set in the Senate elections. This in itself is a no-confidence in their own MPs and their allies in the Balochistan Assembly. The bunch of electables in the largest province are loyal to themselves only, and placing any hope from them would be a rather wild goose chase; they will definitely vote for their own best interests.

One thing that the PTI needs to learn is to follow the conventions and not act indifferent to the democratic practices. So far, they have not given importance to parliamentary affairs and rather than engaging with the opposition in the legislation process they have opted for confrontation and political victimisation by taking credit of all the malpractices by NAB, which has ended up toxifying the political environment and leaving no space for consent and collaboration. This meant that, ultimately, Khan’s government remained dependent on presidential ordinances. But the PTI must know that by using this tool regularly they are negating the essence of democracy.

The government should not have objections on a secret ballot because ballots are always secret. The Election Commission of Pakistan has to be independent from the clutches of the government and they should not be influenced by the ruling party. Already their image is compromised. The ECP should be independent. First, we saw the case of Faisal Vawda linger on for more than a year. After an expected disqualification, he has however been awarded a Senate ticket by a party which claims to be the champion of morality; some would say this has been done to avoid his disqualification. Rather getting him cleared from a court of law and then deciding his fate, it shows that the party has a different set of rules for different individuals. If political parties bring loyal genuine candidates as Senate nominees, then it would make it morally binding for the MPs to vote for them and it would be difficult to go against their party.

The Senate is the upper house of parliament, said to hold more dignity and prestige. It is an important institution which should hold more powers. It should not remain a debating club like the UK’s House of Lords but rather a powerful institution like the Upper House of the US legislature so as to build a better and stronger federation. Today, unfortunately, nobody talks about the increasing powers of the Senate; the power of originating money bills, financial bills etc because it has equal representation of all provinces.

The Senate is important for a strong federation in Pakistan but ironically we see PM Imran Khan himself sabotaging the process of the Senate elections initially by offering Rs500 million to each of his MPs before the Senate elections. Later, the PM House took a U-turn on this as the Supreme Court reminded the attorney general of their 2013 ruling which bars the prime minister from providing development funds to MNAs.

The recent video clip that surfaced on the media, in which PTI MPs from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were seen taking bribes before the March 2018 Senate elections has not served the purpose for the ruling party as later a former MP of the PTI turned up on television and confessed to have received a bribe and promises for a ticket in the next elections and place in the cabinet from none other than former KP chief minister Pervez Khattak; the location of the whole deal was revealed to be the KP speaker’s house.

All this has raised quite a few eyebrows as the party in power has been drumming about horse-trading but seems to have itself been involved in it. These optics are not only damaging to the electoral process of the Senate but also to the country’s overall democratic values.

In 2019, when Sadiq Sanjrani got more votes than his share, where were the democratic principles of the PTI? Why didn't Imran Khan insist on open ballots then? This just shows that the PTI is not interested in principle-based politics but rather in finding ways to serve its vested interests. Today, perhaps the PTI is tasting its own medicine. However, the anxiety and insecurity within the ruling party shows that the PDM has played the Gilani card well on time.

Gilani’s Senate election will be a precursor to a no-confidence motion against PM Imran Khan. In politics, it all depends on who plays the master stroke and changes the game; this Senate election might trigger change in the political dynamics of Pakistan.

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