# Naya Pakistan

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Elections produced winners and losers. Election 2018 did too. The PTI won across the country, emerging as a dominant federal party and the PML-N, PPP, MQM, ANP, MMA etc lost spectacularly.

The Election Commission bungled up terribly. The pre-election manoeuvring, together with post-poll irregularities, threatened to place the election’s credibility under a cloud. Almost all losing parties cried foul. Imran Khan did himself a great favour by not holding brief for those responsible for administering the election, and for supporting opposition’s demand for scrutiny.

It is hard to embrace failure, as it requires courage and grace to concede defeat. We haven’t seen much of that in Pakistan post-elections. This time is no different. While efforts to manage the national narrative in the run-up to Election 2018 are not a figment of disgruntled imagination, neither is the verdict of the electorate on July 25. After a contested election that produced no clean sweep, the PTI has garnered a convincing victory. The outcome is in sync with opinion polls just as it was in 2013 when the PTI lost and refused to accept the results.

Post-Panama, the Sharifs (and by association the PML-N) came to be labelled as corrupt. The conviction of NS and Maryam might be questionable in view of the reasoning of the judgments that condemned them and the quality of evidence they were based on. But for those who saw the Sharifs as corrupt and a cause of Pakistan’s various ills that was legalese. The Sharifs refused to explain their wealth and insisted that the prosecution failed to prove the case again them. That argument might work in a court of law. But it didn’t work in the peoples’ court.

The counter-argument that NS was thrown out because he fell out with the military resonated with the PML-N’s core support base (which is why the party won the seats that it did) but not with undecided swing voters. Going into Election 2018, the average voter with no strong partisan affiliation was embarrassed of associating with the PML-N. The sympathy vote or the resentment vote (ie Punjab rising up to stand behind a popular leader who stood against the establishment) didn’t materialise. Punjab did what it does best: side with the expected winner.

Those of us who were opposed to the PTI’s street agitation post-Election 2013 and its efforts to have election results altered or the government ousted by means other than those prescribed by law cannot take a different view here. Those who believe that elections were rigged should file election petitions. If some parties feel that the rigging was so organised that formal scrutiny of forms and vote count etc.will produce nothing, they should spend their time in parliament trying to reimagine and reorganise the ECP and the electoral processes.

But anyone who claims to be a democrat and a proponent of rule of law cannot justify fomenting chaos and instability as a means to strengthen democracy and supremacy of the law. To identify flaws in institutional processes or question the reliability of outcomes they produce is one thing. But to refuse to accept such outcomes is quite another. The PML-N has done the mature thing by stepping back from its initial rejection of the election result on the eve of July 25 and deciding to join the parliament. People have spoken in favour of the PTI. It is time to move on.

Elections come with the promise of change. They produce hope and legitimacy. It is for the elected leaders to channel the hope and leverage the legitimacy to take the tough decisions that are hard to make if compulsions of power kick in. Whether you believe in IK and the Naya Pakistan he promised or not, you have to concede that his is a tremendous story. From a successful cricketing hero with unparalleled celebrity to braving it out in Pakistani politics for 22 years to reach its pinnacle and become prime minister is quite the fairy tale.

But fairy tales end with “and they lived happily ever after”. Real life goes on. In getting here, IK has made various seedy compromises over the last two decades. But his supporters and proponents blame them on circumstances and compulsions of power. The argument has been that our depraved system doesn’t let a clean outsider rise to the top. To make that happen, the outsider has to play by the system’s rules to be able to acquire the authority that can then be used to change the system for the better. So compromises are an odious but necessary means to a noble end.

The contrary view is that. in playing by the system’s rules, the outsider becomes an insider and immune to the stench that outsiders find repulsive. The initial drive of getting to the top to change the dirty system gets replaced by the self-serving goal of getting to the top to stay at the top. The compulsions of power that encourage you to make compromises on the way up become even more potent when you begin to enjoy trappings of power and begin dreading the thought of losing them should you be reckless enough to revamp the system.

This is IK’s moment of truth. When he allowed electables within the PTI’s fold in end-2011, he argued that he had no option but to accept folks with questionable credentials to be able to form government. But that once he has power, those within his party would abide by the principles he advocates. IK enjoys a clean reputation and isn’t tainted with charges of financial impropriety. He has sold us the trickle-down model of accountability: he will start with himself and those around him and accountability will trickle down to all rungs of public service.

The PTI’s government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during the last five years left much to be desired in the realm of accountability or absence of nepotism or sensible policymaking or even the effective execution of declared policies. Three explanations were proffered for lack of living up to expectations. One, IK wasn’t running the government and so could only do so much from Banigala. Two, this was a young party’s first experience with governance. And three, the PTI had a coalition government in the province and a hostile government in the centre and could only do so much.

We have none of that now. IK is poised to be PM. As a popular leader with near-simple majority at the centre, he has no justification to pick anyone but the best candidates for the federal cabinet and other executive positions. Likewise, the fact that the PTI’s support is primarily rooted in his personal charisma and appeal, he will have no excuse to pick anyone but the most qualified and credible folks for public offices in Punjab and KP. His first order of business is the team he puts together to deliver all that he has promised. And he has no compulsions.

Elected civilian leaders often complain that unelected institutions circumscribe their domain. Here we have a popularly elected leader who is perceived to be the military’s favourite. We have seen elected civilian leaders labour under corruption charges while being hounded by courts. Here we have a leader who has held no public executive office so far, faces no accountability allegations and has been on the receiving end of no adverse judgments. Riding a wave of popularity, if he can’t reacquire the executive’s domain lost to overreach by unelected institutions, who can?

This is Imran Khan’s moment. He should celebrate and rejoice. He has given hope to millions of people across this very cynical land. May he succeed in living up to his promises. As he prepares for his new job (probably the first fulltime one in his life), he must remember that amongst human emotions, hope is audacious and fickle in equal parts. He may recall from Pakistan-India cricket games gone wrong: the transformation of adoring fans into fierce critics doesn’t take very long.

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