



ELECTABLES: THE UNSUNG LOSERS OF THE 2024 ELECTIONS

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Who was the actual winner of the 2024 Pakistani elections? The answer to this question will be debated for generations in our history books. What shouldn't be debated though, is who was the biggest loser. That title doesn't belong to the PML-N or the boys, as is being argued by journalists who write the first draft of history in real time. The biggest loser of the 2024 elections is the politics of the electables.

Elections are typically an opportunity for the ruled to choose their rulers. In Pakistan, where black is white and white is black, the February 8th elections will not

produce a change in rulers. And yet, the PTI voters who quietly turned out a tsunami for change haven't lost their faith in democracy. Instead, they are energised and electrified. What's going on here?

On February 8th, PTI's voters may not have been able to force a change in their rulers immediately but they have rewritten the social contract between the rulers and the ruled in Pakistan forever. In the process, they have finally bent the arc of Pakistan's history definitively towards civilian supremacy and read out a namaz-e-janaza for the politics of the electable.

Traditionally, electables in Pakistan are used to winning elections regardless of which party's symbol they're running on and which way the political winds are blowing. Moreover, once they win elections, electables are a convenient lever for the real power brokers in the country to gently direct the people's mandate in whatever direction they feel is best for the country.

The 2024 elections turned these traditional expectations on their head. Jahangir Tareen, the chief organiser of the electables, lost his own election by a landslide and his party full of electables lost spectacularly in constituency after constituency. Even Saad Rafiq and Rana Sanaullah lost their seats and most independent observers argue that Khwaja Asif also lost his seat. Pervaiz Khattak also lost his personal seat to a no-name PTI candidate. Many of these electables lost to tier 2 and 3 PTI candidates with virtually no name recognition.

There's only one man who can take the credit or blame for this: Imran Khan. Over the last eighteen months, he has electrified and educated the masses on the power of their vote to dilute the strength of unelected forces, which exert undue influence within the corridors of power. He builds on similar messaging delivered by other political giants before him. The difference is that Imran Khan has been able to mobilise a larger number of people, including Gen Z, urban elite and traditionally pro-establishment constituencies on his message. More importantly, Imran Khan and his supporters have shown extraordinary courage in the face of brutal state repression.

It started with the murder of Arshad Sharif, the jailing and torturing of senior PTI party leadership, leaking of private videos, an assassination attempt on Imran Khan himself, media censorship, killing of a party worker and shelling others with tear gas and rubber bullets. This is classic behaviour to get any civilian leader in Pakistan to back down and fall in line. But Khan refused to fall in line or be exiled. He kept making a singular demand to hold elections. And now we know why.

On a side note, remember when they said he wouldn't last more than three days in jail because of withdrawal from drugs or when they disqualified his marriage? That's what they threw at him. Everything and the kitchen sink. And this is what backfired for the electables. For the first time, the Pakistani people voted for something beyond their 'bread and butter' issues - the thana katcheri patronage system that electables master. This time the Pakistani people voted for their basic rights, including the right to vote. And the electables chose to stand on the wrong side of history.

Of course, this is Pakistan and so even winning an election doesn't change things overnight. The mandate of the people stands for change and yet the powers that be don't want to change; they want to cut a deal. Wise intellectuals asked PTI to cut a deal in the name of talking to all other parties. But Imran Khan was stubborn and asked for the people's genuine mandate to be respected. We are now witnessing the last act of the

electable system that has ruled the country for decades and the birth pangs of a Naya Pakistan.

In the longer arc of history, some irreversible gains have already been made by the Pakistani people on February 8th. First, the Pakistani people are entirely capable of producing peaceful revolutions through the ballot box - an extraordinary feat when one considers how many other Muslim nations break out into civil war and violence whilst renegotiating social contracts between the ruled and rulers. Second, the new 'electable' candidate is the one who stands with the people of Pakistan. No backdoor deals or guarantees can withstand the sheer force of the Pakistani voter. And finally, that the Pakistani voter isn't dumb or unaware - even if their bat is snatched and phone shut. This was a vote for the right to vote. Democracy has won by a landslide.

And this time, democracy isn't defined by the electable but is inspired by opposition to the electable: so much so that even PTI independents aren't abandoning their party to join the PML-N or PPP in the numbers they would have previously, especially under such trying circumstances and incentives to switch loyalty. This shows how much the landscape has changed for electability.

The people of Pakistan have demonstrated how knowledgeable, intelligent and nuanced their voting choices are, even when the odds are heavily stacked against them. This is driven in large part by millions of young voters tearing apart the traditional social contract their parents have with their local electable. The 2024 elections mark the beginning of the end for the politics of electables in Pakistan.

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