**[The Barelvi vote](https://www.dawn.com/news/1427090/the-barelvi-vote)**

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HERE’S the good news: the elections in Karachi may have been stolen by local strongmen from ostensibly establishment-backed religious groups. The bad news: the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a right-wing Barelvi group, may have [legitimately won seats in Karachi](https://www.dawn.com/news/1425085).

The 2018 election witnessed the rise of the TLP, which has enabled the creation of powerful narratives about the legitimacy of extremist thought among Pakistan’s voters. Experts claim the party has tapped into widely held beliefs, even in a relatively liberal and religiously diverse city like Kara­chi. On the other hand, the TLP may have also been part of an attempt to rig the polls against incumbents PML-N, PPP and MQM.

For perhaps the first time in Karachi’s history, it is possible to examine the legitimacy of these results. Thanks to the delimitation efforts of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and their census unit, each National Assembly seat in Karachi encapsulates at least one, if not two, complete provincial assembly constituency. For example, voters from PS-107 and PS-108 will only cast votes for NA-246 — previously, provincial seats regularly intersected national seats.

*The TLP vote in Karachi’s Lyari area is part of some discrepancies.*

NA-246 was won by the PTI, with the TLP coming in second by a margin of over 10,000 votes, followed by the PPP with a margin of about 3,000, then the MMA by a margin of about 6,000. In PS-108, the MMA beat the PTI by a whisker: a mere 1,000 votes. In PS-107, the TLP received a winning 26,498 votes; PTI came in second with 16,609.

An almost 10,000 vote difference at the provincial level, in a national constituency that was solidly won by the PTI, is cause for concern. Asad Sayeed, a long-time observer of the PPP in Sindh, put it succinctly: “The math is off — [the TLP’s victory] is possible, but improbable.” Just how much of an anomaly is this? After reviewing 21 National Assembly and 44 provincial assembly seats, a few cases stood out.

First, in nearly every constituency in Karachi, the party that won the National Assembly seat also won the corresponding provincial assembly seats. Exceptions exist, but they are rare, and margins are narrow. In NA-252, the PTI won the National Assembly seat, with MQM trailing by several thousand votes. The PTI won the overlapping PS-122, but lost next door in PS-121 to the MQM by less than 500 votes. In NA-248, the PTI and PPP were virtually neck and neck, with the PPP winning by under 1,000 votes. In the two overlapping provincial seats, the PPP won one and the PTI the other.

In contrast, in NA-249, the PTI won with 35,344 votes, followed closely by the PML-N with 34,626, and the TLP third with 23,981. In the corresponding provincial assembly constituencies, the PTI won one, the TLP won the other by a margin of over 6,000 votes, and the runner-up in the National Assembly constituency, the PML-N, got neither.

The TLP’s voters, if numbers are to be believed, live in strategically clustered, provincial-assembly sized neighbourhoods. Or they may have spontaneously voted for the PTI at the national level, but for the TLP at the provincial level — an incredible feat of voter-coordinated seat-sharing by two parties that, last anyone checked, weren’t sharing tickets or seats. Possible, but improbable.

There is clearly strong support for the Barelvis in Karachi, much in the way the Jamaat-i-Islami and Deobandi religious groups have been popular in the past. Sociologist Nida Kirmani points out a tacit acceptance among residents of Lyari for the violent operation by the Rangers against PPP-backed gangs: “Law enforcement is flawed, but things are better than what was there before.” Karachi veteran Zia Ur Rehman observed that Kutchi businessmen in Lyari resented the allocation of PPP tickets to gang-backed individuals.

The TLP vote in Lyari is just part of some troubling discrepancies in Karachi’s electoral landscape. In several constituencies, votes for one party at the provincial level don’t match the number of votes at the National Assembly level. In PS-92 and PS-93 in Korangi, the MQM’s voters cast a combined 62,259 votes, while the PTI’s voters cast 47,342. Yet in NA-239, which completely contains both these seats, the PTI beat the MQM, gaining just shy of 70,000 votes. All things equal, the discrepancy of over 22,000 votes in PTI’s favour is troubling. Similarly, in PS-104, which is completely encapsulated in NA-245, the PPP got 27,615 votes. The final tally for the PPP in NA-245 was 8,822 votes.

In its eagerness to consolidate its own victory, the PTI will almost certainly ignore allegations of electoral fraud. If so, they would follow the precedent set by the PPP, MQM and PML-N — massaged victories, flouted institutions, ignored calls for transparency. When democratic parties create space for extremist religious entrepreneurs to capture vote banks, everyone loses — especially those desperate for clean water, electricity and employment.

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