**Pakistan: Facing Difficult Choices**

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Following the delimitation process, the ECP is about to release the election schedule amidst an ensuing debate on whether the general elections would be held on the announced date. Even if the Supreme Court and now the ECP have advised the electronic media to desist from casting shadows over the holding of elections on 8 February, a few political parties have expressed security and weather-related concerns while raising distressing questions. A rejuvenated Nawaz Sharif has returned home to create history by yearning to become the PM for the fourth time. However, seemingly, he has not been able to make up his mind on the ‘accountability’ of those who showed him the door. Khan is languishing behind bars with his party’s future as well as electoral symbol in jeopardy. His alleged ‘maltreatment’ and ‘political victimisation’ continues while his party awaits a go-ahead from the ECP to contest elections. The PPP has apparently settled certain ‘hierarchical matters’ thereby establishing Asif Zardari’s supremacy over his ‘new look’ son in important political matters.
Democracy in Pakistan has always been uncertain. Hence, it is extremely difficult to anticipate what might happen once the election results are announced. To make matters even more complicated, the upcoming elections have added a new factor to an already murky political chessboard. One party is already celebrating victory assuming that the next governmental set-up will have the Prime Minister from its platform. Everyone knows but no one is clarifying as to from who and why some parties are demanding a ‘level playing field’. Two things do not make any sense here. How can you possibly decide which party will get how many seats before the elections are held? Secondly, if you know that the ‘chosen’ party is winning while denying you a level playing field, why would you participate in the election game in the first place? Is it the crying wolf syndrome or crybaby tactics? Either way, some kind of clarity is needed.
The caretaker government has repeatedly promised to hold free and fair elections. It also claims to have taken all possible steps for the nation to go to polls on the announced date. Under the circumstances, it would be politically wrong to question its ‘ultimate neutrality’ in fulfilling its mandated responsibility with utmost honesty and dedication. Nevertheless, in all fairness, PM Kakar needs to allay the fears of various political parties in a manner that satisfies their legitimate concerns particularly, the presumed ‘favoritism’ allegedly ‘granted’ to a certain major party. Such a positive gesture may inspire all parties to announce their respective manifestos, as none has so far spelled out the detailed plans to take the country out of its present economic woes or the basic contours of their perceived foreign policy. Similarly, the contesting parties are required to confirm whether they would continue following the economic policy of the caretaker government specifically regarding the SIFC and its endeavour to repatriate all undocumented foreigners.
Perception is stronger than reality. If you go by the general perception, you could safely deduce that the upcoming elections, whenever held, are likely to produce a coalition government (read Qaumi Hakoomat) with every party getting its ‘due’ and PML (N) the Lion’s Share. A disturbing question mark looms over the ‘selection’ of next PM. There would hardly be any element of surprise in the endgame if Nawaz Sharif were to fill the coveted post. Hence, you may get ready for a serious intraparty and interparty tug of war. In this scenario, one might see the return of the Jedi part-II while old grudges re-emerging with rhetorical saga.
The other scenario is even scarier. For instance, imagine this. PTI’s candidates are announced and immediately made controversial while Khan is still incarcerated. The party gets its revered election symbol but the cases against Khan keep coming up one after another. His five-year sentence in the Tosha Khana case stays; he stands disqualified; and, therefore, could not contest election even from his hometown. Law enforcement agencies are trying to calm down anxious crowds, thereby creating a serious law and order situation. A couple of tv channels are shut down while Pemra is trying to stop the inflow of pro-Khan commentaries from abroad. The election results are announced with PML (N) emerging as the leading party while PTI gets about 30 to 35 seats in the National Assembly. Khan’s reactions coming from the jail are contradicted by his own party spokespersons as the new PM takes oath. Election results are made controversial just to prolong the working hours of the higher Courts. The stalled political uncertainty strikes back. The economy is forced to run via stop-gap arrangements. Back to square one.
The ideal scenario? Khan is allowed to contest with his favorite bat in hand just before the elections. His being in jail or outside does not matter. Since he and his party have not been able to come out of the May 9 and 10 unfortunate paradigms, PTI will not be able to perform as has been perceived in social media. A level playing field, as demanded by PPP, is provided by the caretaker government in the most ‘free and fair’ elections ever conducted in the country, and the nation accepts the results with a deep sigh of relief. The PML (N) is still in the lead followed by PTI and PPP. With the help of MQM, a reluctant PPP, IPP, other smaller parties and a few independent candidates, the PML (N) forms the government. The picture does not look pretty at all particularly considering the dismal performance of the PDM’s 16-month rule. However, the opposition benches occupied by the PTI’s new faces, mostly lawyers, might be able to provide the first ever proper opposition in the Assembly. Meanwhile, the possible public unrest, social media’s outcries and foreign critiques are automatically taken care of.
As anything is possible in Pakistan, the nation might get a ‘surprise’ just before and after the elections. So much so that even Khan could be seen striking a ‘deal’ by compromising on his larger-than-life ego. Nevertheless, one thing could be said with one hundred percent certainty. Even if the elections are delayed on one pretext or another, it will not be easy for any new government to successfully address all internal and external challenges may it complete its full five-year term. To begin with, it will have to decide on whether to follow the path of ‘progress’ set in motion by the caretaker set-up or not. Incoming huge investments and SIFC? Privatization of SOE’s? The process of repatriation of undocumented foreigners? The new wave of terrorist incidences and so on and so forth. Even a courageous Marcus Aurelius would think a hundred times before becoming the next Prime Minister of the Republic of Pakistan.