**Uprising Winds of Change**

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Silence is complicity, as affirmed by Nobel laureate journalist Maria Ressa in her 2022 memoir, “How to Stand Up to a Dictator.” The Philippines-born journalist’s words resonate deeply in the context of Pakistan’s recent national elections, where the echoes of pre-poll and post-poll rigging reverberate.

In a nation where the rule of law seems to crumble from within, the powerful forces of people, institutions, and vested interests pose significant obstacles to a brighter future. However, amid these challenges, a compelling narrative emerges – one that suggests the winds of change are sweeping through Pakistan.

The February 8 polls painted a vivid picture of a nation in flux. A surge of tech-savvy youth, representing 44% of the electorate under 35, made their voices heard for the first time. In a display of defiance, voters flocked to the polling stations, leaving an indelible mark on the ballot, challenging the established powers with a resounding message.

Social media, a dominant political campaign tool, played a pivotal role in mobilizing voters. The traditional distinctions between urban, peri-urban, and rural voters blurred as a united front emerged against narrow-based religious or ethnic political entities. The political landscape revealed three major forces – PTI, PML-N, and PPP – each with its stronghold and distinct voter base.

The winds of change may be stirring, but the path forward remains uncertain.

While KP solidified its support for PTI, breaking the pattern of voting for ‘electables’ in Punjab marked a significant shift. The rise of the middle-class voter, active participation of women and girls, and a rejection of certain parties were defining features of this electoral awakening.

Sindh remained the bastion of PPP, echoing the enduring influence of the Bhutto legacy. However, Karachi’s declared results failed to capture the nuanced political landscape, with both PTI and PPP claiming a strong following. Balochistan presented a troubling scenario, with the establishment’s influence, where resentment grew amid concerns about missing persons.

The political landscape is fraught with historical echoes of ‘de jure’ and ‘de facto’ military rule.

The recounting of a personal journey in government service since 1973 serves as a stark reminder of the recurring challenges faced during election cycles.

The legacy of Z.A. Bhutto’s trial and subsequent execution in 1979 paints a grim picture of power dynamics, with loyalty instrumental in what was deemed a ‘judicial murder.’ The subsequent decades witnessed political ping-pong between Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, both grappling with military intervention and resulting political instability.

Yet, the politicians seem resistant to learning from this chequered history. Recent events, from Nawaz Sharif’s controversial choice of an army chief in 2016 to Imran Khan’s extension of the army chief’s tenure in 2019, indicate a recurring pattern of political maneuvers.

Pakistan’s recent downgrade by the Economist Intelligence Unit underscores the challenges faced by the nation. The response to authoritarianism, as echoed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, calls for living not by lies. The question that looms is, for how long will Pakistan continue to live by lies? As those in power navigate the complexities of governance, a poignant reminder of inevitable mortality, ‘memento mori,’ urges reflection on the enduring quest for a democratic and just society. The winds of change may be stirring, but the path forward remains uncertain.

*The writer is a freelance columnist.*