

A nation hostage to its own Election Commission.

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Despite numerous proposals and demands for electoral reforms, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has been working overtime to keep its electoral processes and methodologies at the same archaic level as the ones that existed in circa 1918. Perhaps the parliament is just as guilty for its reluctance to empower the ECP and to pay only lip-service to the subject of electoral reforms. This complicity was best exhibited when the Parliament in 2017 removed the requirement of declaring financial, criminal, educational and personal information by those taking part in the elections.

The ECP's refusal to change has critically impacted upon the development and progress of Pakistan. Its obsolete electoral processes ensure recycling of the same coterie of 1% dynastic, rich, feudal and powerful families - often taking turns for three or four generations.

While electronic and biometric voting machines are already a norm in many countries for more than a decade, the ECP still insists on using thousands of wooden boxes, millions of ballot papers (read trees and forests), messy unverifiable thumb impressions and manual counting of votes. These processes are hugely vulnerable to errors such as multiple voting, voting on another person's card and even voting on behalf of those who are dead. All this could be easily eliminated by using NADRA linked biometric gadgets, now in use at thousands of outlets in Pakistan.

Although the Supreme Court has given a ruling that makes it compulsory for all candidates to declare their personal data, the ECP has made no arrangements to place this data on its website. By doing so, the ECP has denied voters 'right to information' about those they are voting for and also violated Article 19A of the Constitution of Pakistan.

The ECP has failed to provide the NOTA (None of the Above) option to voters in Pakistan, just as it has decided to remain clueless on how to enable overseas Pakistanis to vote. Clearly the ECP is not just ignorant but also highly allergic to any idea that involves reform or use of modern technology.

Pakistan is the only country where a candidate can contest elections on unlimited seats and make the tax payers pay for expenses incurred in holding subsequent bye-elections. How come the ECP and the law-makers have kept their eyes closed to this scam?

The responsibility of raising objections on the information declared by a candidate has been traditionally passed on to rival candidates. This is incorrect and uncivilised. The faults and inaccuracies in a candidate's declarations ought to be determined by the ECP through its own reliable and official circuits. We have had scores of parliamentarians ride through their full parliamentary term with fake degrees, dual nationalities, criminal records and financial irregularities. Should the Chief Election Commissioner not be held accountable and made to pay for all those criminals who sauntered through its porous net?

As seen from the 2018 nominations, almost all reserved seats for women have been allocated to close relatives or friends of the senior leaders of each party. Thus the reserved seats, instead of empowering ordinary women, further reinforce the concentration of power within a small coterie of incestuous ruling families. An estimated 6-8 million people in Pakistan have been disenfranchised because they can only vote from the city of their permanent home address and not from the city they currently reside in. A half-hearted 21 day exercise of setting up 25,000 'Display Centres' was conducted in 2016 to correct errors of this nature. A sample survey in Karachi revealed that almost half of the 'display centres' mentioned on the ECP website did not actually exist. 90 percent persons in another randomly selected sample had no clue about the ECP's Display Centre initiative. ECP's inability to imagine smarter and efficient ways of how a voter can correct his voting address (without visiting its bureaucratic offices) has taken away the right to vote from an estimated 6-8 million voters.

True democracy, as envisaged by the ancient Athenians involves proportionate representation for every political party, and every segment of society. Instead of the parliament being eternally populated by the same 1% rich and influential families, it ought to have women, labourers, professionals, minorities and farmers in the same ratio as their actual numbers. Central to democracy and a healthy political system, the institution of ECP has neither the vision nor the capacity to undertake any reforms on its own. Our only hope may lie in a citizens' movement to reconstruct the institution that is the biggest facilitator of dynastic rule in Pakistan.

