**Playing the game**

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MILLIONS of Pakistanis pay to watch their elected favourites compete in games played in our political national stadium.

Politics here has been likened to cricket, especially after a professional cricketer was fielded as captain of the country`s team. That comparison does not hold: too many players on the pitch, too little respect for MCC rules of gentlemanly conduct, too frequent run-outs. No one is interested in keeping score, only in settling scores.

Is it like football? Not really. Football requires dexterity, speed and control of the ball. Our political fixtures are nothing more than painful tackles, deliberate fouls, and own goals overseen by a partisan referee who wields a truncheon shaped like a whistle.

Is it like boxing? As a sport that draws blood and of ten results in a knock-out, yes, except that our political pugilists are unf amiliar with the Queensbury rules.

Those with a sense of history will recognise a similarity closer to the games that were held in Rome`s Colosseum, where gladiators fought until an imperious movement of the thumb determined their fate upwar d s meant live to fight another day, and downwards death and oblivion.

A vote of confidence in the National Assembly has to be seen for what it is a thumbs up, life for another six months at least. It is a Pyrrhic achievement, akin to a circus goat balancing on an upright rod anillusion of precarious stability.

Many observers wonder why it was necessary for the PTI government to dribble an amendment to Article 226 past the opposition on the eve of the Senate elections? Obviously, it felt insecure about the integrity of its own party members. They are all honest men, but not necessarily honest politicians. As Abraham Lincoln`s secretary of war Simon Cameron once said: `An honest politician is one who when he is bought will stay bought.` Even the promise of Rs500 million of development funds each was clearly not enough to grout the loyalty of our lawmakers.

Voters wonder: if an open ballot is such a good thing, why should it not be applied to even the general elections? The answer if only elected representatives realised it lies in the sanctity of a vote. A vote is a fiduciary trust, a right yielded voluntarily by one human being to another. It is not a football, to be kicked backwards and forwards across a muddied field. And it is more than just a piece of paper.

In 1938, British prime minister Neville Chamberlain returned from his negotiations with German chancellor Adolf Hitler, announcing: `I have here, from Herr Hitler, a piece of paper, a pledge signed byHitler not to go to war again. Herr Hitler privately told his foreign minister: `Oh don`t take it so seriously. That piece of paper has no significance whatsoever.` It took a declaration of war sent on a piece of paper by Great Britain to Germany on Sept 3, 1939, and a German Instrument of Surrender signed on a piece of paper on May 8, 1945, to prove Hitler wrong.

A ballot is worth even less than a piece of paper, if the ballot box is treated as a wastepaper basket. In the hands of a conscientious voter, however, it possesses the force to topple governments. Prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto realised that when, in 1977, he sought to revive a supine electorate he had bludgeoned into submission with his relentless reforms.

His obedient minions secured him a landslide victory. Some of his PPP candidates garnered 95 per cent of the votes in their constituencies. In others, the actual number of votes cast exceed those of actualvoters. It was alleged that the results in certain key constituencies were announced directly from the Prime Minister`s Of fice. Any similarity with the recent polls in NA-75 at Daska is purely coincidental.

General Ziaul Haq`s subsequent intervention inJuly 1977 Operation Fair Play should have levelled the playing field. Instead, it brought the third referee on to the pitch with a permanent seat on the panel of selectors.

Later, in November 1989, Mr Bhutto`s daughter Benazir Bhutto survived a parliamentary challenge, as did her successor Nawaz Sharif in March 1993. They were removed ultimately by less democratic means.

Are Pakistani voters always to be relegated to filling tiers of spectators, bound to watch political gladiators fight with blunted words and fake blood? The Pakistan electorate is tired of seeing opportunistic players switching sides with impunity, of hopefuls being crippled during practice, of dismissive red cards, and of prime ministers being sent off the field.

Dare one ask: Now that you have tired playing with it, may we have our country back?  The writer is an author.

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