The wind of change

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July 27, 2018

It is perhaps somehow fitting that the Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) should have its moment of triumph marred by allegations of rigging. After all, the PTI had claimed that the 2013 election had been stolen from it, and it had made its signature 2014 sit-in in Islamabad against the electoral malpractices that had led to its defeat.

Not only was there an entire litany of complaints about pre-poll rigging, not only were there continued question marks about the role of the intelligence agencies in PTI decision-making, but the polling itself raised questions. There was a cloud of complaints about the expulsion of polling agents, and of the refusal to carry out the counting before them not to issue them certified copies of the count. The Election Commission of Pakistan also conceded that its computerised management system had collapsed, and in the end, it had gone back to the old manual method of compiling results in use up to and including the 2013 election.

The PTI stood accused of benefiting, for not just did it not join the complaints, but its polling agents were said to be present while others were thrown out. Not even its powerful alleged backers could manage the coordinated effort necessary for expelling the polling agents. However, the allegation is a serious one and must be investigated.

Could the expulsion of the polling agents alone make the result doubtful? Probably. Polling agents are vital to making the process fair and thus credible. The use of this method would indicate a guiding hand well experienced in electioneering. However, the size of the PTI win might not yield a simple majority, but it does preclude any other party forming the government. It is thus a little like the 1988 election result, where the PPP won the most seats by far, but not a majority.

The Islami Jamhoori Ittehad did not concede defeat. PML Secretary-General Iqbal Ahmad Khan actually held a press conference to claim victory, which he later admitted doing to keep up morale for the provincial election due the next day (that was still a time when national and provincial assembly elections were held three days apart, rather than on the same day, as at present). Indeed, IJI President Mian Nawaz Sharif offered to form a government. That was theoretically possible, but the gap between the PPP and the IJI could not be covered, and Mian Nawaz remained in Punjab as Chief Minister.

There is another point of similarity with 1988 that exists today. The independents hold the balance in the Punjab Assembly. Then, they supported the IJI, which was the largest party in the Punjab Assembly, and Mian Nawaz remained Chief Minister. The agencies may have delivered the independents, but they remained because of the ‘Changamanga operation’. That was a dinner for all MPAs, not just independents, who supported Mian Nawaz, at the Changamanga forest rest house on the eve of the confidence vote which was to confirm him as Chief Minister. There were many allegations that members were not allowed to leave, though one person there said that was not true. However, that person said, the Mian brothers told their guests that they could take any amount of money they might need after having had to spend on their election.

The Asghar Khan case indicates that that money was made available by the establishment. If true, Mian Shahbaz would know that such support would not be available this time. Indeed, it is likely that it would be available for the other side.

It is perhaps in view of that that there have already been speculations about the PTI’s candidates for the Punjab Chief Ministership. One candidate is PTI Vice- Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who spent 1985-93 in the Punjab Assembly, the last three years as Finance Minister in the Wyne Cabinet. It was in the 1993 election that he went into the PPP after he had been denied a national ticket. He stayed in the PPP until he moved to the PTI in 2011, abandoning the post of Foreign Minister. As PTI’s member, he came into conflict with party Secretary General Jehangir Tareen over many issues, which is one reason that he faces other contenders. The one backed by Tareen is Abdul Aleem Khan, who has been elected to both national and provincial seats in Lahore. Aleem Khan served in Ch Parvez Elahi’s 2002-2007 Punjab Cabinet, and thus also is limited to provincial experience.

Another candidate is Fawad Chaudhary. Though he has no government experience, he is the nephew of Ch Altaf Ahmad, the late Punjab Governor, and thus has a certain interest in the province. Another throwback to 1988 is that, in a vain attempt to win power, the PPP sent one of its grandees, Farooq Leghari, to Punjab as an MPA, only to recall him to the federal Cabinet, when he fought a by-election on a seat he had vacated earlier. Similarly, if any of the three is not selected, and if the ultimate candidate cannot achieve the chief ministership, accommodation in the federal cabinet is likely.

That seems to be what will happen in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the only other province where the PTI will form the government. Indeed, the PTI has increased its majority in KP, and thus incumbent CM Pervez Khattak stakes a claim for re-selection. If not, he has won a national seat and can be inducted in the federal cabinet.

The PPP will form the Sindh government, and outgoing CM Murad Ali Shah, who got the job in the middle of the last term, will be a leading candidate for the position. The PPP has created a unique situation, for its National Assembly parliamentary party will contain a former President, Asif Zardari. He was last a member of the House in 1990-93, when he was under arrest, being brought from the jail in Karachi to attend sessions. It will be different this time unless Imran Khan makes good on his campaign promises to go after the PPP just as he went after the PML(N).

Imran may have added another feather to a cap which included captaining the 1992 World Cup team and building a cancer hospital. However, while he has pledged not to persecute political opponents, it remains to be seen how much pressure he faces from the party cadres over this. He is also a throwback to the 1988 era when he becomes the first person after Benazir Bhutto to enter the National Assembly as the frontrunner for PM, never before having held office. He has one advantage over her: she was an MNA for the first time. At least Khan has won his third term.

He too has a number of challenges to face, not least that of the foreign exchange crisis caused by a widening trade gap. He is expected to tap Asad Umar for Finance Minister. It is to be seen how he performs. Another interesting thing will be the relationship Khan develops with the establishment which he is supposedly linked to, and which is so widely credited with this win.

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