**[The challenges of election day](https://www.dawn.com/news/1423419/the-challenges-of-election-day)**

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ONE must confess that, despite all the hard work of the Election Commission, a dark cloud of suspicion did hang over polling day on July 25. There seems to be near-consensus among a number of political parties, civil society organisations, local and international media commentators that the pre-election environment in Pakistan was not fair. The EU Election Observation Mission also acknowledged complaints regarding the pre-election phase in its preliminary statement issued after the election.

Despite the importance of the pre- and post-election phases in Pakistan, polling day, too, is critical in many ways. One can divide the day into five distinct stages. The first stage is the casting of votes which continues uninterrupted for nine hours. This time the duration was increased to 10 hours. Snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes used to be the most popular mode of election rigging in developing countries before the advent of the electronic media.

Despite negative perceptions about the pre-election phase, the process of polling went exceptionally smooth on July 25, with very few major violations of the law or rules reported. The movement of voters and the conduct of polling staff and polling agents was quite disciplined and orderly, and at least partly the credit can go to the presence of armed forces personnel both inside and outside the polling stations. Polling staff and security personnel — both police and military — were generally polite and helpful to the elderly and handicapped persons. Many polling stations witnessed long queues even before polling time which indicated the public’s zest to exercise their right to vote. Towards closing time, again queues formed and it appeared that many of these voters might not be able to vote before 6 pm. Both PML-N and PPP leaders demanded a one-hour extension in polling time which the ECP declined. However, it sent instructions to the presiding officers (POs) to not turn away the voters present even outside the polling station premises. Generally, this instruction seems to have been followed.

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Despite the presence of military personnel inside and outside the polling stations, the occasional visit of their officers to polling stations and filming and photographing by the ISPR crew, apparently, there was no incident where military personnel gave any unlawful instruction to the polling staff.

The extreme hot and humid weather made it very difficult for the polling staff to perform their duties comfortably. The rooms where polling activity was conducted became extremely stuffy and warm. Voters staying there for even 10 to 15 minutes would felt extremely exhausted. It is highly commendable that the polling staff, both men and women, and security staff in their thick uniforms spent more than 12 hours in such conditions. There were media reports of some polling staff fainting, even dying, of suffocation and hot weather.

Counting of the votes is the second, critical stage of polling day activities and the law requires that it should be carried out in the presence of candidates or their agents. At the end of counting, the presiding officer completes Form 45-Result of the Count and Form 46-Ballot Paper Account, affixes his and a senior assistant presiding officer’s signatures and thumb impressions and asks candidates present or their agents to sign the forms. A copy of the completed, signed and stamped Forms 45 and 46 is required to be given to each candidate or his agent and another copy is to be affixed at a prominent place in the polling station for public knowledge. Many political parties and their candidates have complained that their polling agents were turned out at the time of counting and that they were not given a copy of Forms 45 and 46. The ECP has contradicted these allegations and has asked political parties and candidates to provide it with evidence so that appropriate action may be taken. Since almost all political parties have voiced these complaints, these need to be seriously investigated.

The next stage is the transmission of election results from each polling station to the respective returning officers. It is here that all hell seems to have broken loose. Some problems have even been acknowledged by the ECP. The smartphone-based new Result Transmission System, reportedly prepared by Nadra for ECP, apparently collapsed soon after it was put to use. It seems that the system had not been adequately tested. The problem was not just limited to the breakdown of the RTS; reportedly, many presiding officers inexplicably turned up very late at the ROs’ offices to submit the original Forms 45 and 46 leading to suspicion that they were being pressured to change the result count. Only a thorough investigation and forensic audit of Forms 45 can determine the exact issues.

The fourth stage relates to the consolidation of results of each constituency by the respective ROs on the basis of the Forms 45 received from the POs. Each RO was provided a laptop, two IT personnel and a computer-based application for processing the results through a Result Management System (which was developed in-house by the ECP). Reportedly, the RMS worked fine but since Form 45 came in late, the consolidation of results through RMS was slow. The RMS was supposed to generate Form 47-Provisional Consolidated Statement of Results of the Count and Form 48-Consolidated Statement of the Results of the Count furnished by the POs.

The last stage of the polling day was the transmission of results from the ROs to the ECP. Since ECP has taken almost 48 hours to declaring about 99 per cent of the results, it is not clear exactly which stage of the election day proceedings suffered from problems. As stated earlier, only a thorough investigation can identify the actual problem, fix responsibility and, above all, allay the suspicions of political parties, candidates and the public in general.

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