**The art of capturing the mandate**

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[Dr Naazir Mahmood](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-naazir-mahmood)

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In the seven decades of Pakistan’s existence, at least seven strategies or tactics have been developed in the country to capture or steal people’s mandate.

These tactics – or tools if you will – have been used with various degrees of success in the past 70 years, but one common feature among them is that most of these tools were perfected in the 1950s and then used again and again in each succeeding decade. So, what exactly are these tactics that have been so useful and how people keep falling prey to them?

First, topple the government or its leader without resorting to any no-confidence motion. This tool was first used within the very first week of Pakistan’s creation when the elected government of Dr Khan Saheb in the NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) was removed without a no-confidence motion. It is an established practice that if a national or provincial government needs to be removed, the opposition introduces a no-confidence motion and if the ruling leader or party does not have enough support in the concerned assembly, they lose the confidence vote. This is the legal and constitutional way of removing a government or its leader.

The removal of Dr Khan was not the last such episode. In fact, this engendered a plethora of such removals from both the centre and the provinces. The chief ministers of East Bengal, Punjab and Sindh were repeatedly removed at the behest of the central government. You will find not a couple, but dozens of such incidents in the history of Pakistan. The names are too many to cite here, but from Dr Khan, Ayub Khuhro and Fazlul Haq to the Bhuttos and the Sharifs, there is a long list of leaders whose mandate was captured or stolen.

Second, call them traitors and deprive them of their popular support. For this, a leader or a party does not need to be a popular leader across Pakistan. If you are a provincial or regional leader, or you are not likely to win many seats in the elections, even then you can be labelled a traitor. The condition is that you must deviate from the dominant narrative. If that narrative is of hatred and religious discord, you just need to talk about peace and harmony and you qualify to be a traitor.

Perhaps the first leader to be declared a traitor was Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and then there is a long line of them: Molvi Fazlul Haq, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Suhrawardy, Fatima Jinnah, the Bhuttos, down to the Sharifs. All these leaders have carried the proud stigma of being a traitor at various times. This tool is useful against big, medium and small-scale leaders alike. Even if your party or leader is not likely to win a couple of seats in elections, your defiant mood and questioning nature can deprive you of whatever meagre public support you command.

Third, create a conspiracy case. If declaring a traitor doesn’t do the trick, go a step further and concoct a conspiracy case that can substantiate allegations of treason. Be it the Rawalpindi, Agartala and Hyderabad conspiracy cases or the airplane high-jacking case, all have been used to prove that those who differ from the dominant power – civilian or military – run a risk of being involved in a conspiracy against the state. The hollowness of these cases can be gauged from the fact that even after being convicted in the Rawalpindi conspiracy case, Faiz Ahmed Faiz still commanded people’s respect. The Agartala and Hyderabad conspiracy cases were abolished by Gen Ayub Khan and Gen Ziaul Haq respectively, when they outlived their utility. The airplane high-jacking case died its own death when Nawaz was exiled.

Fourth, physically eliminate the leader. Liaquat Ali Khan was perhaps the first leader of a national stature who was eliminated in this fashion. Irrespective of what wrongs he committed, Liaquat Ali Khan was the leader of the house and commanded majority support. Though the real conspiracy behind his assassination was never fully disclosed, those who benefitted the most from his elimination included Malik Ghulam Mohammad, Iskandar Mirza and Gen Ayub Khan; all three of them became the heads of state one after the other. In the presence of Liaquat Ali Khan, perhaps none of them could have been elevated to such a lofty position.

Be it the judicial murder of Z A Bhutto or the terrorist attack on Benazir Bhutto, they deprived people of their favourite leaders. But physical elimination is not done by assassination alone. You can also exile a leader for 10 years like Nawaz Sharif, or put him/her behind bars for a long time such as Asif Zardari. Those who do all of this are never answerable in any court, even if the cases against those assassinated, incarcerated or exiled are highly controversial and lack any semblance of judicial accuracy. You may also capture the mandate just by creating an atmosphere in which leaders’ safety is always under threat.

Fifth, you may steal peoples’ mandate by abrogating laws and writing your own constitution. Ghulam Mohammad used his own interpretation of the law and the federal court stamped it for him. Maj Gen Iskandar Mirza abrogated the first constitution that had come into being after almost a decade. Gen Ayub Khan formed a constitutional commission of judges but then ultimately wrote his own constitution, promulgated in 1962 and arrogated all powers to himself, thus depriving people of their mandate for over a decade. Gen Yahya Khan abrogated the 1962 constitution and gave his own legal framework order.

Gen Ziaul Haq and Gen Musharraf mutilated the constitution so much that it took decades to restore some of its original countenance, though a portion of it is still bleeding and mauled. But this was not done by dictators alone. Even Z A Bhutto made changes to the constitution that have had a lasting impact on the minorities. Nawaz Sharif in his 1990s’ incarnations made such loathsome changes to the constitution that it started resembling a document from the Middle Ages. In this disenfranchisement of large segments of society, the judiciary was hand-in-glove.

Sixth, to capture the mandate you can use the media to your heart’s content to tell the people that the leaders they love are a worthless bunch of crooks or nincompoops. The print media was used effectively against the second prime minister of Pakistan, Khawaja Nazimuddin in the early 1950s. Then both the print and electronic media were used against Fatima Jinnah. After toppling Z A Bhutto, a series of programmes were shown on PTV that maligned Bhutto and his family. In the 1990s, the media was again used against the Bhuttos, when the Sharifs were relatively favoured.

Finally, the seventh tactic, or tool, to capture people’s mandate is to simply manipulate the elections. Perhaps the first such practice was used against Mirza Ibrahim, then on a massive scale against Fatima Jinnah in the 1960s. This manipulation can range from installing outright hostile caretaker governments, such as Ghulam Ishaq Khan did when in 1990 he made Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi the caretaker prime minister while the latter was stiffly against Benazir Bhutto, or installing Jam Sadiq Ali as caretaker chief minister of Sindh who surpassed all levels of indecency against Benazir Bhutto and her party, which enjoyed popular support at the time. So much so, that the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad had to be created to capture the mandate.

To conclude, the seven tools outlined here do not present an exhaustive list of such mechanisms. If you count, you may cross the mark of a dozen and still be counting. Thus, my friends, the story of the 2018 elections is not new, it has been repeated again and again. So let’s try to relax and enjoy.

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK and works in Islamabad.