

## Reforms that refuse to arrive

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It does not require great skills, statistics or science to predict that the 2023 general elections would follow exactly the same pattern of deficiencies, delays and discrepancies that were witnessed in 2018. That is how the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has always conducted elections - in 2013, 2008, 2002 and the ones before. Two structural compulsions ensure the repetition of the same set of follies. The ECP suffers from incorrigible and chronic learning disabilities and the successive Pakistani Parliaments failed to introduce any meaningful electoral reforms.

The electronic and biometric voting machines have been the norm in many countries for more than a decade. The ECP has however insisted on its age-old habits - using over 1.7 million plastic ballot boxes, 220 million ballot papers, 'hard to verify' thumb impressions, tons of magnetic ink and a uniquely sloppy and inefficient method of vote counting. Just the process of placement of stamps on ballot papers has yielded over 1.6 million rejected votes in 2018. 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 have been easily eliminated had the ECP opted for NADRA linked biometric machines, now in use at thousands of outlets in Pakistan.

The 2018 elections cost us Rs.40 billion. Only the purchase and printing of ballot papers was a dent of Rs.2.2 billion. Most of these expenses could be avoided if the ECP was to do away with its antiquated processes and instead adopt biometric verification along with electronic voting machines. Collectively they ensure that every voter can be uniquely identified by her/his CNIC and biometric impression. A second vote cannot be cast against the same CNIC from any other location while the vote counting is done electronically and can be monitored in real time from a central location.

The Elections could be held province wise and spread over 3-4 days. This enables reuse of same equipment and personnel, shorter queues and improved voter turnout. The electronic voting machines would eliminate the nagging 'rejected' votes, the saga of the Forms 45, 46 and 47 and the error-prone manual vote-counting system.

Approximately 6-8 million voters were disenfranchised because their votes were listed at the city of their permanent home address. Likewise over 7 million overseas Pakistanis were disenfranchised because the ECP and the Parliamentarians would not trust a modern technology-based solution. The ECP has failed to discover an address change procedure that does not involve tedious bureaucratic hassles of visiting ECP offices, filling forms, appending photocopies and wasting two days. Likewise a process of registration of voters should be reconducted for every election. Voters should be asked to register themselves afresh and this process must begin 2 years prior to each election. Registration must be done through NADRA's bio and CNIC verification without filling any form or going to any ECP office.

Lessons could be learnt from how confidential electronic banking transactions are carried out and how NADRA linked phone SIMs are issued at thousands of outlets. The ECP must ensure that it provides easy mechanisms for local and overseas voters to register or change their polling addresses any time during the five years.

The existing practice of contesting election on multiple seats and then making the state pay for bye-elections should be eliminated. Contestants' affidavits and declarations ought to be placed on the ECP's website at least four months prior to the elections. This should give ample time and opportunity to all parties for scrutiny and raising objections.

The responsibility of raising objections on the information declared by a candidate has been traditionally passed on to rival candidates. This ought to be the responsibility of the ECP and not that of private citizens. We have had scores of parliamentarians ride through their full parliamentary term with fake degrees, dual nationalities, criminal records, financial irregularities and on-going court cases. This ought to cease and the ECP (in coordination with other government organisations) ought to create its own fool-proof scrutiny / filtration mechanisms to prevent those not meeting the criteria from contesting in the polls.

Although constituting 50% of the population, the representation of women in the Parliament is much smaller. The current laws requiring political parties to field at least 5% women candidates on general seats must be raised to at least 10 percent. Sadly the majority of reserved seats for women are gifted out to close relatives or friends of senior party leaders, further reinforcing the concentration of power within a small coterie of incestuous ruling families. There is thus a need to rethink the process of nomination on reserved seats. Receiving applications from public, defining a criteria and asking a larger group to make selections could be one such option.

The existing electoral processes are obsolete, faulty and dysfunctional. It would be best for the ECP to learn from the tribal wisdom of Dakota Indians, passed on from generation to generation which suggests that when you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount.