



2024 ELECTIONS: THE END OF ELECTABLES?

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Analysing elections in Pakistan – particularly in their immediate aftermath – has always been closer to reading tea leaves than solving a quadratic equation. There may be general trends that can be observed and speculative conclusions that can be reached, but the paucity of exit poll data and information about why people voted the way they did invites a certain degree of caution when making definitive statements about what a given election means for democracy, parties, and candidates in Pakistan. This problem compounded by the ever-present interference of the military establishment whose pre- and post-poll forays into electoral engineering further cloud the picture, as currently being seen in the furor over Form 45s across the country.

In the February 2024 elections, there are some observations that should be relatively uncontroversial. That the elections were rigged is something that cannot really be denied, nor would it make sense to suggest that the PTI's candidates did not perform better than expected given the constraints placed on them. Whilst there are

some who might argue that the military establishment ultimately benefits from a national political scenario in which no one party is able to claim an absolute majority in parliament – since unstable coalitions will always be easier to manipulate – there is little evidence to support the idea that the success of PTI candidates was part of some secret military conspiracy. If anything, the 2024 elections are an important reminder of the limits of state power. Attributing all events and outcomes to the machinations of shady uniformed masterminds gives them far too much credit.

However, in this context there are important questions that currently do not have clear answers. For example, while there is a broad consensus that rigging happened it is not immediately evident how much it affected the outcome of the elections. Which seats were rigged, who were they rigged in favour of, and how much of a difference did these efforts make to the overall balance of power in the National Assembly? The elections may be stolen, but what exactly is the scale of the theft? Similar

ly, to what extent can the success of the PTI be attributed to support for its platform as opposed to anti-incumbency bias driven by years of grinding inflation and poor governance? In other words, is there a meaningful difference between votes for the PTI and votes against the status quo? Much has also been made of the youth vote – 44% of voters in 2024 were reportedly voting for the first time – but again, we lack any concrete information about who young people vote for. This is not to suggest that they do not support the PTI but, rather, that we simply lack the data to be able to arrive at this conclusion with any confidence.

These are all interesting questions for a variety of reasons, but one reason why it makes sense to pause and take a wider view of the 2024 election results is because of the belief that this election heralds a profound break with the past, not only because it supposedly represents a defeat for the military establishment but also because some believe it signifies the beginning of the end for Pakistan's so-called electables. Defined as political candidates possessing the wealth, political connections, and social status required to mobilise local vote blocs and win elections without necessarily requiring the support of a party machinery, electables have long dominated Pakistan's electoral arena. For example, one study estimated that just 400 political families had won a majority of electoral contests in Punjab since the 1970s, and it has historically been electables defecting from one party to another who have often held the balance of power in Parliament (most famously when they join 'King's Parties' like the PML-Q under Musharraf and, more recently, the IPP). Through a combination of familial privilege accumulated over generations and generous support from the military establishment (when in alliance with them), electables have been a constant in Pakistani politics.

The abject failure of the IPP to make any electoral inroads in 2024, the defeat of party stalwarts from the PML-N and PPP, and the election of a record-breaking number of 'new' legislators in the National Assembly – 96 including six women elected on general seats – is being taken as evidence of the waning power of electables in the face of the PTI's overwhelming support and popularity. The electorate, it is argued, has turned its back on the traditional political elite and has opted for change, making its voice heard at the ballot box. But while there may be an element of truth to this narrative, it is important to highlight a couple of reasons why it may be too early to pronounce the end of electables in Pakistan.

It is important to understand precisely why electables have held power in the first place. Whilst it is often assumed that electables are little more than quasi-feudal elites coercing people into voting for them, the reality is that the key to political power at the local level has, at least for several decades, been contingent upon the ability to provide voters clientelistic service delivery. Put differently, electables succeed precisely because they possess the political and bureaucratic connections necessary to be able to credibly promise services to their supporters. These services can range from providing gas

and electricity to interceding with the police to resolve disputes. This ability to dispense state patronage is coupled with the construction of local electoral alliances, sometimes based on kinship networks, and lies at the heart of Pakistan's clientelist politics.

Clientelistic service provision of this kind is often contrasted with more universalistic, programmatic provision through which constituents would be entitled to public services regardless of who they vote for, and where votes would be cast in support of manifestos and policies rather than the promise of patronage. In terms of the 2024 elections, it is not immediately clear that this kind of shift – from clientelistic to programmatic politics – has taken place. After all, it is important to remember that many of the 'independent' candidates put forward by the PTI who defeated (or should have defeated) PML-N and PPP stalwarts would themselves qualify as traditional electables – including, but not limited to, individuals like Omar Ayub Khan and Malik Amir Dogar. Their victories could be attributed to an enthusiastic upswell of support for the PTI, but it could also be the case that their success rested, at least in part, on their ability to work the traditional levers of political mobilisation in Pakistan. Placed in historical context, electoral competition in Pakistan has often been more of an intra-elite affair than one in which no-name newcomers are able to dislodge powerful incumbents through the support of their party and the sheer force of their campaigns.

If all this is correct, how can we make sense of candidates like the PTI's Mohammad Mobeen Arif who defeated the PML-N's Khurram Dastgir Khan in Gujranwala? This, some may argue, is clear evidence of a relative unknown defeating a political heavyweight, which would not be incorrect. Once again, however, context matters. As research on dynastic politics in Pakistan has shown, traditional electables tend to fare worse in urban constituencies, and this trend intensifies over time. Put simply, urban voters tend to place a greater emphasis on service delivery and are less likely to be part of vote blocs organised around local kinship networks. Urban spaces are more pluralistic, in terms of the range and variety of political options and events available as well as sources of information and, crucially, are also home to Pakistan's middle classes. All these factors combine to produce voters who are less likely to reward poor candidates – regardless of their name of party affiliation – and it is not coincidental that some of the biggest upsets (or potential upsets) in 2024 took place in Pakistan's cities.

This brings us once more to the question of whether it is meaningful to distinguish between a vote for the PTI or against the status quo. Had the PTI not been forced out of power by the April 2022 vote of no confidence, there is considerable reason to believe its government would have presided over a deteriorating economic situation and that it would have fared poorly in a free and fair election. Instead, the record-breaking inflation and economic hardship endured by voters over the past two years have been associated with the PDM and Caretaker governments, and it would be reasonable to

assume voters punished their electables for this reason. Things were not helped by the relatively lacklustre campaign mounted by the PML-N, presumably because it assumed its partnership with the establishment guaranteed victory. The PTI itself was hamstrung by the curbs on its campaigning and whilst its leaders and party workers did build a narrative around their persecution and dismissal, the 2024 election season was characterised by a relative lack of debate on policy, even by Pakistani standards.

What this implies is that whilst there may have been pro-PTI sentiment for a variety of different reasons, or anti-PDM mobilisation due to economic hardship, it is difficult to discern how much of the PTI vote was for programmatic policies like the Sehat Card as opposed to more populist rhetoric. This matters because commitment to reforming the entire system of clientelistic politics would be a prerequisite for reducing the power of electables, and simply electing 'new' candidates is not sufficient to guarantee this. After all, 2024 is not the first time 'electable' politicians have found themselves ousted from power; similar dynamics were at play in the 1970 elections, and the introduction of a degree requirement for legislators by the Musharraf regime in 2002 also resulted in the disqualification of numerous traditional political elites. In both cases, it could be argued, the fresh faces brought into Parliament ultimately ended up reproducing the same systems of clientelistic politics they ostensibly had the potential to disrupt. Absent disciplined parties with strong organisational capacity, and because of continuous military intervention, candidates who become part of the political system tend to be coopted by it. Today's 'new' politicians could, therefore, become tomorrow's 'electables'.

This is not inevitable. Evidence from other parts of the world shows that clientelism declines as voters become wealthier and start demanding services that become increasingly expensive to provide in a targeted, nepotistic fashion. This is particularly true in circumstances where broader fiscal constraints – such as those being experienced by Pakistan – limit the ability of local electables to fund patronage spending in their constituencies (arguably another factor inhibiting the incumbents in 2024). As 'buying' votes becomes more expensive or difficult, parties are induced to make more programmatic, ideological appeals – and it will be interesting to see if similar tendencies take hold in Pakistan. Conversely, the opposite could also be true if economic conditions improve.

There are other developments that may also shape electoral politics in the years ahead. The development of new, centralised digital governance platforms – such as the mechanisms through which BISP and the Sehat Card are administered – have the potential to take state patronage out of the hands of local electables. Coupled with the potential elimination of so-called Constituency Development Funds, this could go a long way towards associating service delivery with parties rather than individuals. Similarly, as mentioned above, urbanisation and the growth of the middle classes should

similarly blunt the power of electables in the long run. Finally, and most importantly, reducing the military's interference in politics and allowing elections to take place uninterrupted over several cycles would do much to introduce accountability at the ballot box and strengthen democratic institutions.

Electables may indeed become a thing of the past in Pakistan, but it is far too early to make that prediction.

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