**[Will polls matter?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1796054/will-polls-matter)**

[Aasim Sajjad Akhtar](https://www.dawn.com/authors/3/aasim-sajjad-akhtar) Published December 8, 2023 Updated a day ago

The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

Listen to article

THE powers that be have declared that [general elections will be held](https://www.dawn.com/news/1785760) on Feb 8. Ask any seasoned observer, however, and they will tell you that there is still a dark cloud hanging over what is supposed to be democracy’s single most important event.

The reasons are obvious: the establishment is not yet convinced that it has culled the PTI Frankenstein that it happily brought to life and to [power in 2018](https://www.dawn.com/news/1426772). So repression and dirty media leaks continue. We should know soon whether the selectors feel the need to extend the date again, but whenever they do happen the elections will produce establishment-shaped results.

It is now old news that the PML-N and its returned leader Nawaz Sharif are chomping at the bit to become junior partner yet again. Other big parties, the PPP most notably, are also lobbying to carve out space for themselves in the post-election order. So the question is: will elections really do anything to change the lives of Pakistan’s young, working masses?

**The short answer is no.**

We will continue to hear the usual rhetoric.

1. None of our bourgeois parties has an economic programme to provide livelihoods and dignity to working people. They are primarily interested in keeping creditors like the IMF and Gulf kingdoms happy while ingratiating oligarchs like Malik Riaz. They will tow neoliberal orthodoxy around privatisation, while building more mega infrastructure even where it is not needed. Public education and health will deteriorate further while casualisation of labour, especially for youth, will intensify.
2. The ecological crisis will worsen, largely because of reckless development policies. It is telling that barely 18 months have passed since a third of Pakistan was under water and no one is talking about the [2022 floods](https://www.dawn.com/news/1710561) anymore. Mind you, if Pakistani rulers are indistinguishable when it comes to producing disasters through their expropriation of nature and dispossession of working people, then the COP28 drama is proving that this is an affliction of ruling classes globally.
3. Pakistan’s place regionally and globally will still be shaped by imperialist logics without, and militaristic nationalism within. Every once in a while there are noises from parties like the PML-N and even the establishment that they want peace with India. But this is belied by the perceived patronage of extremist elements and tired invocations of the ‘ideology of Pakistan’. The disastrous policy on Afghanistan [since August 2021](https://www.dawn.com/news/1640974) shows how little can be expected to change. Relatedly, we will continue to hear the usual rhetoric about Pakistan and the Muslim world, but we’ve all been witness to the spinelessness of our — and other Muslim — rulers vis-à-vis the genocide in Gaza. Don’t be surprised if the next government makes attempts to normalise ties with Israel, as dictated by the US and Gulf kingdoms.
4. The peripheries will continue to burn. What has happened recently in Kech is just the latest in the cycle of brutalisation in Balochistan. The [arrest and treatment of Manzoor Pashteen](https://www.dawn.com/news/1795155/manzoor-pashteen-arrested-in-chaman) shows there is no change towards Pakhtun youth who have peacefully been challenging the totalitarian logics of counterterrorism. Disaffection in Sindh, Gilgit-Baltistan, Kashmir and the Seraiki belt may take different forms but will certainly not be kept in check by sloganeering about a unitary Muslim nationhood.
5. Right-wing ideology will deepen its roots in society. This will be reflected in the cynical alliances that mainstream parties make to win poll contests and also in the organic growth and spread of groups as different as the TLP, JUI and TTP.

I am not a pessimist but do not believe that one should paint an unrealistically rosy picture of what we face even if the constitutional requirement of holding elections is met. I do believe, however, that the poll exercise at least provides an opportunity for anti-establishment voices to go out and convey their message to the voting public.

This includes exposing the role of money and corporate mediate-dominated narratives in how elections are conducted, such that the proverbial ‘electable’ wins the fight before it even takes place.

The powers that be will in any case have most electables doing their bidding on Feb 8. Does that mean that the majority in Pakistan cannot upend the apple cart? In principle, they could. But the truth is that formal institutions of representative ‘democracy’ in militarised Pakistan, and even non-praetorian polities, function like a rigged game.

Most young people are more understandably disillusioned with mainstream politics with each passing day. The only hope is for progressives to bring together as many on the outside of the rigged game to foment an alternative. And that too before too much water has passed under what is already a dangerously creaking bridge.

*The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.*

*Published in Dawn, December 8th, 2023*