**The power of the youth**

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Pakistan has a population of 220 million people, which includes 48 million (22 percent) youth between the ages of 18 and 30.

In the 2018 elections, with 100 million registered voters, only half (50 million) exercised their right to vote. Therefore, the number of youth eligible to vote in the next election is roughly equal to the total number of votes cast in the 2018 election. Should the youth decide to exercise their right to vote in larger numbers, they can make a big difference to the outcome of the next election.

In the 2018 elections, the PTI secured 17 million votes, securing the highest number of votes (32 percent) followed by the PML-N at 13 million (24 percent), and the PPP at 7 million (13 percent). All the other parties were far behind. Even the MQM, which usually demonstrates its political muscles, secured only 750k votes (one percent) but managed to gain a proportionately higher number of seats (6) because its vote bank is concentrated in the two largest cities of Sindh.

With the current super-charged political imbroglio, the youth is now much more aware of the political situation. They are participating in jalsas in larger numbers than ever before, and they are more concerned about the future of Pakistan. In addition, the population is growing at a rate of two percent per annum, adding four million youth to the voting age every year. Therefore, just in the last four years, 16 million youth have been added to the voting pool. This is now an energized crowd exercising their right to speak up and participating in ever larger numbers in political rallies. There are no prizes to guess which party or leader the youth are tilted towards and will vote for.

In Pakistan, those who call the shots have not yet realized the power of the youth. These people belong to the Baby Boomers generation (those born before 1965) while the world today is driven by Gen-Y (millennials) and Gen-Z, who were born in the age of IT. This generation is driving the world today, whether in politics, technology or entrepreneurship.

Many Western democratic countries are now led by young leaders who are millennials: Sebastian Kurz, the chancellor of Austria, is 35 years old; Sanna Marin, the PM of Finland, is 36; Jacinda Ardern, the PM of New Zealand since 2017, who won the hearts of the Muslim World, is only 41 years old. However, let this in no way be equated with the brand of young leaders in underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, and other monarchies and dictatorships, who were born with a silver spoon in their mouth and have inherited their positions. They may not have real-life experience of facing or resolving challenges of a free society where people vote on issues, past performance, and credibility. Most young Western leaders have worked their way up and received votes based on their qualifications, credibility and performance.

Likewise in the world of entrepreneurship and technology, Jeff Bezos started Amazon when he was only 30 years old and is considered the richest man on earth worth over $200 billion. Elon Musk started Tesla when he was 33 years old and is worth over $170 billion.

Beyond the world of entrepreneurship and technology, the disruptive power of social media is influencing how the youth makes decisions. Today it is the world of Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube Influencers that is driving the trend. Vloggers like PewDiePie with over 100 million subscribers on YouTube are influencing the way Gen-Y and Gen-Z think and act. Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson with over 250 million followers on Instagram (more than the combined votes secured by both Biden and Trump) could announce his candidacy for US president. When Cristiano Ronaldo with 307 million followers on Instagram removed the Coke bottles in front of him during a recent press conference, Coke lost $ 4 billion of its share value.

Pakistan is catching up fast, with over 61 million internet users in January 2021, and increasing by over 11 million (21 percent) just between 2020 and 2021. At this rate, one can easily assume there are currently over 76 million internet users today, which is over 70 percent of the population if one does not include the 0-14-year-olds.

In Pakistan, like in the developed countries, the youth are the largest users of social media, which is influencing their decision making. 65 percent (143 million) of the population are Facebook users while 10 percent (22 million) are YouTube users. The most popular mobile App to communicate and post videos, images and links is WhatsApp which has over 46 million users. Postings on WhatsApp become viral, and videos are transmitted across the globe within minutes. In the world of politics, Twitter is popularly used by over 20 percent (44 million) of the population. Among the politicians, Imran Khan leads all others with over 16 million followers, Shehbaz Sharif is next with 5.8 million, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has 4.5 million followers. Meanwhile, social media news channels are giving the mainstream TV news channels a run for their money.

The future belongs to the youth who will influence the way Pakistan should go. Recent events have demonstrated that the youth have taken matters in their own hands to save Pakistan from corrupt and incompetent leaders. They will certainly exercise their vote in the next election in much larger numbers to choose the right leadership and reject the purana Pakistan.

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