**A year in politics**

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The general elections held on July 25, 2018 were the highlight of the year 2018 in Pakistan. For the first time in Pakistan’s history, two elected civilian governments completed their full terms of five years in a row. And the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) emerged as a third political front that challenged and ousted the two old political vanguards – the PPP and the PML-N – that have ruled Pakistan in turns. The smooth transition of power from one elected civilian government to another elected civilian government is certainly a good omen for democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

According to the Free and Fair Elections Network (Fafen), the 2018 elections were more transparent than previous elections in many aspects. International election observation missions also ruled out any rigging on Election Day. However, they pointed out “lack of equal opportunities” in the pre-poll campaign. Except for the PTI, other political parties alleged rigging on Election Day but failed to substantiate their allegations with solid evidence. The inordinate delay in electoral results in a few constituencies due to the Results Transmission System (RTS) was mainly attributed to technical difficulties by the Election Commission of Pakistan.

The year 2018 clearly belonged to the PTI, which not only emerged as the single largest party in the general elections but also formed government for the very first time in the centre as well as in Punjab. The party was also able to retain its government in Khyber Pakhtunkhawa, and also became a stakeholder in the Balochistan government as a coalition partner. In Sindh too, the PTI managed to cover lots of ground and emerged as the second largest party ahead of the MQM.

The PML-N was the biggest loser in the 2018 elections; the party not only lost government at the centre but also lost Punjab, their major electoral power base. The PPP was somehow able to retain Sindh with a little more seats as compared to previous elections. The MQM lost its strong power base in Karachi. Maulana Fazalur Rehman, a major power broker for the last three decades, is also finding it difficult to cope with the current political order as he is out of the power corridors. That may explain his bitterness against Imran Khan and other powers.

August 22, 2018 was a big day for Imran Khan as he was sworn in as the 22nd prime minister of Pakistan after 22 years in politics. To be fair to Imran Khan, it won’t be appropriate to judge the little over four months old PTI government. Yet the kind of promises, in the shape of ‘Naya Pakistan’, that Imran Khan made to the Pakistani nation during his election campaign have certainly raised the expectations of the general public in Pakistan. There is no denying the fact that Imran took over the office of premier in the midst of a non-functional economy with loads of foreign debt, decades old power shortages issues propped by a Rs1200 billion circular debt, a tense external security situation particularly with reference to India, poor governance and international isolation. How has Imran Khan performed till now on the external and domestic challenges confronting Pakistan?

On the external front, the PTI government claims that its performance has been remarkably well. Imran Khan made official visits to four countries including Saudi Arabia, UAE, China and Malaysia, and received enviable protocol and treatment. Pakistan managed to come out of international isolation and stand confidently among other nations. Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided generous support in terms of direct cash payment to the State Bank of Pakistan to boost its reserves; they also offered a deferred payment deal on oil imports to Pakistan. Similarly, China also signed a number of MoUs and promised a great deal of help to strengthen the foreign reserves of Pakistan through direct deposits and loans. Malaysia too offered certain concessions to Pakistan.

These arrangements eased Pakistan’s immediate balance of payments problems and Pakistan is now in a comfortable position while negotiating with the IMF and other financial institutions. Pakistan’s relations with the US under the Trump administration were at an all-time low. However, it seems the new government’s stance forced the US to review its position regarding the country. The US is now again seeking Pakistan’s help to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table.

On the domestic level, the performance of the PTI government has not been so encouraging. One does not expect overnight change or some kind of miracle in such a short span of time from the incumbent government. However, the least the government could have done in four months was to have determined some kind of direction that could keep the nation’s hopes alive.

PM Imran Khan did bring about some cosmetic changes that include an austerity drive at the government level, opening of governors’ houses for the public, anti-encroachment drives, an anti-land grabbing drives and construction of shelter homes for the poor in major cities. These measures do have a positive impact yet the government needs to focus on the real issues confronting Pakistan. The dollar exchange rate has touched Rs140 and our currency is under constant pressure. Finance Minister Asad Umar was the biggest critic of Ishaq Dar’s fiscal policies during the PML-N government but now seems to be following in Dar’s footsteps. He has repeated the same old formula of indirect taxation through increasing gas and power tariffs. He has hardly pursued any reform agenda regarding the FBR and other major enterprises. The PTI has failed to initiate any legislation/reforms in parliament during the first four months, except for a finance bill as a mini budget.

When it comes to governance, there is hardly any change visible in ‘Naya Pakistan’ despite the PTI’s tall claims. There are also serious question marks on the choice of Imran Khan’s team. The appointment of Usman Buzdar as the chief minister of Punjab is beyond comprehension. A few ministers have also been creating problems for the prime minister through irresponsible statements. What they need to understand is that ministers make statements through their performance.

Imran Khan has always been a strong advocate of ‘rule of law’ and independence of state institutions but the PTI seems to have forgotten all that after assuming power. Their ministers seem very keen to send every political entity behind bars. This attitude is casting aspersions over the ongoing accountability process. The verdict against Nawaz Sharif and the JIT report against the PPP’s top leadership are undermined by the irresponsible statements of a few ministers. Imran Khan needs to put his house in order before it is too late. He needs to focus on the reforms and development agenda to get Pakistan out of the troubled waters the country is in.

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