

What happened in Tharparkar?

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THERE was hardly an element of surprise in the election victory of prime minister-designate Shaukat Aziz, especially after the several reports of pre-poll fixing. There was however some expectation of fair play on the day of the ballot since Mr Aziz's election was a foregone conclusion and there was no need for any fixing. Sadly, even this pretence was not kept and malpractices as well as rigging were all too apparent.

Was this a simple case of mismanagement? Or were there some hidden expectations which required manipulation to get the desired result? Or has rigging become a political culture of those in power? There are apparently no clear reasons for rigging a perfectly winnable election, but the complexity of the Tharparkar electorate indicates that it is no safe haven particularly as the goal was to show a landslide victory and not just a simple win for the next prime minister.

Election-watching can be a great learning experience. Everyone has an opinion. There is movement and people around the main cities/towns are often seen discussing electoral prospects. This was not the case in NA 229, Tharparkar 1. The only people seen parading in the streets of Mithi were armed plainclothes men brandishing rifles in a dead city. On enquiry we learnt they were police constables.

According to official sources,

the supporters of the chief minister confirm this with some pride.

There is no doubt that he has a sizable following in Tharparkar, but not everyone is there because of genuine admiration. There are those who live on his largesse, others who fear his wrath and quite a few who are disappointed with their own parent parties. The number of his opponents is difficult to define, and hence steps had to be taken to ensure foolproof victory.

Prior to the elections, the chief minister and his associates had made public statements intimidating their opponents in various ways. For example, Hamid Singh, son of Rana Chandar Singh, was reported on Aug 6 to have said that anyone attending the PPP meeting would get their legs broken. The Sindh chief minister reportedly magnanimously said to the press that he had allowed his opponent to file papers for

contest these elections gave them sufficient pride and courage. Regrettably, no Pakistani can claim the same for the future prime minister, who stands beholden to a feudal and the establishment of Pakistan for his victory.

Sindhi nationalists expressed their discomfort at being coerced into voting for a non-Sindhi. Those that managed to slip away did not vote. The HRCP team calculated that despite all the machinery at work, the turnout could not have reached beyond 40 per cent. There are numerous examples of rising percentages of the turnout in the last hour of polling. One such example was witnessed by me at a polling station number 58 (Yousaf Somroo) where by 10:45 am polling in the women's booth was seven per cent and had reached 23 per cent by 3.30 p.m. but had increased to 65 per cent in half an hour when there were no women in sight.

A similar pattern was seen by all five teams of the HRCP. Four teams witnessed the polling agents of Mr Shaukat Aziz stamping ballot papers in full view of the public. Incidentally, every polling agent of Mr. Aziz informed the HRCP team that they represented the Arbabs, and only one polling agent mentioned that she represented "Chaudhry Shaukat Aziz".

In polling station 123, Dr. Tasneem Kausar, general secretary of a human rights organization, was waving the official stamp and calling out to women voters so that she could note down their ID card details in order to vote for them. In the same station, another polling agent of Mr. Aziz was sitting on a chair behind the screen to help women voter stamp their ballot in the

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contesting against the future prime minister whereas he had the power to get him out of the way.

Other such reports were also