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**GB elections: no real surprises**

As expected, the PTI has emerged as the single largest party in the Gilgit-Baltistan assembly elections. According to unofficial results, the PTI has won 9 seats, but fell short of the simple majority of 13 seats to form government.

This means that the PTI will have to rely on independent candidates to get the required majority. It is expected that the majority of independents will join the PTI to form government. The ruling party will also get the largest share in reserved seats for women and technocrats.

The Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly consists of 24 directly elected seats, in addition to nine reserved seats for women and technocrats that are allocated based on a proportional representation basis. The house has 33 seats in total.

Even though the PTI emerged as the single largest party in the assembly, this victory is not as dominating as the PPP and the PML-N had in 2009 and 2015 respectively. The PPP won 15 seats in 2009, while the PML-N won 16 seats in 2015. Both the parties won with a landslide. But the PTI failed to win the simple majority of 13 seats.

Independent candidates won seven seats, the only surprise in this election. Independents have never won so many seats before. In the previous two elections, the mainstream political parties dominated the elections.

This time around, the PPP has won three seats. The party was expecting more seats after a marathon campaign led by PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari who mobilised PPP workers and supporters across the region. He even went to small towns and large villages in the remotest areas of GB. As a result of this well-organised campaign, the PPP has been able to increase its share of votes from 18 percent in 2015 to 26 percent in 2020. The PTI got 28 percent share of votes in this election. The number of winning seats is less than what the party leadership was expecting. The PPP needs to build strong organisation in GB on the basis of this impressive election campaign.

The PML-N is the real loser in this election and could only manage to win two seats. Both seats were won from Diamer district. The PML-N won 16 seats in the 2015 elections. But nearly half of the PML-N’s GB leadership left the party before the elections and the majority joined the PTI. Some electables contested as independents.

The PML-N is blaming pre-poll rigging and political engineering for this poor show. The question is: what did the PML-N do to strengthen the party in Gilgit-Baltistan in the last five years while it was in power?

Weak party organisation should be a matter of concern for all the parties. In general, political parties focus on party organisation and political work at the grassroots level between two elections. Unfortunately, political parties have replaced party organisation and political workers with electables. Instead of strengthening the local party organisation and structures, they prefer to win over influential and rich candidates in different constituencies to win more seats.

Electables have no political ideology and loyalty so they change political loyalty before every election. Political parties have encouraged this movement of electables from one party to other before elections.

Political parties need to change this strategy, which has caused lot of damage to democracy and political culture. First, the parties rely on electables and when these electables change loyalty, they cry foul. These electables join a particular political party which is poised to win elections. They do it to remain in power. The parties need to take a principled and clear stance to stop this practice since it has damaged political parties at local levels.

Electables are not the substitutes of party organisation at the local levels. When in power, political parties ignore party organisation and structures and work through their elected MPAs and MNAs.

If our political parties are serious about stopping the pre-election rigging and engineering then they should focus on strengthening local party organisation and internal democracy. Instead of nominating party officials upto district level, they should be elected in open, free and transparent internal party elections.

The other factor is that people in Gilgit-Baltistan prefer to vote for the ruling party in Islamabad. Gilgit-Baltistan looks towards the federal government for funds and development. PTI ministers promised jobs to unemployed youth as well as economic opportunities in the tourism sector. This factor places the ruling party in the centre at an advantageous position.

There is a desperate need to develop the infrastructure of roads, bridges, schools and hospitals in many parts of Gilgit-Baltistan. Tourism needs basic infrastructure and services to boost this sector. The federal government provides the financial resources for such infrastructure development and services. So every federal government has tried to use this position to win elections in Gilgit-Baltistan.

In 2009, the PPP was in the federal government so it won 15 out of 24 seats. In 2015, the PML-N was in power so it won 16 seats in the GB Assembly. So it is not surprising at all that the PTI will be forming government there.

Both the PPP and the PML-N have alleged that the GB election was not fair and transparent. Both parties have alleged that the ruling party used government resources to lure the voters. The PPP chairman made the announcement in a tweet, stating “My election has been stolen. I will be joining the people of Gilgit-Baltistan in their protest shortly.”

The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) has released its preliminary report on the Gilgit Baltistan elections 2020 in which it said that the voting and counting processes were according to the law but there were some irregularities. "Voting and counting processes at the polling stations [were] conducted mostly according to the law and prescribed rules, though the legally mandatory provision of Form 45 (the Result of the Count) to polling agents was reported to have not been fully ensured by the presiding officers," said FAFEN in its report.

However, FAFEN pointed out that not all polling stations were able to follow the rules in accordance with the prescribed regulations. "Observers deployed by FAFEN reported an average of around three illegalities or irregularities per polling station. These included breach of the secrecy of the vote, stamping of ballots by others on behalf of voters, and voters registered at the polling stations turned away for various reasons despite having their National Identity Cards (NICs)", read FAFEN's report.

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