**The three phases of elections**

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Although a firm date for the 12th general election in the country has not yet been fixed by the Election Commission of Pakistan, its announcement that the next general election will be held in the last week of January 2024 is meant to allay some fears.

The electoral process in Pakistan is divided into three distinctive phases: Pre-Election, Election-Day and Post-Election. These three phases are critical to understand not just for political parties and candidates who have to actively engage in these phases, but equally so for media, analysts and the general public. Understanding these phases also helps to accurately determine fairness of a general election.

A classification of these three phases means that the pre-election phase begins soon after the completion of the term of an assembly (national or provincial), or its premature dissolution (as witnessed in the case of the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assemblies in 2023). The legal definition of the pre-election phase begins with the notification of the election programme and its schedule where the Election Commission is empowered to ensure fairness. However, a broader definition of the pre-election phase is applicable in the case of Pakistan where a distinctive set of actors and influencers begin to have an impact on the electoral process much before the announcement of election schedule.

The pre-election phase, therefore, includes the process of appointment and functioning of neutral caretaker governments, the role and independence of the ECP, a non-partisan and independent judiciary, and a free and independent media. Unfair use of public resources and/or development funds to benefit a party or contestant also falls in this phase. Assessment of the pre-election phase requires a keen study to ascertain measures that might have been put in place to skew the level-playing in favour of or against any political party or candidate. Pakistan’s electoral history shows that management of the pre-election phase has had the strongest impact on fairness of elections in Pakistan.

Election-Day mainly includes management of the process of voting. An essential component of Election-Day is also counting of votes, tabulation and compilation of votes and transmission of results. With largescale constitutional and legal reforms in strengthening the ECP, election-day management has vastly improved in Pakistan with a relatively low impact on the overall fairness of elections.

The post-election phase includes consolidation and announcement of final election results, oath of elected legislators and the process of formation of governments in the centre and in the provinces. Pakistan has witnessed that management of the post-election phase has previously resulted in denying popular public mandate in the formation of elected governments and coalition governments.

The history of Pakistan’s general elections is counted from 1970 when our first election was held though its results tore apart the country geographically. Subsequent general elections were held in 1977, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2008, 2013 and 2018. The latest general election, which was due to be held by October 2023, has been significantly delayed.

An objective exercise to measure prospects of a free and fair 12th general election in Pakistan cannot be completed without analysing the fairness of each of Pakistan’s previous elections. The opposite of a free and fair election equates to a rigged election where certain activities and actions violate the constitution and laws of Pakistan.

A ‘rigging test’ was first employed by Pakistan’s leading public scholar Dr Ijaz Shafi Gilani, as written and compiled for PILDAT, to analyze the fairness of the first eight general elections based on the three phases: pre-election, Election-Day and post-election. This crucial analysis has since guided PILDAT’s evaluation of electoral fairness of subsequent general elections.

With the exception of the elections in 1970, 1977 and 2013, each of the other general elections in Pakistan have suffered from a high level of pre-election rigging to defeat the will of the citizens of Pakistan. This has meant that interference and manipulation of the pre-electoral process has had a decisive impact on the outcome of elections at the national level to determine who wins or loses majority of seats, forms and runs (or fails to form and run) the government.

Excluding the 1977 General Election which witnessed a high level of Election-Day rigging, every other general election had a low level of election-day rigging. Low level of rigging is defined where violation of the principles of level playing field occurs but does not significantly impact the electoral process. This classification deteriorated in the 2018 General Election where major issues were encountered in compilation of votes and transmission of results.

The general elections of 1970, 1985 and 2002 were marred by a high level of post-election rigging also through fracturing, altering and denying of clear popular mandate in formation of elected governments. This was of course inapplicable in the case of the 1977 General Election where both the incumbent PPP government and the opposition lost to the military. The 1988 and 1990 general elections witnessed moderate post-poll rigging which meant that, while its impact was not decisive, it sufficiently influenced the direction of the popularly intended outcome.

Pakistan’s journey towards consolidation of democracy has been anything but smooth. Pakistan’s electoral history offers key clues to this transition which began and continues with a quest for democratic governance under the rule of law. Each of these electoral exercises has witnessed many watershed moments spanning over fifty years with deep imprints on state and society.

Despite misgivings on the timing of the general election and absence of a fixed date for the 12th general election, Pakistan has entered the pre-election phase. How free and fair the next general election will be depends on the neutrality of the caretaker governments, role of the ECP, judiciary, and a free from coercion independent media fully able to objectively utilize and provide available mediums to every political party and candidate to reach voters.

The writer is an analyst working in the field of politics, democratic governance, legislative development and rule of law.