**Voting rights**

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In 1994, when the then president Farooq Leghari visited the US he promised to consider the demand of the right to vote for overseas Pakistanis. Since then leaders of all successive governments in Pakistan have been supportive of this demand, but without much action.

The PTI government deserves credit for introducing the bill for granting voting rights to about nine million overseas Pakistanis. This bill was rushed along with 32 other bills that were passed on the same day, without any debate on their merits or demerits in the joint session of parliament.

Though overseas Pakistanis have welcomed the legislation in principle, there are some ambiguities that need to be looked into. For example, the mode and procedure of registration and casting of votes. How to determine the identity of the voter who is outside the domain of Pakistan and Pakistani laws? How to act against any attempt to commit fraud?

Despite all security measures, the internet is not a fool-proof method. Hackers have hacked the most secure systems of some American corporations. During the American elections of 2016, cyber interference by some foreign countries were discussed and debated by intelligence agencies and cyber security experts of the US. Pakistan’s FBR’s system has been hacked twice. How will the integrity of our electoral system be ensured, while nine million people cast their votes from outside Pakistan? If Pakistani embassies and consulates are designated as polling stations abroad, how will Pakistanis living in distant towns and cities abroad cast their vote? This will deny the majority of voters their right to vote, due to distance from the polling station.

Since there are no separate seats for Pakistanis overseas, it is clear that voters will have to vote in some constituency inside Pakistan and for a candidate with no connectivity or sensitivity with the issues of Pakistanis abroad. What will be the mode to know the candidate and their campaign? Further, how will a Pakistani voter abroad be assigned a constituency in Pakistan for his/her vote?

First-generation Pakistanis who migrated to countries like the US and Canada have love and connectivity with Pakistan and their relatives. This generation is already aging and now the flow of migration from Pakistan to the US and Canada is receding. The new Pakistani-American/Canadian generation born and educated in North America gives preference to its birthplace than the native countries of their parents. If this trend continues, the voting rights for overseas Pakistanis will markedly diminish with the aging of the first generation of Pakistanis in the US, Canada, UK and elsewhere. Such trends are already visible.

Dual citizenship with dual right to vote does not seem logical and prudent. Pakistani immigrants chose and migrated to these countries by their own choice and conscious effort. The new generation of Pakistani-Americans/ Canadians can be a good bridge for building good relations between their adopted countries and native Pakistan.

There is another opinion advocating the right to vote in Pakistan, despite dual citizenship and oath of loyalty to the adopted country. Since this bill has been passed without increasing any seats in Parliament, it is evident that overseas voters will have to vote in one of the existing constituencies within Pakistani territory. As all politics is ‘local’ and the Pakistani voter abroad is disconnected with local issues, their vote will likely go to waste.

Another suggestion is allocation of some seats in parliament for Pakistanis abroad. These seats ought to be filled by Pakistani overseas and voted by the same. Those elected on such seats should be involved in committees and matters related to Pakistanis abroad, such as emigration, immigration, customs rules, travel, foreign investment, remittances, foreign policy and other related issues. This will generate interest among Pakistanis overseas and their new generations. It will also help Pakistan benefit from its overseas talent.

But to act on such a proposal, the newly passed bill is not sufficient. A constitutional amendment is required to add the seats in parliament; and the ruling party is in no position to adopt any such constitutional amendment.

The ambiguities in this voting rights bill create an impression that the movers of this bill want to manipulate some political mileage rather than serve Pakistanis overseas. The burden of working out the details and procedure has been shifted on to the Election Commission of Pakistan. Since the devil is always in the details, while the mover (PTI) wants to take credit for granting voting rights, the ECP would get the blame for the plan and procedure to implement such a vague law.

It is not clear if overseas Pakistanis will be eligible to vote in the next elections, as it requires a detailed action plan and arrangements. Meanwhile, the movers of the bill got a better public image among overseas Pakistanis without delivering much except an ambiguous voting rights law for Pakistanis abroad. This law needs a detailed debate to take into account different points of view, before implementation. Political parties should consider national interest above partisan interest and publicity.

Let Pakistani communities abroad build their image as good citizens of their adopted countries with their Pakistani heritage. Dual nationality with dual oath of loyalties to native and adopted countries will not help Pakistanis abroad in these times, when racism, religious bias and ideological confrontation are on the rise in some countries. The fact is that the effects of the 9/11 tragedy have not completely disappeared.

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