**[A test for election observers](https://www.dawn.com/news/1421903/a-test-for-election-observers)**

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IN a tight election race like the one we are witnessing in Pakistan ahead of July 25 and amidst allegations of ‘pre-poll rigging’ and ‘absence of a level playing field’, the spotlight on international election observers is far greater than is usually the case. Two most prominent international election observer missions have already arrived in Pakistan and started their initial pre-poll observations.

The traditionally largest international election observation mission is the one fielded by the European Union and is generally referred to as EU-EOM. It is not only the largest in terms of the number of observers it employs, its observation span — about four months — is also the longest. The mission is well resourced having access to some of the best election experts from around the world. The mission consists of more than 100 persons including 10 analysts, 60 long-term election observers, seven members of the European Parliament and around 42 diplomats from the embassies of the EU states, Norway, Switzerland and Canada.

The mission, which is led by the chief observer, Michael Gehler, a member of the European Parliament from Germany, started its work on June 24 and is expected to stay in the country till September. EU-EOMs were also fielded in elections in 2002, 2008 and 2013. Although the mission generally releases its preliminary statement about two days after polling day, its final report and follow-up reports come much later.

An important feature of the mission is the rigorous follow-up on its recommendations and providing a detailed status of their implementation by the host government. Although international observers are extremely careful in criticising the host governments, the EU-EOM has already hinted in one of its press releases at the bureaucratic hurdles which delayed the arrival of its members in Pakistan by a few weeks.

*International observers seldom pass judgement on the integrity of an election.*

A relatively smaller mission but one comprising international heavyweights is the Commonwealth Observer Group. It has 14 members headed by the former Nigerian head of state, retired Gen Abdulsalami Abubakar. Other eminent members of the group include a former chief election commissioner of India, a member of the Sri Lankan Election Commission, a commissioner of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission, a former minister from New Zealand, a judge from the UK, a member of the Mauritian Election Commission, a senator from Australia and several prominent members of civil society from Bangladesh, South Africa, Fiji, Kenya and Nigeria.

A 10-member team from the Commonwealth Secretariat is also accompanying the group which arrived in Pakistan on July 18 and is expected to stay till July 30.

Despite the expectations of the people of the host country, international observers seldom pass judgement on the integrity of an election. They generally look at the technical, administrative and representational sides of the election and release their preliminary statements and subsequent detailed reports in highly guarded and carefully chosen words.

They, in general, prefer to err on the side of caution, and do not like to upset the governments and election management bodies of the host countries as they prefer to maintain a link for the future instead of slamming the door after making a strong statement. International observers have to tread a very delicate path as they have to respect the aspirations of the people in general on the one hand and observe the norms of international conduct and diplomacy on the other.

The conduct of international election observers came under heavy criticism after the presidential election in Kenya in August 2017. The preliminary statements issued by almost all international observers including the otherwise prestigious Carter Centre (US), the African Union, the National Democratic Institute (US), EU-EOM and the Commonwealth seemed to have endorsed the dubious election victory of the incumbent President Uhuru Kenyatta while opposition candidate Raila Odinga rejected the result and people on the streets battled with the police as they protested against widespread election rigging and irregularities, leading to the death of 28 persons.

Some of the statements of the observers went to the extent of congratulating the Kenyan people on conducting a relatively peaceful election even as human blood spilled on the streets. Former US secretary of state John Kerry, who led the Carter Centre’s observer mission in Kenya, noted that “Kenya has made a remarkable statement to Africa and the world about its democracy and the character of that democracy. Don’t let anybody besmirch that”.

Almost a month after the international observers had generally approved the quality of election, the Kenya’s supreme court, in response to a petition filed by the opposition presidential candidate, ruled that the election did not conform to Kenyan constitutional requirements and ordered a re-poll between the two key candidates.

Larry Garbern, a former USAID official who authored Guidelines for International Election Observation, wrote after the Kenyan debacle that “…even as observers give due deference to local institutions, their long-term credibility depends on their willingness to criticise publicly electoral manipulation that is aided and abetted by corrupt, non-independent institutions, including election commissions and even supreme courts”.

He went on to conclude that “Without giving voice to such concerns, observers will again be perceived as naïve shills whose presence undermines, rather than promotes, international solidarity among democracy activists”. At the heart of the alleged rigging was the nation-wide breakdown of a new $24 million system which was supposed to scan tally sheets and post them online immediately.

Learning from the debacle in the Kenyan election, it seems that the international election observers in Pakistan will need to discharge their responsibilities with extreme care and sensitivity. Normally, it is the legal, technical and administrative aspects they mainly focus on. But as the Kenyan example has rudely reminded us, it is the political context which ultimately determines the credibility of an election. Will the international observers, chastened by the Kenyan example, be able to pass the test in Pakistan?

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