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**Senate and reforms**

During every Senate election in Pakistan, we hear the same allegations of horse-trading and corrupt practices. These allegations not only tarnish the image of elected representatives but also raise questions on the integrity, legitimacy and transparency of the electoral process to elect senators. The Senate elections this year are no different.

A video surfaced a few days back in which some MPAs of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly can be seen allegedly receiving bribes. The video has led to the PTI government and opposition parties accusing each other of using money in Senate elections.

The PTI government has come up with the idea of open ballot to stop such use of money in the Senate elections. The government is claiming that this video is clear evidence that horse-trading took place during the 2018 Senate elections. Now the government now wants an open ballot in the upcoming Senate elections.

In order to conduct Senate elections by open ballot, the PTI government has approached the apex court under Article 186, and the Supreme Court of Pakistan is hearing the case. The Supreme Court’s guidance has been sought in the presidential reference in order to amend Section 122 (6) of the Election Act, 2017 without amending the constitution. The government has also promulgated an ordinance to hold Senate elections using open ballot instead of secret ballot. The implementation of this ordinance has been linked with the SC’s decision.

The whole debate around the allegations of horse-trading and vote sale in the Senate elections has created the impression that use of money in the electoral process is confined just to the Senate elections. However, this is a much more serious issue. Wealth is not just used during elections but also to enter into politics. The fact is that electoral politics, whether it is at the union council level or within national and provincial constituencies, is plagued by money, influence and power.

All major political parties indulge in the same practice to lure electables from other parties to strengthen their position at the expense of others. Can political parties justify the presence of so many parliamentarians within their ranks who have contested every election on the ticket of a different party?

There are many parliamentarians who have never contested two elections from the platform of a single party. And yet, every party wants to embrace them. It is surprising to see leaders who support and encourage defections in other parties, but cry foul when their own do the same.

We are missing a broader picture. Nobody can oppose efforts to make the electoral process at every level clean, free and transparent. But to do so, we need radical reforms in the electoral system. One law or amendment in the constitution will not stop corruption in electoral politics. The whole system needs to be overhauled to fix the bigger problems of rigging, horse-trading, political engineering, manipulation and interference.

The political parties had hoped that the Election Act 2017 and introduction of electoral reforms would solve the problem of rigging and irregularities in the polling process. It was hoped that the Election Act 2017 would make the electoral process and the counting of votes free and fair for competing candidates. But that enthusiasm was short lived. The failure of the RTS and the delayed results raised many questions on the 2018 elections. Almost all the major opposition parties raised allegations of rigging in General Elections 2018. Even though very few objections were raised during the polling process.

Many important issues had been left unattended in the Election Act 2017. Nothing has been done to stop or even minimise the role of money in elections. Little has been done to provide an atmosphere in which poor peasants, women, the rural poor and sections of the working class can exercise their democratic right without any fear of repression and undue influence.

In the 2018 Senate elections, almost all political parties and independent candidates accused each other of horse trading and using money to influence the outcome of the election. Similarly, almost all parties witnessed defections. But nothing serious was done to clean the electoral system.

What else can we expect from a political system that is based on money, power and patronage? When politics is not based on ideologies, principles and a democratic culture, it can only produce a culture of political corruption, rigging and horse trading. The cleansing of a political system is the responsibility of the political leadership. But the leadership of today is not playing its role in this regard.

The present social, economic and political structure paved the way for capitalists, big landlords and tribal chiefs to dominate and manipulate electoral politics. Without radical reforms and fundamental changes in the social, economic and political structures, the working classes cannot get a level-playing field to compete with the elite.

Parliamentary politics is then just the democratic continuation of the elite’s crushing domination and power. Feudal lords, capitalists, big businessmen and tribal chiefs own the means of production and wealth. On the basis of their economic power and social position, they dominate electoral politics. Pakistan’s democracy is still an elitist democracy. People’s democracy - or rather a participatory democracy – is still a distant dream for the people.

The overwhelming majority of parliamentarians belong to the elite. And the results of every election simply reflect the fact that parliamentary politics and the political system are controlled by the elite and privileged classes while political activists who belong to the middle and working classes have consciously been kept out of this system.

The other problem with the existing political system is that it represents the interests of just 10 percent of the population and excludes 90 percent of the population. The political system is not even in a position to satisfy the aspirations and demands of the middle class.

The working classes and the poor have been alienated from this political system. No party wants to campaign for the real issues of the people. No effort has been made on the part of the ruling leadership to make the political system accessible and acceptable for a wider segment of society.

It is true that dictatorships and interventions have weakened democratic institutions, including political parties, and hindered the growth of the democratic movement. It is also true that powerful forces dominate politics and state institutions in the country. But when politicians have gained the opportunity to strengthen democratic institutions and structures, they have failed to do so.

The political leadership is not prepared to reform the political system so as to strengthen the democratic processes and structures. In a similar vein, the political elite are not willing to organise the major political parties at the grassroots level.

The writer is a freelance journalist.