**[Making sand castles](https://www.dawn.com/news/1793196/making-sand-castles)**

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WHY have some elements had an odd addiction to making shaky political sand castles that soon collapse? Free polls rejuvenate the political process. Incumbents defend their track record; opponents propose new policy directions and voters decide after hearing both sides. The winners, possessing a credible fresh mandate, tackle state challenges with gusto. Unluckily, polls, being usually rigged, rarely provide such impetus in Pakistan.

Out of 15 national referenda and polls held to date, the 2013 one was largely credible as per both the European Union election report and a Supreme Court verdict. Nine were seen to be rigged to the extent of the final outcome being changed, while three were partially rigged to reduce (1998 and 2008) or up (1977) the winner’s margin. Arguably, only one was rigged by civilians (1977). We seem destined to have two rigged polls in a row; the extent of the alleged rigging may exceed that in 2018.

Our political landscape is surreal today. None of the parties have presented credible manifestoes to tackle our serious and multifaceted challenges which threaten an economic meltdown. The sole focus is on roping in electables and smaller parties without regard to ideological affinity. The PML-N, the outgoing ruling party, has a head start in this regard. But this is odd given its poor performance in power and the steady stream of opinion polls in which it lags behind. So, one would expect few to align with it given its political liabilities. But defying the natural pull of political gravity, political actors are rushing towards it. Will this political sand castle be more sturdy than those made before by the same hands and minds?

It is instructive to look at the different types of political sand castles or hybrid regimes erected over the decades to give the illusion of civilian rule while ruling from behind and the reasons why they fell. Ayub’s entire era is usually seen as military rule. But unlike the other three army rulers, he resigned as army chief after deposing Iskandar Mirza and by January 1960 got elected as president via a rigged referendum to set-up our first hybrid regime. After achieving unsustainable and unequal growth, he fell due to age-related health issues, political unrest against his autocratic rule even in the urban areas that benefited most from the unequal growth, economic stagnancy, the impatience of generals with his long rule, and loss of American support.

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Unlike Ayub, Zia ruled for eight years directly in uniform before introducing our second hybrid regime prototype: a party-less assembly from rigged polls with a president in uniform. While Zia’s death formally ended this experiment, it was failing even earlier due to tensions between the puppet civilian rulers and the puppet pullers, resulting in reduced US support, heightened insecurity and apparent impatience in the ranks with his long rule and political unrest, all of which had led Zia to fire his handpicked prime ministers. But Zia’s successors within the state quickly invented a third hybrid model without a president in uniform which employed the threat of presidential dismissal of assemblies to keep the civilians in check. Musharraf recycled Zia’s second hybrid model after three years of direct rule but with rigged, party-based polls. His system too collapsed for mostly the same reasons as Zia’s.

This was followed by two regimes in 2008 and 2013 that won polls without the establishment’s help. Yet, a fourth semi-hybrid system was soon devised to keep civilian regimes under control and unstable by engineering crises and dharnas and using the judiciary to dismiss prime ministers. In 2018, many note the third model of poll manipulation was reintroduced, which too fell due to an economic crisis, political unrest and tensions in civilian ranks. Though the space for the first two models has shrunk, one can’t say as much about the two newer models.

Are attempts being made to manipulate the electoral scene again, with the PTI facing a bigger crackdown than the PML-N in 2018? Even a cursory analysis shows that any rigged regime led by the PML-N will face the same pressure points and may soon fall. These pressures include age-related health issues of both Sharif brothers, economic turmoil, security threats, and the inevitable tensions between the twin cities, given the elder Sharif’s desire for civilian sway. A divided mandate may make the system more unstable. Thus, the political stability we desperately need seems elusive in the foreseeable future.

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*Published in Dawn, November 28th, 2023*