**The polls are a battlefield**

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This Wednesday, Pakistan is going to the national polls. These elections aren’t the first ones in our hobbled political history. Nor shall they be the last. But on account of how the process of these elections has unfolded over the last few weeks, and considering the context of the turmoil that has preceded them, this electoral exercise has already become unique. Unfortunately these features and what is likely to happen after the polls are dark and dreary, and do not portend a bright and stable political order.

One, these polls are more in the nature of the notorious referendums held by former dictators Ziaul Haq and Pervez Musharraf than refreshing turning points based on inclusive and fair competition between opposing forces. The above-mentioned referendums and the upcoming polls converge on at least one crucial point: the outcome as far as Islamabad’s next ruler is concerned. While we don’t know who the prime minister will be, what we do know is who won’t be in power at the centre – the PML-N, whose leadership has either been jailed or decimated through judicial verdicts, accountability cases, contempt notices and in some cases rejection of nomination papers.

Just like those referendums were given a patina of legality and held as ‘legal exercises’, the present process of practical elimination of one contender for power from the competition at the centre too has been immersed in the law – to the extent that questioning some of the most awkward oddities in the legal proceedings focusing on one political party can itself become a case for punishment. The referendums were farcical and yet legal. What has happened before these polls too is hugely controversial, and in the months and years ahead shall be debated for its flaws.

Two, these polls are also unique in their divisiveness and the level of scepticism that has accompanied them until now. Almost all elections – even those held by military men like Ayub Khan in 1965, Ziaul Haq in 1985 and Pervez Musharraf in 2002 – became bones of contention after the results were announced. It’s the same with those in 1971, 1977, 1990, and even the last ones in 2013 that Imran Khan thought were managed against his party; these polls did not have so much negativity surrounding them before they were held and were contested after their results.

The upcoming polls, however, are exceptional in this regard, being contested even before the first ballot is cast. Accusations have flown thick and fast and at various levels. In fact, there is not a single aspect of these elections that has not come under serious charges. From the ballot printing of the ballot boxes to the tilting of the national stage in favour of some parties and against others, from election campaigns to judicial observations, from exemptions granted to some and taken away from others – every bit of these elections is caught in a web of distrust and disharmony.

Three, there has never been an election in this country in which every institution associated with the electoral exercise has had its neutrality questioned and in some cases openly defined as partisan, partial and tilted. Generally, the target of political participants’ wrath is focused on one instrument of the machinery. In the past, the bureaucracy was targeted. The ECP was targeted. Even caretaker governments were marked and critiqued for partisanship. Imran Khan has accused serving army officers of managing the polling stations in 2013. Several times, he laid into ex Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry for being part of the alleged massive rigging plan through judicial officers.

There are other examples from the past when political parties trained their guns towards groups that perpetrated violence and prevented a free, fair and even playing field, and even the media. Political manipulation by the intelligence agencies has been a standard charge documented in famous cases like the Asghar Khan case and the more audacious and now almost forgotten Midnight Jackals operation against Benazir Bhutto’s first government.

At other times, parties losing their candidates to quickly-formed new groups and alliances shouted foul play. Whenever ‘forward blocs’ were made after elections, they were mostly considered part of brazen plots hatched in dimply-lit backrooms.

However, this is the first time in our national history when every part of the system is facing serious accusations of every variety all at once. This has never happened before, and its dangers can’t be spoken about enough. This means that the entire state structure and all its pillars, informal and formal, are in the dock of demeaning debate and wide distrust. This also means that there is not a single mechanism that is available to adjudicate on these accusations and settle these matters before the nation goes to the polls. In fact, closer to the elections knock-out punches received by politicians via judicial forums have created a vast grievance that is not confined to the political leadership only but has trickled down to the supporters of these political parties.

The Lahore gathering of N-League supporters on the eve of Nawaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz’s return was significant not just for its numbers but also for the spontaneous expressions of bottled-up anger and frustration on account of the perception of being wronged and being pushed against the wall. The PPP’s grievances, and similar fears expressed by the ANP, are not just leadership complaints but have become popular cases with the electorate.

Far more serious are the several documented incidents of party affiliations being changed under coercion and candidates being asked to alter their loyalties. Again, never has at anytime in Pakistan’s seedy electoral politics so much come out from so many different constituencies involving so many sources about back-end manipulation. There are names. There are places. There are witnesses. There are documents and conversation records. It’s all there – from Taxila, the birthplace of the Jeep symbol, to the earlier emergence of the Balochistan Awami Party to the formation of the Grand Democratic Alliance. Every part of this long and meticulous effort to create a new political order is on paper and available for scrutiny. There is nothing left to the imagination – and even less for plausible deniability. That alone makes the upcoming polls extraordinary.

Related to this is growing violence and widening divisions in the body-politic. The environment in which these polls are held is laden with hatred and disrespect for opponents, captured nationally in the sad incident of a donkey being beaten to a pulp after being mischievously painted as ‘Nawaz’. This followed Khan’s description of N-League workers as ‘asses’ for attempting to go to the airport to receive their leaders. This is mass-scale hatred that will only deepen in the days ahead. And lastly, we have media censorship, blackout, outright threats of closure and verifiable evidence of information flows being hacked and turned into monstrous propaganda tools, to the bereavement of one political protagonist and to the benefit of the other. This is unprecedented – in its scale and brazenness.

Most elections are preceded by more than usual freedom because these are times when every colour of opinion and every strand of thought plays out for wider space and greater expression. The media becomes the platform for an exercise that is as much cathartic as it is genuinely democratic. Not this time: the media industry, its owners, workers, distributors – all have been thrown under the suffocating pall of censorship. The range of gagging and guiding is mindboggling. These elections and their inner dynamics have not been covered comprehensively, and that is totally because of the censorship in place. The most striking news about the manipulation of the system has not been debated because of the fear of closure.

With such unique features in place, the upcoming polls are unlikely to be a harbinger of hope and peace. These elections are being held on a terrible bumpy and contested ground. This is not how smooth rides begin.

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