**Hope for the future**

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Friday, Feb 09, 2024

The unique feature of yesterday’s election was the contesting parties’ heavy reliance on digital platforms. Be it instant messaging apps or social networking forums, it seems that the real battle between supporters of various political parties was fought in the digital arena.

The Election Commission of Pakistan deserves appreciation for fulfilling its constitutional responsibility in a brilliant manner. Returning officers (ROs) as well as police officials and LEAs played a pivotal role in conducting the voting process smoothly.

A social media message I received on WhatsApp reminded me of my columns published in The News some years ago. According to the message, God Almighty has blessed the tribal region of Pakistan, especially Waziristan, with hidden treasures of diamonds, gold, copper and other valuable minerals. Reportedly, the diamond mines in Waziristan were discovered during the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, but they are not fully functional yet due to a lack of technical expertise.

The message says: “Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto signed a pact with an international company in 1994 to give technical support for diamond mining in Waziristan,” hinting that the discovery of oil reserves in the Middle East resulted in changing the destiny of the entire region (once the world’s most backward area) as well as uplifting the socio-economic conditions of millions of locals and immigrants.

Geographically, the semi-autonomous tribal area adjacent to the Pak-Afghan border, erstwhile Fata, consists of seven tribal agencies and six frontier regions. Although it was merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 through the 25th Amendment, people from the area are still facing numerous issues.

Fata has a rich heritage of waging freedom struggles against foreign invaders. Even at the peak of their power, the British faced tough resistance in controlling the tribal areas. However, the tribal people supported the Pakistan Movement whole-heartedly to end British rule. A leader of freedom fighters, Maulana Fazal Elahi Wazirabadi, attended the historic March 23, 1940 jalsa in Lahore to represent the tribal population and endorse the Pakistan Resolution. Five years later, a large number of people came out on the streets of Landi Kotal to welcome Quaid-e-Azam as they preferred to associate their future unconditionally with an independent and sovereign Pakistan.

Quaid-e-Azam announced the withdrawal of armed forces from the area, calling the patriotic tribal people a frontline force in protecting the western borders. Regrettably, after his death, this marginalized and vulnerable region remained neglected for decades.

It is quite hurtful that successive governments decided to continue governing the area through the FCR law inherited from the British. During the Soviet invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan and later the 9-11 tragedy, tribal areas faced numerous challenges.

The unanimously passed 1973 constitution is a remarkable achievement by Pakistan’s first elected prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Although Fata was declared a part of Pakistan under the constitution, Articles 247 and 248 restrict the jurisdiction of parliament, the Supreme Court and high courts in the neglected tribal areas.

Understanding the genuine concerns of tribal people, Bhutto formed a committee to devise a framework for merging Fata with KP (then North-West Frontier Province) for general elections.

A few years ago, after my visit to North Waziristan, I warned in a column that if the government did not pay due attention, the region would once again become a haven of extremism. Although tribal areas have been merged into the province, people are still suffering from severe hardships.

With general elections and with a people empowered to use their power of vote to elect their political representatives in parliament, the tribal people are once again looking forward to a bright future.

During my recent interaction with several tribal personalities, they believe that their destiny is truly associated with the state of Pakistan but in a dignified manner. “Our only hope now is Bilawal Bhutto Zardari who we believe will do something good to fulfil the incomplete agenda of his legendary grandfather and great mother to serve the tribal people.”

The writer is a former member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.

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