**Shameless aversion to LB polls**

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It is a shame that only a week before the local body elections in Islamabad scheduled to be held on 31st December, the federal government, through a hurriedly passed legislation increased the number of Union Councils from 101 to 125 forcing the ECP to postpone the polls setting aside its protestations. However, Islamabad High Court on petitions filed by PTI and JI ordered ECP on the evening of 30th December to hold the elections as per the already announced schedule asking the federal government to provide all possible assistance in this regard. My considered view is that though the decision of the court was a step in the right direction it should have considered the practicability of the order and given more time to ECP for the purpose. The federal government and ECP have not implemented the decision citing the reason that they couldn’t hold the elections at such short notice. They have accordingly filed intro-court appeals against the decision. The court has fixed the hearing for the 9th of January. In the meantime, the President has returned unsigned the ICT Local Government Amendment Act 2022 in terms of Article 75 of the constitution, and rightly so.

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This is the second time that LB polls in Islamabad have been postponed by the PDM government for no justification at all except for the fact that it wants to avoid them for political reasons of its own. However, it is pertinent to point out that the tenure of LBs in Islamabad had expired in 2020 but the PTI government did not bother to hold new elections shirking its constitutional obligation. It would not be out of place to mention that immediately after assuming power the PTI government dissolved the local bodies in the province of Punjab. The SC hearing petitions against this decision restored them on 25th March 2020. The SC in its order The Supreme Court declared the dissolution of the LG system as unconstitutional and Section 3 of the Punjab Local Government Act (PLGA)-2019 ultra-vires to the constitution. The Act was passed by the Punjab Assembly in May 2019.

Regrettably, the order was not implemented. The court took a serious view of the matter on 19 October 2021 and ordered the government to restore the local bodies by 20th October and also summoned the incumbent and former chief secretaries on the next date to answer if they failed to implement the court decision. The Punjab government restored the local bodies on the orders of SC. However, despite the local bodies completing their tenure on 26 December 2021, new elections have not been held as yet. Reportedly they are scheduled to be held in April this year. The constitution of Pakistan envisages a three-layered system of governance that comprises federal, provincial and local governments. But to the chagrin of the masses, while the federal and provincial governments have been functioning uninterrupted, both under civilian and military rules, it was only the latter who installed systems of local governments. But they were not in conformity with the constitution. The sole purpose was to build support for their regimes at the grass-root level and undermine the political parties. The elected governments that interspersed the military regimes remained criminally oblivious to this constitutional requirement. The consequences of this shameless aversion to LB polls and breach of the constitution by the elected governments are that the state of Pakistan has failed to provide the required civic amenities to its citizens and build a responsible relationship with them. That decidedly is also the major factor in promoting fissiparous tendencies in the country and undermining national integration.

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The model of local government, originally crafted by the National Bureau of Reconstruction during the Musharraf era, was probably a bold initiative that conformed to the system envisioned in the constitution. It enhanced the powers of the elected officials of the local government and abolished the office of District Magistrate and Divisional commissioners. This step also finally fulfilled the constitutional requirement under Article 175(3) for the separation of the judiciary from the executive at the district level. But the PML (Q) government (installed by Musharraf) defanged the system by changing some of its features and initiating a process of recentralisation of some of the development departments. Musharraf acquiesced to these changes dictated by political expedients. However, the moment democracy was restored in the country as a result of the 2008 elections, all the provincial governments abandoned the system and revived the archaic and colonial system of district administration. None of the parties ruling the provinces, despite crying hoarse from every convenient rooftop to rub in their democratic credentials, ever bothered to hold local government elections. What a shame. We often hear demands for the creation of new provinces and administrative units to resolve the problems of the people and find solutions to political tensions. I think this is not the real solution. The real solution lies in establishing local government, a missing link in the system of governance, in conformity with Article 140A (1&2) of the constitution.