**[Poll fervour](https://www.dawn.com/news/1425904/poll-fervour)**

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THE elections are over, and so is the anxiety that was witnessed then. Much has been said and written about the national elections, hence we will restrict our comments to the elections held in the (now formerly) tribal areas in general and Waziristan in particular. For the first time, people were casting their votes as part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Though the merger of KP and Fata had taken place on paper, on the ground almost everything was the same.

The elections started with many doubts and mistrust. Free and fair elections in Waziristan had been a pipe dream. The biggest tragedy with regard to North Waziristan is that despite being amongst the oldest and most developed of the tribal districts it has only one National Assembly seat whereas all the other older agencies have two each. The census was, unfortunately, carried out practically at the peak of Operation Zarb-i-Azb, hence the actual population could not have been counted. The first setback to free and fair elections in Waziristan was the barring of a candidate Mohsin Dawar, affiliated with the Pakhtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), from entering North Waziristan by the deputy commissioner under the Maintenance of Public Order.

Dawar appealed to the Peshawar High Court against the orders wherein the court set aside the decision. This was the first step towards justice for the tribals, and the first benefit of the merger.

*For the first time, elections in Waziristan were free and fair.*

During the election campaign, for the first time, candidates had free access to every nook and corner of the district. There was no fear of militants, and the army extended full cooperation in enabling candidates to have corner meetings at will. For the first time, almost all political parties awarded tickets to their candidates, who were contesting elections under party banners and symbols. Though the situation varied from agency to agency, in previous elections only JUI-F candidates used party flags — all others contested as independent.

The biggest and most surprising change was, however, the interest of female voters in the elections. For the first time, a female candidate from Kurram district, Ali Begum — a retired civil servant — was contesting. Women were seen going around, from house to house, raising awareness on the importance of their participation in the election process. Election day was more of a carnival for the women of Waziristan. Had the ECP raised the number of and selected easily accessible polling stations for women, their participation could have increased manifold. But in spite of all the hurdles, the women went to the polling stations; it was a delight to see them forming queues in front of the polling booths.

Then came the election results. They were a surprise for everyone and experts will be commenting in greater detail. Here focus is on the results of the tribal districts; two factors are highlighted. First, the candidates affiliated with the PTM won their constituencies in North and South Waziristan even though they were first timers and the PTM, as an organisation, was not participating in the elections. Second, the PTI came out as the largest party in the tribal districts. The JUI-F only got one seat from South Waziristan, while the nationalist parties didn’t get any.

This shows that the nationalist and religious parties were not in sync with the aspirations of the masses, and that the PTM and PTI knew the mood of the people. PTI chairman Imran Khan supported the contentions of the PTM minus the slogans against government institutions. He supported the PTM-affiliated candidates and didn’t award party tickets to candidates contesting against them.

It can safely be concluded that the masses bought the narrative set by the PTM, rejecting that of the religious and nationalist parties. For now, the religious and nationalist parties will not be setting the agenda for the Pakhtuns.

Those who lost the elections will come up with various excuses, and the debate whether elections were fair or not will continue, but one thing is clear: for the first time ever, elections in Waziristan were free and fair. They were held without threats and intimidations, the rallies were more like festivals and corner meetings like carnivals. For the first time, there was a feeling that the people of the tribal districts were also a part of Pakistan.

Having cribbed and cried for so many years, this is the first time the people of tribal districts thank the government for holding fair elections, and the armed forces (especially the GOC 7 infantry division) for maintaining peace and allowing them free movement. They are thankful to the governor and his team, and last but not the least to the ECP.

As part of KP and mainstream Pakistan, this is a new beginning for the people of the tribal districts. Imran Khan is not only loved here as a cricketing hero and a fearless politician but also regarded as their next of kin. They will surely have great expectation from him and hopefully he will not disappoint the people.

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