**The utopia of elections**

Murtaza Solangi

Thursday, Feb 02, 2023

Pakistan is facing a three-pronged attack of political instability, economic meltdown and renewed terror insurgency in an election year. This is proving to be a lethal cocktail.

All three streams of attack and their origins and drivers might be different but are organically linked as well. The very fact that they are weakening Pakistan in the election year makes it more problematic. The PTI thinks elections, early elections especially, are the panacea of all ills; the other camp thinks just the opposite.

Let us take them all, one by one. The political instability in the recent past started in the end of June 2014, when Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri met in London and made the London Plan in cahoots with the establishment to remove the PML-N government of Nawaz Sharif. Come August, the full-blown movement against the government was launched in Islamabad with civil disobedience, attacks on parliament and the PM House and the PTV building besides threats by the then DGI ISI Gen Zaheerul Islam, plans for a coup, well documented by Shuja Nawaz in his last book, ‘The Battle for Pakistan’. The Nawaz government was saved partly because the then opposition stood united behind parliament and also because of the fallout of the APS massacre of December 16, 2014.

After the Panama scandal of 2016, the unfinished agenda of removal of Nawaz Sharif got a new lease of life and through a judicial route not only was Nawaz removed from the government and parliament, but also from the leadership of his party in July 2017. Despite the fact that parliament completed its tenure, the remaining part of the PML-N government under Shahid Khaqan Abbasi was a weak government under constant attacks – ending their government in Balochistan and denying the party its due role in the Senate through engineering.

Despite massive rigging in the 2018 elections, as documented by independent observers and parts of uncontrolled media including the EU Observers’ final report, the opposition parties of the PML-N and the PPP decided to lay low and refrained from mounting any major movement against the ‘selected’ government of Imran Khan, let alone resigning from parliament as suggested by Maulana Fazlur Rehman.

Imran Khan, buoyed by the support of the establishment – instead of using political wisdom to consolidate his party and delivering to the people – acted like a bull in a china shop and tried to create a one-party state with the help of coercive state institutions. Parliament, its committees, opposition parties, judiciary, especially independent judges like Qazi Faez Isa, critical and independent journalists, media houses and even his own party stalwarts – nobody was spared.

Imran’s naivete, arrogance, ignorance and vindictiveness took a heavy toll in other areas including the economy and foreign relations, proving him more of a liability than an asset for the establishment and forcing their hand to first distance and then dump him altogether. It is probably unique with the Imran government that he destabilized his own government and continued political and economic destabilization after his removal from office in April last year.

When he saw his removal imminent, he sabotaged the IMF programme by freezing the power tariff and petroleum prices while the oil prices were going up in the international market, putting the reputation of the country at stake. He even tried through Shaukat Tarin and the provincial governments of Punjab and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to sabotage the resumption of the IMF programme under Miftah Ismail. The resignations from the National Assembly, his failed marches on Islamabad and Rawalpindi and then the eventual dissolution of the provincial assemblies, all are aimed at continuing to destabilize the polity and the economy of Pakistan to create anarchy, which could lead to hostile forces fishing in our troubled waters.

Now that Imran has displayed his mistrust in the Election Commission of Pakistan, the current government, the new and the old establishment as well as the new caretaker setups in Lahore and Peshawar, there is no guarantee if he will accept the results of the provincial assemblies, due in April or the forthcoming general elections due in October. Hence, it is a utopia that an era of stability shall follow after the elections as we don’t know if the losing party will even accept the results of the elections.

Given the political government at the centre, hostile to the PTI, we don’t know how free and fair the elections in Punjab and KP will be. Also, if new governments are formed in Lahore and Peshawar, no matter who forms them will influence the general elections due in October. The caretaker setups envisioned under 18th Amendment didn’t foresee the situation caused by Imran Khan. Also, if the provincial elections are held under the 2017 census in April and the National Assembly elections are held in October on the new census, it creates another anomaly in the system.

The recent surge of terrorism has added a new dimension and raised serious questions on free and fair elections, especially in KP and Balochistan. Given the ongoing negotiations with the IMF and the economic meltdown, it makes more sense to find legal room to allow both the caretaker governments of Punjab and KP to continue till October, when elections are held across the country as they have been taking place since February 1997. After the general elections, parliament must plug the hole on caretaker setups in situations like the one created by Imran the anarchist.

The writer is a journalist. He tweets @murtazasolangi and can be reached at: murtazasolangi@gmail.com