[Malik Muhammad Ashraf](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/malik-muhammad-ashraf)

July 5, 2021

**The changes we need**

It is hard to take issue with the prime minister’s emphasis on electoral reforms which he has been insisting upon for some time. He also reiterated this during his speech in the National Assembly on June 30, rightly contending that it is imperative in view of the fact that all general elections after 1970 have been controversial.

In this regard, he mentioned bringing transparency in the Senate elections and switching over to electronic voting which he thinks is the only way to eliminate chances of rigging. He has also invited the opposition for a dialogue on reforming the electoral system in such a way that nobody can raise a finger at the results of the elections.

There is no denying the fact that controversies following general elections have invariably resulted in political instability or imposition of martial law in the country. However, the question is: would ensuring transparency in the Senate elections and adopting electronic voting solve the problem? My considered view – also shared by many intellectuals and political analysts – is that the real cause of political instability and bad governance in the country is the single constituency system through which we elect our parliamentarians.

To begin with, this system forestalls the chance of people from the lower and middle strata of society to contest elections due to the enormous cost involved in the election campaigns. Only the urban elite and feudal lords and their kith and kin can afford the luxury of contesting elections. This promotes an elitist culture, and the parties have no choice but to rely on the support of the electables to form the government. These electables are used as pawns on the chessboard of power by the non-democratic forces to make and break governments and, if need be, to orchestrate political engineering. That way the culture of graft and entitlement is encouraged. The legislators thus elected have a common cause in defending their vested interests and resisting change.

Further, the government elected through the first-past-the-post system might have majority seats in the legislature but is not a government of the majority of the people or registered voters. It so happens that in a constituency where more than one individual is contesting, a person obtaining 10-15 percent of votes gets elected. The number of seats won by a party does not reflect its real support among the masses.

The retention of the single constituency system with cosmetic and procedural changes in the conduct of elections is not going to address the real problems. The best way to have a truly representative government in the country is the adoption of the system of proportional representation, under which people vote for parties rather than individual candidates in a single constituency and the parties get representation in parliament on the basis of the percentage of votes that they poll.

The advantage of this system is that it reflects the real support for the political parties among the people, and also ensures the presence of smaller and regional parties in parliament – making the legislature a truly representative body. Party leaders are spared the blackmail of hereditary legislators who keep shifting their loyalties to cash on their ability to make and break governments.

The system also eliminates the possibility of horse trading, floor-crossing and chances of rigging – which has invariably marred the political landscape of Pakistan leading to political upheavals and instability. To resolve the controversy regarding Senate elections, parties can be allotted seats from each province on the basis of the percentage of votes they poll in the general elections.

To make the proportional representation system really workable, voting will also have to be made mandatory as is the case in more than 50 countries, mostly European, where different variants of the proportional representation system are in vogue. Even in the UK, serious thought is being given to adopting this system. It is most suitable for countries with multiple cultural entities like Pakistan.

The possibility of fixing a date for the federal and provincial elections like the US needs to be considered so that no sitting government can delay or postpone the elections to suit its political interests. The present constitutional arrangement to nominate and appoint the chief election commissioner and the members of the commission is quite convoluted and has been a subject of political controversies. These are positions which need to be kept beyond political maneuvering and favouritism. Therefore, the ruling and opposition parties should have no role in their appointment. The matter can best be resolved by inserting a provision in the constitution that the senior most retired chief justice of the SC be appointed as the CEC by the president with the power to appoint other members from the community of retired judges. This would eliminate the controversies.

Apart from electoral reforms and related matters, there are also other issues that need immediate attention to improve accountability and good governance. The mode of appointment of the chairman of NAB needs to be changed. This has not only been the subject of tension between the ruling and opposition parties but has also warranted judicial interventions. To settle the issue once and for all, it would perhaps be desirable that the president as his constitutional obligation appoints the senior most retired judge of the Supreme Court as chairman of NAB.

Similarly, the provisions in the NAB Act that have generated controversy also need to be reviewed. So, there is an imperative need to look into the whole affair and make it an institution free of political interference and capable of conducting across the board accountability, which is a basic requirement of good governance.

All the above suggested systemic changes would require amendments in the constitution. Therefore, the opposition parties should give serious thought to interacting with the government to bring necessary reforms regarding good governance and the way we elect our representatives. The government and the opposition parties owe it to the people.

The writer is a freelance contributor. Email: ashpak10@gmail.com