**[Ordeal of the polling staff](https://www.dawn.com/news/1430061/ordeal-of-the-polling-staff)**

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THE Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has paid the Pakistan Army Rs9 billion for providing security cover to 85,456 polling stations that were set up for the 2018 general elections. This comes to about Rs105,000 per polling station. The army deployed two personnel inside every polling station and two outside. It also provided security for the printing process and the transport of ballot papers. This was an arrangement between two institutions and it worked well as no security lapse was reported from anywhere.

The polling processes, however, were administered by public servants drawn mostly from the education department as per practice. Each polling station was headed by a presiding officer (PO) who was an officer of grade 17 or above. He/she had on average a staff of nine other public servants comprising three groups of two assistant presiding officers and one polling officer, to perform various chores at the polling station.

POs were promised a sum of Rs6,000 and the rest of the staff Rs4,500 per person. The total came to an average of Rs46,500 per polling station or Rs4bn for all 871,000 personnel. The per-person amount that the ECP paid to polls administrators was five to six times less than what it paid for poll security.

Election duty for polling staff is both tough and thankless. This time, it started with POs attending a two-day training organised by the ECP. They were later called by the returning officers (ROs) to their offices where Nadra officials installed the RTS app in their mobile phones. The POs had to pay an additional visit to RO offices to take a formal oath to perform their duties honestly and diligently. The premises of these offices were not adequate for over 300 persons at a time and lacked basic facilities like a place to sit in the shade and drinking water that were much needed in the unpleasant weather. Attendance thus was accompanied by a feeling of humiliation.

*One can’t expect polling officials to go through hassle without expectation of reward or recognition.*

The POs then queued up at the RO offices a day before polling to collect polling material, including ballot papers. As per practice, they had to bring these under security cover to their assigned polling station and spent the night there without any boarding and lodging facilities.

The gruelling process of polling started at 8am the next day and continued for 10 hours without a break. They had to make their own arrangements for food and tea as accepting these from any local party would be considered a favour which they were required to refuse.

At polling’s conclusion, the sensitive exercise of vote count, preparation of forms and announcement of results began. This took four to six hours after which the staff packed up the entire polling paraphernalia and travelled, under security cover, to RO offices where they had to wait for their turn to fulfil the handing-over formalities.

This was the end of their ordeal but under the condition that they could be called in at any time to correct/confirm details or to present themselves before an election tribunal in case of a controversy.

The amount paid to the polling personnel for this long ordeal was not enough to even cover actual costs incurred by them. The duty is considered ‘risky’ as minor action, or non-action, by staff members could cause controversy, and have a negative impact on their reputation and careers.

One cannot expect the officials to go through such hassle, and humiliation, and perform a dangerous duty with dedication and motivation, without expectation of reward or recognition of any sort. It is thus not surprising that as soon as the process to appoint them starts, they launch a campaign to have their names struck off the lists. But only a few lucky ones succeed.

As the number of polling stations is steadily going up, the requirement for personnel is also increasing. Elections 2002 were conducted by 568,120 personnel at 64,475 polling stations. The ECP now finds it hard to recruit the required numbers, and is compelled to mobilise the top bureaucracy that, in turn, employs law-enforcement agencies to force unwilling staff to attend training workshops and perform poll duty.

This is not the way to inspire public servants to give their best and deliver quality elections. The entire model of administration of polling processes needs to be thoroughly reviewed and revised.

The first essential change must be to replace the current element of force and fear with incentives and rewards. If we want quality polling processes, we need to pay the administrators, at least as much as we pay those providing them with security cover.

Though general elections are held every five years, we now also have local government elections; besides there are by-elections held every now and then. In that way, the demand for education staff to perform poll duty is permanent. The ECP needs a formal institutional arrangement with education departments so that the latter owns the job and is prepared to partner whenever required.

The second important aspect relates to the training of election staff. Elections appear deceptively simple to hold, but quality administration needs a thorough understanding of the relevant laws and rules and also the ability to interpret them. It goes without saying that the brief training that election staff are offered cannot fulfil this need.

The ECP needs to rethink its training model. Instead of having temporary, one-off arrangements, it should institutionalise its training programme by involving distant-education universities. The open university and/or virtual university can easily develop a polling administration short course for not only the polling staff but also the polling agents of political parties. The education department can add this course to job requirements for grade 17 officers and maintain a ready pool of certified POs.

Our electoral history has been erratic to say the least. This has hampered institutional solutions to perennial challenges in election administration. Ad hoc quick fixes and tinkering with traditional models have failed to meet popular expectations and lie at the heart of our electoral woes. It is now time to develop a long-term institutional approach for better outcomes in future.

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