The establishment strikes back

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Imran Khan’s relentless struggle spanning over two decades has finally been crowned with success. With the PTI’s success in securing the highest number of seats in the National Assembly, even though falling short of a simple majority, Imran Khan is in a position to form a coalition government at the Centre with the help of independent candidates and some other parties. The substantial increase in its seats in the KPK Provincial Assembly will enable PTI to form the government there without any need for a coalition partner. It may also succeed in forming the government in Punjab if, as appears likely, sufficient number of independent candidates join it even though PML(N) originally led it by a few seats in the Provincial Assembly. Thus, PTI may not only control the Centre but also the provincial governments in KPK and Punjab. In Sindh, PPP is in a comfortable majority to form the government without any need for a coalition partner. The provincial government in Balochistan will necessarily be a coalition of several parties.

PML(N) suffered the worst in the just concluded general elections. It not only lost its comfortable majority in the National Assembly and the government at the Centre but is likely to lose its control over Punjab also. In both these places it may have to be content with assuming the position of the opposition leader. On the face of it, this appears to be quite surprising. According to most reports and surveys preceding the elections, the governance record of the PML(N) government in Punjab was better than that of the PTI government in KPK and the PPP government in Sindh during the previous term. But whereas PML(N) in Punjab lost its substantial majority in the Provincial Assembly, both PTI and PPP were able to increase their strength substantially in the Provincial Assemblies in KPK and Sindh respectively. Even at the Centre, the PML(N) government had achieved considerable success in overcoming the energy crisis, raising Pakistan’s GDP growth rate during its term from 2013 to 2018, and initiating various developmental projects on a large scale under CPEC and otherwise. This is not to deny, however, its failure in reducing the budgetary and current account deficits, checking the substantial increase in the national debt, and alleviating poverty. Still, it appears that PML(N) was badly hurt by factors other than purely its performance in Punjab and at the Centre.

Many observers and analysts, both domestic and foreign, have made allegations that the elections on 25 July were preceded by a process of extensive and systematic rigging and political engineering which exclusively targeted PML(N) and its supporters to deny them a level playing field during the elections. Panama leaks were exploited by PTI and other elements to the hilt to level charges of massive corruption against former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family to tarnish their image and alienate the Pakistani people from PML(N). Electronic and social media were extensively influenced by the powers that be to carry out a sustained character assassination campaign against them. The elections were, thus, held with the hands of PML(N) virtually tied behind its back to pave the way for PTI’s success.

According to the EU election observer mission chief, “Most interlocutors acknowledged a systematic effort to undermine the former ruling party through cases of corruption, contempt of court and terrorist charges against its leaders and candidates. The electorally sensitive timing as well as content of decisions of courts investigating or adjudicating on matters related to high profile Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) candidates were perceived by several stakeholders as an indication of politicisation of the judiciary. These cases reshaped the political environment ahead of the elections.” The EU mission in its preliminary report further drew attention to restrictions on freedom of expression and unequal opportunity to campaign. The report mentioned that “media outlets and journalists suffered from restrictions, which resulted in self-censorship.”

It is interesting to note once again that despite all these efforts to prop it up, PTI was not able to gain even a simple majority of the seats in the National Assembly to form the government on its own. May be this was part of the plan by the powers that be so that the in-coming PTI government remains on a tight leash to be dislodged through the formation of a new coalition if and when it tries to assert itself against their wishes and policy preferences, especially in security and foreign policy fields. Even in terms of the votes cast, PTI secured 16.85 million votes as against 12.89 million for PML(N), 6.9 million for PPP, 6.01 million for independents, 2.53 million for MMA, and 2.19 million for TLP. Thus, PTI failed by a wide margin to secure even a simple majority of the votes cast. Imran Khan and PTI have every right to celebrate and rejoice over their electoral victory. However, they should also ponder over the causes and the implications of their limited mandate while preparing themselves for the assumption of their future responsibilities.

The results of the elections must also be seen against the background of the perennial tussle for supremacy between the elected governments and the military establishment in Pakistan over the past six decades. Repeated military takeovers in the past have prevented democratic institutions and traditions from taking root in the country besides undermining the sanctity of the constitution and the rule of law. The absence of the rule of law has engendered cronyism at the cost of meritocracy and encouraged corruption in the governmental functioning. This undesirable trend can be reversed by upholding the sanctity of the constitution, establishing the rule of law and strengthening the various institutions of the state so that they function within their constitutional and legal limits on the basis of merit and justice. It is particularly important that the present exploitative and oppressive system of governance in the country is reformed to provide social and economic justice to the common man in Pakistan.

Besides charges of corruption and pre-poll rigging and political engineering, it was PML(N) government’s inability to reform the current system of governance and empathize with the common man that hurt it most during the elections. By the time the elections took place, PML(N) was viewed by many, especially the down-trodden, as the government of the rich, for the rich and by the rich. It was in this perspective that Imran Khan’s slogan of a “naya Pakistan” and promise of the reform of the existing unjust system of governance resonated with the people of Pakistan, especially its youth, leading to PTI’s victory in the elections.

For the sake of strengthening the democratic process in the country, it is important now that despite the reservations on account of pre-poll rigging and the mismanagement of the elections, Imran Khan and PTI are given a fair chance to form the government at the Centre and fulfil their promises of good governance to the nation. Let us hope and pray that Imran Khan and his party succeed in this endeavour and are able to overcome the formidable domestic and external challenges confronting the country. They should then be judged by the people of Pakistan at the next elections. However, one cannot ignore the possibility that being at the head of an inherently weak and unstable coalition and in view of the dominant role of the establishment, which represents and defines the current unjust status quo, in Pakistan’s polity, Imran Khan’s success may prove to be elusive.

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