**Poll reforms, again**

BY A H M E D B I L A L M E H B O O B 2020-11-22

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has once again expressed hisintention tointroduce three key electoral reforms. Two of them relate to the general elections and the thirdis about the Senate elections.

Mr Khan has forcefully advocated `electronic voting` and presented it as a solution to our perennial problem of non-acceptance of election results by the losing parties. He likened electronic voting to `neutral umpires` in cricket which, he reminded us, was his idea as captain of Pakistan`s cricket team.

Electronic voting may have its advantages suchas greateraccuracy and speedin result compilation and the elimination of invalid votes. Guaranteed trust of all parties is, sadly, not one of the attributes of electronic voting. In fact, there is increasing scepticism about this mode of voting in several countries including the US and India.

Many countries including Germany, France and the Netherlands abandoned electronic voting after adopting it.

The key reason for this is the lack of transparency. The heart of the electronic voting machine is the programmed chip.

Several Indian politicians over the years expressed doubts about what goes into the chip. Some of them petitioned the courts to provide a paper trail for each vote so that they may be able to match the results. As a result, Indian EVMs are now retrofitted, at enormous cost, to provide a paper trail as well. But the scepticism continues.

We in Pakistan seem to harbour even greater scepticism about our electoral system and conspiracy theories are easily accepted. EVMs with their programmable chips can further enhance these doubts especially because the chip programme is not something which can be seen by the naked eye.

In addition, the possibility of large-scale manipulation of election results through tampering with the EVM chip in the peculiar power structure of Pakistan can`t be ruled out. For example, the results transmission system collapsed during the 2018 election under very dubious circumstances and there has been no proper investigation despite the lapse of over two years.

The financial feasibility of the EVMs is another issue which needs to be looked into.

In 2017, it was estimated that some 300,000 EVMs would be needed for which a cost of roughly Rs45 billion was estimated, excludingthe cost ofstorage,service and training.

Most likely, this cost has significantly escalated by now. The government and parliament must carefully weigh the cost-benefit ratio ofsuchexpensive gadgetry.

Under the Elections Act, 2017, the Election Commission of Pakistan was sup-posed to undertake pilot tests of EVMs and biometric verification machines and present the feasibility report to the government for further action. The ECP procured some 300 EVMs and BVMs for this purpose and submitted a report to the government over two years ago. It is very important that parliament doesn`t rush through the legislation and openly debates whether EVMs will really enhance the credibility of polls.

The prime minister has also announced work on the facility for overseas Pakistanis to vote from abroad. The ECP submitted its feasibility report on internet voting to the government two years ago. There are concerns about the confidentiality of votes and the confirmation of the free will of the voter sitting thousands of miles away. Since internet voting requires an email address, a large number of blue-collared workers who don`t use emails will be excluded. These concerns need to be closely examined by parliament. Parliamentary committees shouldcallexpertsandholdhearingsbeforeposed to undertake pilot tests of EVMs and biometric verification machines and present the feasibility report to the government for further action. The ECP procured some 300 EVMs and BVMs for this purpose and submitted a report to the government over two years ago. It is very important that parliament doesn`t rush through the legislation and openly debates whether EVMs will really enhance the credibility of polls.

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The third reform proposed is about making Senate elections open instead of the current system of secret ballot. The prime minister thinks that the secret ballot has encouraged corruption and vote-selling. Even if there area few suspicious cases, is it wise to change the entire system based on such unscrupulous elements instead of taking action against the violators? The legislators`freedom of choice and the secrecy of ballot as currently provided for in the Constitution should not be changed if we don`t want to make robots out of our legislators. If the system has to be changed, there is no need to go through the motion of show of hands; parties should be assigned Senate seats in proportion to their strength in the provincial assemblies as is done in the case of reserved seats for women and minorities There can be diverse opinions about each of these three proposed reforms but it is important, rather critical, that the government, parliament and parliamentary committees examine the pros and cons in detail before passing any legislation because there will be long-term implications for the choice that we make today. The writer is president of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development And Transparency president@pildat.org Twitter: @ABMPildat