**[The TLP and elections](https://www.dawn.com/news/1621947/the-tlp-and-elections)**

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THE by-election in a [Karachi constituency](https://www.dawn.com/news/1621019/ppp-emerges-victorious-in-na-249-karachi-by-poll) has followed the time-honoured Pakistani tradition of throwing up a controversial result accepted wholeheartedly only by the victor and none of those left behind. With the PML-N now [appealing](https://www.dawn.com/news/1621692/pml-n-urges-cec-to-place-na-249-ballots-in-armys-custody) to the Election Commission for not just a recount but also reposing its trust in khalai makhlooq for the custody of the votes (oh the delicious irony) it will take some more twists and turns till this saga comes to an end.

However, the by-election, following as it does on the heels of a nationwide dharna, has also focused attention on the growing electoral force that is the banned (or not) TLP. The party finished third in the by-election, behind the PPP and PML-N and ahead of the PTI, MQM and PSP. It has set off alarm bells as it did after the 2018 election when the TLP scored big for a newcomer — it was the third choice for the Lahori voters, leaving behind the experienced MMA and PPP. In Karachi, it even managed to win two provincial assembly seats.

No wonder then that people are asking if the organisation is going to be a big player politically and electorally, considering that it has already flexed — rather successfully — its street muscle in the country. In recent years, it has not just brought the country to a halt, it has also shown its ability to stare down the state.

But there is another way of looking at the relative success of the TLP in elections, than simply assuming that there are a growing number of voters who prefer a more radical, right-wing, religious option. After all, Pakistan has always made space for Islamist parties electorally though they have rarely ever been successful enough to be a national force, which can also form a government at the centre. And seen as part of this trend, the TLP could just now have become the option that the Jamaat (and some Barelvi parties) once had been. And it may also be filling a vacuum, caused by the weakening of some parties or their growing ethnicisation.

What if the PPP or JI was seen as a serious choice by voters? Would the TLP still do as well?

Consider Lahore. It has generally had a third party which voters have opted for in election after election, even if this third choice trailed far behind the first two. In 1993, this was the Pakistan Islamic Front, the name under which the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) contested the election. Of the nine Lahore seats, the PIF scored third position in eight of them, even though its tally was quite scant compared to the first two. The real contest was between the PML-N and PPP.

By the next election in 1997, this third slot was claimed by the PTI in seven of these seats. The number of votes polled was again pretty low but it appeared as the third choice. In 2002, the race was not so simple as there were many players, some weakened (PPP and PML-N) and some newly formed — and assisted. As a result, six of the 12 seats saw PPP, Noon and Q as the top three contenders. On the rest, others such as MMA and even PTI put in an appearance. Five years later, the city witnessed the same three parties — the two Leagues (Q and N) and PPP — in the first three positions.

However, as is now well known, the PPP and Q League have no longer been serious players in Punjab, or Lahore for that matter, since then. The vacuum has been filled by the PTI, which has become the contender to the Noon, and to some extent the TLP. The latter may also have gained the support of voters who once looked towards the JI, which is now as irrelevant in Lahore as the PPP.

This is not to deny the appeal of the right-wing message of the TLP but to ask if it would resonate as much if there were more serious, mainstream players in the fray. What if the PPP or JI was still seen as a serious choice by voters? Would the TLP still do as well?

Karachi is not as straightforward as Lahore. But even then, previous elections showed that there was some consistency to a third preference of voters. In 1997, of the 13 seats in the city, eight saw the same three parties in the top three positions — the PPP, PML-N and MQM. By the next election, the MMA was among the top three contenders and PML-N had sort of disappeared. But it is the next two elections which witnessed the biggest changes in the city. In 2013, the PTI emerged as a second force, though it trailed far behind. And the third place was shared by the JI, PPP and the Noorani group.

Then came the even bigger change. The military operation in the city broke the MQM’s hold in more ways than one. Electorally, the city was finally open for a contest but few parties were ready for it. And this is just as true of the PTI which ‘swept’ Karachi. This lack of preparation plus the overall weakening of the religious parties provided space for the TLP. Unlike in Lahore, it managed to even win two provincial assembly seats. It is worth asking that if Karachi, like Lahore, had relatively better and freer election contests, would the TLP have managed to win?

The recent by-election reflects the changed Karachi. The PPP, rigging issues/allegations aside, took the contest seriously enough to pour in funds — something it is usually accused of not doing where Karachi is concerned. It was also for the second time after 2018 that the PML-N paid attention to Karachi by bringing in heavyweights. And the TLP came in third, while other religious parties such as the JI and JUI-F stayed away.

But in both cities, it is worth wondering what the electoral scene would have looked like had national-level parties (the PML-N and PPP) not limited themselves to a province each, and if the MQM had not smothered the electoral process in Karachi. A number of these factors have played a role in the emergence of the TLP in elections, rather than just a growing radicalisation of voters.

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