Changing trends in religious vote

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August 13, 2018

The voting data of 2018 election has divulged a very interesting trend as far as the performance of the religio-political parties is concerned. In each election since 1977, with the exception of the atypical episode of 2002 vote when the religious sentiments were smartly exploited against the US by the religio-political parties in the aftermath of the 9/11 situation, the vote bank of the traditional religio-political parties has shown the signs of gradual shrinkage, while suddenly there is an upsurge in the popularity of a different kind of religious party which arrived on the scene just few months back – Allama Khadim Hussein Rizvi’s Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). A cursory glance at the data shows that all the old and considered-to-be-well-entrenched religio-political parties, including the Jammat-e-Islami (JI), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazlur Rehman (JUI – F), Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan – Noorani (JUP-N) and the Sunni Tehreek (ST), are fast losing the support in their respective strongholds. This trend is not surprising at all. But nobody could have imagined as near as in October 2017 that the TLP would suddenly emerge as the most potent religious force on the political horizon backed by a very handsome vote bank that is scattered in almost every constituency in Pakistan.

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The 2018 election data reveals very interesting trends of the religious vote. All the religio-political parties, including big alliances and smaller splinter groups, together secured around 5.1 million votes in total, amounting to 9.6% of the total valid votes cast in 2018 election. The most striking feature is the fact that the TLP, a nascent party that contested the general election for the very first time within first year of its existence, has suddenly overshadowed all the chronic custodians of religion who have been the self-proclaimed flag-bearer of Islam for the last seven decades in Pakistan. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an amalgamation of five religio-political parties, fielded candidates in 191 National Assembly constituencies and 404 constituencies of the four provincial assemblies. On the other hand, the TLP contested in 178 National Assembly constituencies and some 388 provincial assemblies. But the results are astonishing. The MMA, which won 12 National Assembly seats and 19 provincial seats – all from KPK and Baluchistan only - and secured 2.5 million votes, while the TLP alone captured 2.2 million votes but managed to win only 2 Sindh Assembly seats. The difference between the two on overall votes is less than 350,000 but the MMA succeeded to win a lot more seats in the centre and two provincial assemblies compared to the TLP. This proves one phenomenon that the MMA parties have their support concentrated in few areas of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and Balochistan, while the TLP’s supporters are more or less homogenously distributed in all part of Pakistan. This explains why the TLP, despite winning almost the same number of votes as the MMA, failed to win reasonable number of seats in the legislature.

The second interesting feature of the religious vote is that, if we minus the factor of independent candidates, the TLP emerged as the fourth “single” largest party in Pakistan on the basis of number of valid votes – the MMA is not a single party but a five party alliance. The TLP garnered 18,76,265 votes from Punjab, 4,14,635 votes from Sindh, 78,125 voters from KPK and 11,00 votes from Baluchistan. Strangely, in spite of being the third largest vote gainer and receiving more votes in Punjab than the Pakistan People’s Party Parliamentarian (PPPP), the TLP could not bag a single seat, while the PPPP was able to win 6 seats with lesser votes - the drawback of scattered votes. Factually speaking, the religious parties have never captured tangible number of votes in any general elections. The only significant success achieved by the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) was in 2002. When, after the US intervention in Afghanistan, the MMA successfully capitalised on the already simmering anti-American sentiments and registered unprecedented electoral success. This was the only time when these religious parties were able to make some palpable scores - 3.1 million votes (12.28% of valid votes). In 2008, the MMA and other religious parties together were bitterly humbled by a massive decline and hardly captured 0.9 million votes (2.85 % of valid votes). However, these religio-political parties regained some lost ground in 2013, though they were contesting mostly in individual capacity. In 2013, all the old and traditional religio-political parties, including JUI-F (1.45 million votes) and JI (0.95 million votes), together secured around 3 million votes (6.68% of valid votes), but their vote bank has significantly shrivelled to 2.5 million (4.8% of votes) in 2018.

So the voting pattern of 2018 makes a loud statement; there is gradual dwindling of support for traditional religio-political elements, while the Tehreek Labbiak Pakistan is fast emerging a new Islamic political entity in Pakistan. . Last year, the TLP suddenly popped up on the political scene with massive protests in opposition to “blasphemy” changes in the “Elections Bill 2017”. The mysterious arrival of the TLP, under the fiery leadership of Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi, with the backing of the influential quarters, is a new phenomenon in the religious segment of Pakistani politics and it is likely to be further nourished in the coming days so as to utilise it as per the “situation”. Though Allam Khadim Hussain Rizvi launched his election campaign under the new 12-point party manifesto, which is obviously not different from any other Islamist party as far as the ‘sincere intentions” are concerned, but the voters have not voted him for his new manifesto or some “revolutionary agenda”. Instead, the voters, primarily belonging to the Barelvi sect, are supporting him because of his “emotional” attachment to the Khatm-e-Nabuwwat slogans. Reportedly, the Muthidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) invited him to join hands in the 2018 election; Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi declined to be part of the MMA and decided to contest the election as single entity. He knew well that by joining any alliance, he would not be able to categorically prove his statistical strength among voters. By going alone - and expectedly winning more votes than any other religio-political party – Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi wanted to use the 2018 vote to emphatically establish the TLP as the biggest Islamist party so as to have a better bargaining position in the future. This is exactly what happened. Though the TLP has not won more than 2 provincial seats, but he has snatched a reasonable numbers of votes and practically damaged the PML-N in some of the closely fought constituencies. Technically speaking, both former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Khadim Hussain Rizvi belong to the same school of religious thoughts and there is every evidence that some of the disgruntled supporters of PML-N, who are seriously convinced that Mian Nawaz Sharif was the main culprit behind the blasphemy aspect of the controversial Election Bill 2017, have actually preferred to vote for the TLP rather than other political parties with more secular and liberal leanings like the PPPP and the PTI.

The supporters of old religio-political parties, like Jamat Islami and JUI-F, are mostly drawn from an exclusively traditional and fixed religious pockets and they are mostly confined to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan, but the TLP, apart from religious voters, has attracted the attention of general voters that had been so far supporting the liberal and progressive political parties. This is perhaps the main difference between the TLP and older religious parties. The supporters of TLP are scattered in a reasonable number in almost all the constituencies. Till the late 70s, Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP), under the leadership of Shah Ahmad Noorani, remained the main representative of this sect, but during the Zia period, it gradually lost its supporters to Pakistan Awami Tehreek of Allam Tahirul Qadri, who, despite utmost efforts to lure the voters of the Bralevi voters and present himself as a sole spokesperson for them, failed miserably to register any respectable electoral success and eventually moved to Canada in utter disappointment. Allama Tahirul Qadri, in spite of his periodic sojourns to Pakistan, has not been to make a revival. While the TLP has very quickly filled the chronic void left by the JUP but in a very different – and violent - way. The disproportionately aggressive tone of Khadim Hussain Rizvi is anti-thesis of the extreme softness and sophistication of Maulana Shah Ahmed Noorani. But this aggression contains a charm for his emotional supporters and Allama Khadim Hussain Rizvi is using this aggression very effectually to entice his target audience. The results of the 2018 general elections have set a new tone for the religio-political elements in Pakistani politics, but more than anything else, the TLP has established its nuisance credentials to play an “affective” role in the future power politics in Pakistan.

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