

WHAT MATTERS MOST – VOTES OR NUMBERS?

Sarwar Bari

Every ‘elected’ government that was cobbled together after a rigged election in Pakistan could not survive full term: simply because creators had enough of their own creation within a few months of its birth. Interestingly, the same creators committed the same blunder once again in the aftermath of the 8th February election. The creators even didn’t bother to sell the old wine in a new bottle. What else could insanity be! Visibly, the coalition government at the centre is the result of a ‘stolen’ mandate, non-inclusive electoral process, and the most controversial election of Pakistan’s history. Moreover, the international community and civil society have also been demanding a thorough investigation into the alleged rigging. Will it survive even for a year as it lacks legitimacy and public support? I would respond with a resounding no. Here is why.

First, oppression and resistance are two sides of the same coin, and the higher the oppression, the greater the resistance and defiance. And if the cause is just, defiance is likely to perpetuate. This is one of the lessons of human history as well as recent political uprisings across the globe and in our own neighbourhood. Pakistan can’t be an exception. Since 1988, no mainstream party had ever posed resistance to the security establishment in the aftermath of its dismissal from power. Seemingly, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is the first mainstream party whose leadership refused to yield to the ruthless and constant oppression of the caretaker government and [un]law enforcement agencies. Many commentators believe it was developed and implemented diligently and ruthlessly by the security establishment.

The architects of this oppressive policy have turned a clearcut mandate into a ‘stolen’ one. No wonder Pakistan is the only Asian country that has been downgraded from a ‘hybrid regime’ to an ‘authoritarian regime’ by the Economist Group Democracy Index 2023. The same report notes that Pakistan registered the greatest deterioration of any country in Asia, throwing her 11 places down in the global ranking to 118th. It also noted that due to ‘meddling in the electoral processes and government dysfunction, the independence of the judiciary has been severely curtailed’ in the country. However, unprecedented oppression has given birth to a widespread awakening and resilience, though it is still very raw. PTI has to channelize it into an

organised energy and strategy if it is interested in meaningful structural reforms.

Second, it is important to understand the causes and forms of rigging. Seemingly the oppressors and exploiters knew very well that mere violence would not be able to achieve ‘desired’ results through free, fair and transparent elections as the victims could always silently vote against them. Therefore, rigging and manipulation strategy was developed and implemented ruthlessly over the course of the past 22 months. Consider this. The moment the security establishment realised that the ‘unwanted’ party was leading in more than two-third constituencies and its ‘favourite’ leaders were likely to lose with huge margins, the announcement of results was abruptly stopped for a few days. During that time, Form 47s¹ were forged without aggregating the Form 45s² of each constituency. The mandate was stolen; but it was too late to hide the blunder. Many contesting candidates had already received Form 45s.

In 2022, PATTAN with whom the author is associated, had calculated 163 means of rigging that were being used in Pakistan’s elections. Since then, the establishment has introduced dozens of new means, but we had never thought that the Election Commission could go to an extent that it would allow the administration to forge Form 47s without considering the Form 45s. Moreover, in 2018 only the Result Transfer System was stopped from working. In 2024, on the polling day the citizens were deprived of internet and cellular services for a prolonged period, and it was done in the name of security threat. That created massive anger in the country and to suppress the spread of the rage, authorities shut down X – formerly Twitter.

¹Provisional consolidated statement of results of the count of all polling stations of constituency.

²Result of the count at polling stations.

“Why are you making a spectacle of yourself in front of the world?” This is what the Sindh High Court Chief Justice would say on the 22nd of February. He also warned the government, “Let the whistle of the pressure cooker blow lightly, the more you try to clamp it down the larger the explosion.” At the time of writing (26th February), almost every party is on the street protesting against the mega rigging. Some of them have genuine reasons and proof, whilst those who had ‘stolen’ the mandate are gearing up to form governments.

Bertolt Brecht, famous theatre practitioner and playwright, once said, ‘In the contradiction lies the hope’. Instead, our security establishment with the collaboration of corrupt elite has in fact sharpened the contraction with the citizens. Logically it will lead to conflict unless reversed. The best way to resolve it peacefully is to audit the whole paper trail of polling, counting and result announcement – from Form 42s to Form 45s, 46s and 47s. Or be prepared for prolonged uncertainty as our peoples’ trust in the social contract and state institutions has already been massively eroded.

Third, the higher the dependence on the security establishment, the lower the political parties’ need for grassroots presence and support. A strong correlation between the two has developed in the last four decades. In the ‘70s and early ‘80s, many parties – especially the People’s Party – had a conspicuous presence at the local level. It would have party chapters and offices even at the mohallah level. Since 2002, local party chapters disappeared. That was the beginning of elite capture and so-called electables. On the other hand, PTI managed to establish party structures at the local level during 2008 and 2013. But in the last 22 months it has penetrated through to the once-diehard support base of PPP and PMLN, even JUI-F and most of the apolitical sections of society. This means if parties invest time and energy on spreading their programme, the people are likely to respond positively. And the parties who relied heavily on electables (often local tyrants and exploiters) and state machinery (often on the side of the powerful tyrants) are likely to lose people’s support. No wonder most of the traditional parties whether secular or religious massively lost their vote bank in many parts of the country including Islamabad.

Despite being the most watched and observed region of the country, Islamabad and Rawalpindi witnessed massive rigging in almost every constituency. PATTAN audited Form 45s of the following four National Assembly constituencies, and we found that thousands of ‘votes’ were shifted from PTI to PMLN candidates. For instance, in NA46 alone, PMLN’s numbers were increased from 42,048 to 81,958 with the stroke of a pen. Shamefully, authorities didn’t hesitate to shift 41,476 votes of the PTI supported candidate to PMLN’s candidate. See table below. If it can happen at this level in the most observed and watched cities, it has most likely happened tenfold across the rest of the country. Simply, an unwanted party is being deprived of millions of votes. And this has turned losers into winners. Only state officials could provide this kind of

quick service. In such circumstances, why bother having party chapters at the local level? But the beneficiaries of the rigging must know that this kind of support could evaporate in the air as quickly as it appeared on paper. It has happened many a times in the past between 1988 and 2018, and could always happen again.

Difference in polled votes between Form 45s and Form 47s				
Constituency	Party	Form 45s	Form 47	Variance
Islamabad NA-46	PTI/IND	85,793	44,317	-94%
	PMLN	42,048	81,958	+49%
Islamabad NA-47	PTI/IND	101,596	86,794	-17%
	PMLN	49,678	101,397	+51%
Islamabad NA-48	PTI/IND	74,425	59,851	-24%
	IND	30,345	69,699	+56%
Rawalpindi NA-53	PTI/IND	81,330	58,476	-39%
	PMLN	38,982	72,006	+46%

Source: Based on ECP documents including Form 45s and 47s.

Fourth, mere numbers on Form 47s have little value in the face of real voters as they express opinions through social media, in neighbourhoods and workplaces, etc. They influence the public as well as policymakers. The upcoming government should know, therefore, its weaknesses and vulnerabilities and be aware of the threats and risks that are likely to cause social disaster sooner or later. I wish time proves me wrong, but wishes can’t be horses.

Here are some of the risks and vulnerabilities of PDM 2.0.

1. Inherently, this is going to be one of the most paranoid coalition governments of Pakistan’s history as it lacks confidence (its major ally has already distanced itself from governance affairs) and a tangible support base.
2. Whose interests will dominate in decision-making in the coming days – the public or those who added the additional numbers on Form 47s for the coalition, helping form the government?
3. How long before the lack of trust turns into internal ruptures?
4. Does it have the confidence and the strength to face a sustained resistance movement, as is likely to happen in the near future?
5. Will it be able to protect Pakistan’s strategic interests whilst the opposition is protesting within the Parliament as well as on the streets?
6. How will it revive the economy whilst people are demanding social support?
7. Will the PDM 2.0 repeat the same blunders that its first iteration had committed? It consists of the same parties, same leaders and has been gelled together by the same actor.

Finally, the people of Pakistan have deepened my faith in democracy. This is my takeaway from Pakistan's recent general election. However, as in the past, our civil and military elites once again tried to rob the mandate of the people, but unlike in the past, they appear to be failing in their unholy venture because this time around the people appear to be more aware, more determined, well connected and more assertive – and the victim party refuses to submit to the whims of the powerful actors. Surprisingly, voters also managed to frustrate every attempt of the mighty establishment until the polling and ballot count. However, they failed to prevent it from tampering the results in many constituencies. The establishment was caught red-handed as rigging was done extremely clumsily. Moreover, it appears the politicians who had been assured of certain shares in upcoming assemblies performed too poorly; and the gap between them and the unwanted winner was too large to fill, and too big to hide. But many of the losers blamed someone else to satisfy their ego, gain sympathy, or to pave the way for future alliances. No wonder they were also found agitating somewhere in the country. And that has deepened the political uncertainty and made it extremely difficult for the establishment to manage the crisis and to form the governments. All because a few individuals wanted to impose their will over 250 million people.

Despite all the oppression and economic hardships that the decision-makers and law-enforcers unleashed in the country, people remained peacefully defiant and lawful throughout the last 22 months. Moreover, the caretaker governments left no stone unturned to manipulate the electoral process at every step as well as using every method, including violent ones, that they had in their playbook to knock out the unwanted party and its leadership from the race. This atmosphere of fear and injustice continued to build up anger in the country and resultantly transformed the public. And this is likely to persist in the coming days. The anger may even turn into rage if the government fails to lower poverty and inequality.

The way forward is to conduct a thorough audit of the paper trail of the election before it is too late to manage.

The author heads Pattan Development Organisation and can be reached at bari@pattan.org.

