



Electoral

Voting Machines

Pakistan Institute of
Development Economics

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Webinar: Electoral Voting Machines

Friday, 10 September, 2021

11:00 AM PST

Panelists



Kanwar Muhammad Dilshad
Former Secretary,
ECP



Sarwar Bari
Spokesperson
FAFEN



Ahmed Bilal Mehboob
President / CEO
PILDAT

Speaker



Senator Shibli Faraz,
Minister for
Science & Technology,
Govt of Pakistan

Moderator

Nadeem ul Haque
VC, PIDE



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Preamble

In the wake of the recent hue and cry regarding the adoption of electronic voting machines (EVMs) in the coming general elections, the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, keeping up with the norm of free inquiry and discussing ideas, held a webinar on the hot subject. This webinar was meant to discuss the working, operation as well as issues, and challenges associated with adopting electronic voting machines in conducting free and fair elections in Pakistan. Mr. Nadeem ul Haque, VC PIDE, initiated the session reiterating his, and of course of PIDE's, enthusiasm for looking into any socio-political events that directly or indirectly impact development in Pakistan. Broadly outlining the contours of the debate, he invited the guest speakers to enlighten the audience about the working of EVMs.

Speaker 1

- **Ahmed Bilal Mehboob** gave a concise presentation on the working, process, manufacturing, and usefulness of EVMs. On the critical side, he was, however, of the view that before indulging in any discussion about the voting machine's mechanics and operations, one should be very clear about the rationale for introducing EVMs.
- It is pertinent to question: "*why do we need electronic voting machines at all?*" While alluding to this question PM Pakistan has stated on several occasions that we want to obtain these machines because we want to ensure free, fair, and undisputed elections. A very closely linked question then pops up: what are the key characteristics of the elections that have been conducted by the Election commission of Pakistan (ECP) in the past. What are the pre-election and post-election particularities, the electioneering customs, the political violence, and post elections practices like alliance formation and groupings? These are the part and parcel of elections in Pakistan. These practices until checked or abolished can never pave the way for free and fair elections. Hence, *electronic voting machines will be of no use to address these pre and post-election ill practices.*

- While commenting on the usefulness he appreciated that EVMs would help in vote counting making the whole process seamless and transparent. The vote transmission system will also be improved as there will be less physical involvement and electoral staff will have to scan and input a QR code into the system. However, **internet connectivity issues may make the system vulnerable to technical faults.**
- He emphasized the need to rigorously test the system before launching it on a national level. Drawing the attention of the audience towards the Election Act, 2017; he highlighted section 103 of the act that requires ECP to conduct pilot projects of EVMs. ECP did conduct only one such pilot, while the report of that event was still lying in the parliament un-debated. Thus, if we want to start a meaningful debate on the reliability of EVMs, the report provides the starting point.
- Also, we need to debate the roles of various entities in the state in the context of EVMs and the electoral process. In the current state of affairs, there is the reverse sequence of events as against what it ought to be since the government of Pakistan has taken on to herself the task of making the machine and has started giving demonstrations of the machine. Although the machine is quite good and it does its job well. It looks like any machine manufactured in a developed country. There is no objection to the working of the machine, the question is about the process and the incorporation of machines into the system. The government shouldn't encroach upon the constitutional mandate of ECP. **It is the job of ECP to experiment with the machine and evaluate its performance of the machine.**
- He cautioned that **Pakistan will be the world's first country to deploy 4000+ EVMs for full coverage of elections in one go.** There should be a gradual step-by-step introduction of EVMs into Pakistan's electoral system. EVMs would help in reducing the number of invalid ballots. **Pakistan loses almost 3% votes in every election** due to invalid ballots and there are almost 24 constituencies in Pakistan that lost almost 3% votes in the 2018 general elections due to wrong balloting. EVMs would avoid this invalid balloting and this may result in increasing turnout.

Speaker 2

- **Mr. Faraz** termed it a very important issue of Pakistan since the country is at the crossroads of history with the electoral and democratic institutions undergoing a paradigm shift.
- In an attempt to alleviate the concerns expressed by VC PIDE, Mr. Faraz affirmed the role of ECP as solely responsible for conducting free and fair elections in the country. However, he lamented the inability of ECP in initiating a parliamentary debate on the report published by ECP herself and failing to build capacity to take lead on the matter of utmost significance like making the electronic voting machine.
- The government had to take the lead on the matter due to the inability of ECP to perform its duties in due course of time. Government has no intention of encroaching upon the constitutional domain of ECP and other institutions, yet it is the incompetence and inability of ECP which persuaded the government to intervene directly, he regretted.
- He further clarified that the **government is not making the machine itself, it is just supervising the task** assigned to the private company to make a prototype. The requirements of the machine have been specified by ECP. The prototype was presented before ECP and a technical team was set up to analyze the prototype. ECP tested the machine and gave their observations but the purpose of introducing the machine is not to force the people of Pakistan to use it. ECP can approve the machine of their own choice; the government is just trying to make machines and anything locally if there is will.

Speaker 3

- Former Chairman ECP, **Mr. Dilshad** tried his best to defend ECP in the face of heavy allegations of inefficiency and incompetence leveled by the government of Pakistan.
- Nonetheless, ECP remained under-represented and Mr. Dilshad couldn't defend his organization for the lack of research and up-to-date knowledge. He reiterated the stance of mutual understanding between government and ECP to bridge the rift.
- He emphasized that the government is forcing the ECP to introduce EVMs in the next general elections, but practically the ECP couldn't do so. ECP has a time constraint. **One and half years is not enough for the complete introduction of EVMs into the electoral system of Pakistan.**

Speaker 4

- **Mr. Sarwar** also criticized the ECP for not being able to tame other electoral issues which do not depend on EVMs but have great implications on overall election results. He advocated the introduction of EVMs but expressed his concerns regarding other electoral issues that need speedy reform. He alluded that ECP is unnecessarily opposing the adoption of technology without any research. The objections raised by ECP are not linked to EVMs but point fingers at ECP's performance.

Way forward by Dr. Nadeem ul Haque

- *why the government of Pakistan desperately wants to introduce EVMs instead of launching a mobile app for casting votes.* He argued that the nationwide deployment of EVMs is a costly venture. It will cost billions of rupees to the Pakistan government. The alternative must be researched and the best economical alternative should be considered instead of recklessly following the trend of EVMs. There was a weak rebuttal on the grounds of secrecy and security breaches as well as abuse of mobile phones of the masses by elite politicians.

Conclusion

Dr. Haque concluded the session by declaring to continue this debate in the future as many aspects of the electoral system of Pakistan need further discussion and debate. He concluded that our system is going on blindly. We as a nation start following every new trend without analyzing and without doing any research EVM is welcomed as an initiative; nobody should be against the adoption of technology. There are always alternatives, the need is to research the costs and benefits of alternatives and decisions should be taken accordingly. Sadly, our policy process is whimsical and devoid of research. The debates here start after the decisions are made. There is an extreme shortage of research for decision-making and decision analysis. We should not confine ourselves to technical disputes; we should look into the system as a whole. There should be constructive debates and proper research regarding the performance of the election commission of Pakistan and the electoral process in Pakistan.



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