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**A rotten system**

If I had any faith left in the system, it has been effectively busted by the stink generated during the Senate election. If democracy is to prevail in the country, we are in dire need of an intensive and extensive overhaul across its various facets.

It is no longer a secret that votes have been purchased to win seats by some political parties, of which incontrovertible evidence is available in the form of video and audio messages. The material was submitted to the ECP with a request for immediate action. For the sake of justice, the minimum that should have been done is to have ordered an enquiry and, pending its outcome, postpone the election on the suspected seats.

The fact that someone seen as dubious has bought a seat in the federal capital under the watch of the ECP is a slap across the face of the entire system. It has also happened when grave apprehensions had been expressed at various forums regarding the possibility of some parties and individuals indulging in this nefarious practice. Yet no timely action was taken. It has jolted the very foundations of democracy in this country.

The government has been consistently advocating an environment of transparency in the election process. For this purpose, it had also solicited advice from the SC to hold the Senate election through open and identifiable ballots.

In its judgement, the apex court had held that the secrecy of the ballot is not absolute: “The secrecy of the ballot has not to be implemented in the ideal or absolute sense, but to be tempered by practical considerations necessitated by the processes of elections”. It had gone further by stating that “in order to achieve the mandate of the ECP in terms of Article 218 (3) read with Article 220 and other enabling provisions of the Constitution and the law, the ECP is required to take all available measures including utilising technologies to fulfil the solemn constitutional duty to ensure that the election is conducted honestly, justly, fairly and in accordance with law and that corrupt practices are guarded against”.

It was, therefore, rightly speculated that the ECP would take adequate measures to ensure that no malpractices are resorted to in the election process including water marking or numbering the ballot papers. In reality, there were people who were openly and blatantly proclaiming that, in spite of not having the requisite numbers, they would win the seat for Yousaf Raza Gilani. That is exactly what happened. Obviously, some additional votes were cast for him for a price which was paid to the dishonourable individuals by some equally dishonourable individuals.

The PTI’s position has always been clear on the subject as it remains the only party to date which had expelled 20 of its sitting members of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly during the 2018 Senate elections for selling their votes. It may again do the same, but that will not put an end to this scourge.

As held out by the SC, the principal responsibility for this rests on the shoulders of the ECP and the chief election commissioner (CEC). He has the complaints before him. He has the video and audio proofs. He should launch an enquiry to identify the culprits who are guilty of having sold their souls for measly pieces of silver. They must be punished including the prospect of expelling them from the assemblies. The beneficiaries of these corrupt deals should also be punished by depriving them of their ill-gotten assets.

This is no small matter. It should also not be taken as a small matter. It is a question of having faith in democracy and the overall system. At this juncture, both are rotten. This is the first time that this wicked practice has been drummed into the open arena. It has to be dealt with one way or the other: either culprits are caught and punished to resuscitate people’s faith, or ignore them to the detriment of democracy and the system both.

The integrity of the ECP is on the line. It must act by making use of the evidence that it has in abundance. The chance is here and now. The need is here and now. It cannot be put off. If the ECP allows this, it would lose credibility as an institution that can be entrusted with the mammoth responsibility of holding just, transparent and fair elections in the country.

We stand at a crossroads. We have to decide what kind of system we want in the country: a system led by criminals, or a transparent system dictated by the genuine will of the people? In case of the former, we are doomed. If we struggle for the latter, we may have a window of opportunity to take this country forward on the road to deliverance from those who have hijacked the system exclusively for their personal advancement.

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