**The spirit of electoral reforms**

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Due to the proven history of election irregularities and manipulations, we lost the spirit of electoral reforms by focusing merely on procedural interventions to ensure transparent and reliable elections. Our concern about procedural lacunas is not without reasons. I personally witnessed several irregularities in different elections at the grassroots during the 1990s.
I remember once I joined a colleague to be a polling agent of one of our colleagues’ contesting an election for the provincial assembly of NWFP, now KP. We were placed at the home station of one of the expected winning contestants; our candidate was not among those. However, after the lunch break there was a huge roar to oust both of us out of the polling station because they heard that another winning candidate ensured polling of all eligible votes on the voter list, even those who have died, in connivance with the polling staff and they wanted to do the same here at their polling station. I initially resisted, but when it came to guns, I left the polling station for them along with my colleague.
This is one of the first-hand accounts; there are several other observations of rigging in different forms which still prevail in our electoral system including the failure of the Result Transmission System (RTS), counting behind closed doors reportedly without polling agents at some places and the most recent revelation of spoiling ten thousand votes of a winning candidate in Karachi while putting an additional stamp on the ballot paper to favour a weak candidate who eventually won a seat of the National Assembly. All these instances emphasise the importance of electoral reforms to eliminate such operational and procedural problems during elections, but there is a need to consider some other important aspects to strengthen democratic norms and establish genuine democracy according to our ground realities.
The spirit should remain to establish the importance and maintenance of the vote. According to Joshua A Douglas from the University of Kentucky, “Voting is the foundational concept for our entire democratic structure. We think of voting as a fundamental—the most fundamental—right in our democracy. When a group of citizens collectively elects its representatives, it affirms the notion that we govern ourselves by free choice. An individual’s right to vote ties that person to our social order, even if that person chooses not to exercise that right. Voting represents the beginning; everything else in our democracy follows the right to vote. Participation is more than just a value. It is a foundational virtue of our democracy.”
It is indeed a frustration for the masses when they observe the obvious wastage of their votes as depicted in the previous elections. Because in 2018, PTI took almost 32 percent votes, the opposition got approximately 42 percent, while the considerable votes of less popular parties were not represented in the parliament; we can witness nearly the same trend in 2013 when PML-N was on the treasury benches. Therefore, we need to find ways to eliminate the general distress of the voter through electoral reforms for inclusive governments.
Representation of all factions of the society is important in the parliament including some factions of Balochistan, ex-FATA territories, southern Punjab, and a few sectarian and ethnic groups who have not yet witnessed any considerable say in national policies; because, they usually emerge as important stakeholders during any wave of instability. Therefore, it is important to develop a system which assimilates all these integral components of our society.
The current plurality-based electoral system does not serve even in the Senate because it reflects the same party-based majority instead of a philosophical equal representation of all provinces. The very purpose of the upper house was to ensure equitable representation of provinces, but it failed to accommodate all the communities of the provinces because the same members who make it to the provincial assemblies on the basis of a majority votes elect members of the Senate, thus again depriving considerable voices in the society to be heard in the parliament.
We have a history of decades-long extremism in the country, which usually stems from the exclusion of smaller groups in the mainstream population due to their specific ethnic or sectarian approaches. These groups never stopped propagating their view of life and probably will not do so during our journey on the road to democracy because, probably, this is one of the good aspects of democracy where everyone is allowed to live with his/her thoughts and preferences.
We have been subject to unusual circumstances from day one of our independence. The prevalence of these parties and clusters can’t be denied in all provinces of the country from the north to the south, their exclusion from the corridors of power remained fertile for global players to pursue their agendas in the country. Our establishment always remained busy in coining counter narratives and curbing foreign interventions. The most effective strategy would probably be to ensure the inclusion of such smaller parties and groups in the mainstream democratic processes through electoral reforms because we could not eliminate them through existing policies and perhaps would not be able to do so for at least another two to three decades.
Considering all these aspects, it is quite appropriate to suggest an electoral system based on proportional representation (PR). PR can probably provide remedy to several deep-rooted ailments of our electoral landscape. It seems quite appropriate to opt for PR to accommodate all voices, to ensure true representation of every section of the society, to ensure that every vote is counted, avoiding the wastage of votes as largely happens in plurality-based electoral system, to eliminate extremism from politics and the society, to encourage coalition and collaboration, to enhance turn-out and reduce apathy, and to exhibit preferences for both the candidates and the political parties.
However, technically it needs extensive brainstorming to determine the most appropriate type of proportional representation. In a closed party-list PR, there is absolutely no influence of voters on the selection of candidates which, I think, is not a suitable option; that voters only vote for the party and then the party decides the list of successful candidates; it will be a new form of totalitarianism.
Open party-list PR has some influence on at least the order in which party candidates are elected. Ranked voting provides an opportunity to the voter to rank their candidates in a sequence of 1st, 2nd, 3rd etc. and also accommodates the transfer of votes to other constituencies. Mixed member PR provides an opportunity to the voters to elect the representative for their constituency as well as the vote for their preferred political party.
This is indeed a matter which needs attention and scholarly reflections to bring novel electoral reforms for Pakistan. Nevertheless, not every system is without limitations, PR is also subject to several challenges including compromises, political gridlocks, unstable governments and above all, reduced accountability to voters. Therefore, we have to move cautiously to maintain the spirit of electoral reforms for the benefit and prosperity of all stakeholders of society.