**Moving towards credible**

Dr Farid A Malik January 30, 2020

The son of Bhera, Sikandar Sultan Raja has been tasked to ensure the next credible election in the land of the pure. In the checkered political history of Pakistan only the 1970 electoral contest remains indisputable. Only Jamaat-e-Islami complained after a poor showing winning only four seats in both the Eastern and Western wings of the country. Since then every election has been disputed including the last one held in 2018. The quality of legislature has continued to decline making it almost an irrelevant ritualistic exercise a classic waste of time and energy.

After the promulgation of the unanimous 1973 constitution the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) was mandated to be a serving or retired member of the superior judiciary. The first elections under the new document were held in 1977 under the stewardship of Justice Sajjad Ahmad Jan. It was a direct two way contest between the ruling Peoples Party led by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) whose leaders were Maulana Mufti Mahmood and Air Marshal Asghar Khan. There were serious allegations of rigging that crashed the entire democratic order which resulted in Zia’s dark ages from which Pakistan has not recovered till today.

During the Ayubi onslaught against democracy (1958 – 1969) only the superior judiciary provided relief for individual liabilities. The coercive state apparatus was blatantly used to silence dissent. It was with this background that expectations of neutrality were tied with the judges to ensure credible, indisputable elections but they repeatedly failed eleven times since the promulgation of the 1973 constitution. Finally this condition has been waived with the appointment of CEC having administrative experience.

As a rule individuals should not lobby for such important positions. Record of service should speak for itself. The newly appointed CEC who recently retired as a federal secretary has been appointed by consensus but there are rumours that he actively lobbied with political parties to win this slot for himself. He happens to be the son-in-law of the former principal secretary to Nawaz Sharif. Though he has had a good career but his known for his excellent public relations skills. It is hoped that he will ensure a level playing field for all contestants.

It has to be understood that establishment established political parties like PML-N, PML-Q always rely on hidden hands to gain political advantage. With their long stints in power their influence runs deep in the administrative machinery of the country. Reliance on ‘Thana’ and ‘Patwarkhana’ introduced during the Ayub era is the hallmark of their politics. The last elections in 2018 under the supervision of the Army were very peaceful. Police was not allowed to enter the balloting areas they were there to ensure law and order only and not allowed to interfere in the voting process as they had been doing previously. Despite a very peaceful ballot exercise, there were allegations of rigging. The Results Transmission System (RTS) did not work. When the shortcomings were reported to the CEC expeditious action was not taken to redress complaints.

The Election Commission of Pakistan has a small core team that has an immense responsibility to elect political leadership of the country. It relies on staff from other government departments who have their own affiliations. In Karachi it is the MQM factor, in rural Sindh the Vdara control, in Punjab the PML-N inductees, while in Balochistan the Sardars prevail. Perhaps politically the KPK province is most attuned for a free and fair electoral exercise. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf is the first political party to win back to back terms in the province of political stalwarts arts like Bacha Khan, Wali Khan and Qayyum Khan.

Bureaucrats get used to the endless powers and perks of office that stretch over three to four decades. They enjoy authority without accountability or transparency. Most of them lobby for important post retirement positions both home and abroad. Individuals who lobby seldom serve, as they have their own agendas. Hopefully the current CEC will be an exception to this rule and strive to deliver a credible ballot which is very much required to advance the democratic order.

We, the students of the sixties and seventies who defied the dictatorial regime of the first dictator to bring back democracy are now close to the end of our innings. The 1970 free and fair elections was a dream come true. Another free and fair electoral contest followed by transfer of power to a genuinely elected political leadership will establish the democratic legacy of our generation. The 1973 constitution has survived despite two serious onslaughts ( Zia 1977, Musharraf 1999 ). It is time to follow the consensual document in letter and spirit.

Lot of hopes were pinned on Justice Fakhruddin G. Ibrahim as the CEC but he failed and went home to die in silence. Now it is Sikandar Sultan Raja in the saddle who brings with him vast administrative experience to plan and then deliver a credible election whose results are acceptable to all the players together with an effective grievance redressal mechanism.

The role of the establishment will also be critical. After the free and fair elections of 1970 almost all parties accepted the results yet power was not transferred to the elected representatives. In 1988 again Benazir Bhutto the most popular leader of her times had to deal with Ishaq Khan and Martial Law cronies like the Sharifs of Lahore and the Chaudhrys of Gujrat. Democracy has its own dynamics which must be respected. Constitutional guidelines should be followed. Accountability and political cleansing is needed to weed out the Mafia’s and bounty hunters. Every party including the PTI is infested with the epidemic of corruption infested political players who are there for themselves. CEC can enforce the constitutional requirements for the contestants to ensure level playing field. Once the elections are held all disputes should be settled expeditiously, no stay orders should be issued by the higher judiciary. It is certainly a good omen that the Election Commission is now under an administrator instead of an adjudicator. Another free and fair electoral exercise can perhaps bring the Zia era to a close as did the 1970 election which ended the Ayub era otherwise the malaise will continue. As CEC the conduct of Sikandar Sultan Raja will be closely watched.