

## → Elections are the only solution to multi-pronged Problems in Pakistan.

A free and fair election can be described as a regular vein in any democracy. For smooth functioning of any society it is imperative that there is a government in place and masses have a habit of obedience to that government. As ordained by Allah (S.W.T) in the Holy Quran that "Follow Allah, His messenger, and those charged with authority amongst you -" (Al-Quran) to entrust someone with this authority conducting elections is very important. The delay in elections, in a society, as polarised as ours, lead to unprecedented crises. Pakistani society is no different so we also find ourselves in a number of different crisis. Though elections alone cannot be treated as panacea for all the problems, majority of the problems suffered by Pakistan have their roots in the dysfunctionality of democracy, which can be partly addressed through elections. This essay will start off by discussing how elections can offer solutions to a number of problems suffered by us such as economic crisis, constitutional crisis, extreme polarity found in the society and the list goes on. It will also delve into other solutions as well. Finally this piece will connect those solutions and their effectiveness with the conduction of election.

The democracy in Pakistan, marred by military dictatorships has seen a number of different kinds of elections. Pakistan witnessed indirect elections through Basic democrats introduced by President Ayub Khan in 1960's.

Pakistan also witnessed a ban on political parties and non-party based elections conducted by then President Zia in 1980's. However, from last three decades Pakistan has experienced a Parliamentary form of government, despite enduring a military regime in the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It was the conduct of elections in 2008, which brought an end to the military backed regime and ousted President Musharraf, who had usurped the power with the use of force. Peaceful elections and ensuring smooth transfer of power cultivates inclusivity and tolerance in the society, which in turn help to address a number of challenges.

Speaking of tolerance, currently Pakistan is in a dire need of it. The rise of popular politics and ascending to power of the popular politicians around the globe, e.g. Trump in USA and Narendra Modi in India, also engulfed Pakistan. Pakistan also witnessed the rise of Imran Khan, an extremely popular leader, who was successful in generating a cult following. The current political environment in Pakistan is of the nature that opposition is treated as enemies, while dissent is seen as sedition. Therefore, in order to bring down the high political volatility and breed tolerance in the society, conduct of free and fair elections is very important. Any delay in elections may prove to be the ignition that may lead to the burning down of the whole edifice of our society.

Apart from the polarisation, Pakistan's economy is also seeing an unprecedented crisis. With an uncontrollable balance of payment deficit and inflation, Pakistan is struggling to breathe without the support of IMF or other loans from friendly nations. However, all the brotherly countries, who have helped Pakistan in the difficult times are hesitating to offer support, e.g. the Gulf Countries and China, in the absence of a stable government. There is no doubt that economic stability is directly linked with political stability, which is impossible to be achieved without conducting free and fair elections.

The political instability and high polarisation, as discussed above, have also their fair share of contribution in Pakistan's constitutional crisis.

There is no provincial government in Punjab and KPK, for more than an year, which amounts to approximately 70% of the whole Pakistan. Former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, who was ousted through a vote of no-confidence in April 2022, in an attempt to settle the scores with his political opponents, orchestrated the dissolution of provincial assemblies in Punjab and KPK. This move necessitated an election within 90 days, as warranted by the constitution, however that was not feasible either economically or logistically. Therefore, interim govts are running 70% of the Pakistan for more than an year and to rescue Pakistan from this constitutional crisis, conduction of general elections for the national as well as the provincial assemblies is utmost necessary.

Moreover, the sense of alienation that breed in the peripheries of Pakistan can be exacerbated with a possible delay in the elections. The fire has already been ignited by the return of militancy in Pakistan, so a delay in elections might add fuel to this fire. With the return of Afghan Taliban in power in our western neighbourhood and rise of Baloch nationalism, we have seen increasing number of terrorist attacks in South & North Waziristan, merged districts of FATA and whole of Balochistan. Hence, the conduction of free and fair elections will certainly inculcate inclusivity among masses, which will consequently lower the temperature in peripheries.

Lastly, Pakistan is facing a climate emergency. Pakistan is in a dire need of a stable political leadership to address this issue. Recently, the world leadership gathered in Dubai to conduct the Conference of Parties (COP 28), in which Pakistan was represented by an interim Prime Minister, who has a very limited mandate. It is imperative to note here that Pakistan is among the worst effectees of climate change. Only the flood of 2022 caused an estimated damage of \$ 30 billion to our economy, let alone the other droughts which Pakistan faces regularly. Therefore, in order to take concrete steps towards our protection from an environmental disaster, there needs to be stable, elected government in Islamabad, which is not possible unless elections are conducted.

While the importance of elections cannot be denied, some quarters also argue elections alone are not enough and a lot more has to be done to solve Pakistan's problems. As far as polarisation is concerned, conducting elections in such a polarised environment may lead to rampant violence, threatening the law and order situation throughout the country. Therefore, in order to ease down this polarisation in our society, there needs to be a lot of work done in our education sector, which is in a very dilapidated situation. This can be well gauged from the fact that more than 50% of the children of school-going age are out of schools. Thus, Pakistan will remain unable to bear the fruits of representative democracy, unless the masses, who use their right of vote in elections are educated and aware of their political rights.

Some even argue that elections will have little bearing on our economy, which is on a ventilator from past few years. Pakistan, since its inception, has found itself on the door steps of IMF. The latest stand-by agreement of \$3 billion has kept our economy from defaulting. It is imperative to mention here that each IMF tranche that is allowed is accompanied by harsh conditions resulting in increased taxation and resultant sky rocketing inflation. It often gets difficult for a political government to take such harsh decisions. Thus, the delayed elections in Pakistan, with an interim set up in power, government was able to meet the demands of IMF and keep our economy afloat.

As far as the constitutional crisis is concerned, it has not arisen in a vacuum. Repeated undermining of constitutional and democratic norms over the years lead to a crisis situation such as Pakistan is facing these days. Strengthening the independence of judiciary and rule of law will have more far reaching effects on these crisis than merely holding elections. Among the three pillars of the state, it's the job of judiciary to uphold and protect the constitution and our history in this regard paints a very bleak picture. Therefore, in order to keep Pakistan from plunging into any other constitutional crisis in future, the imperative is to have a judiciary independent enough to uphold and interpret constitution in its letter and spirit.

In pursuit of countering terrorism, a delay in elections has proved to be a blessing in disguise for Pakistan. Rampant militancy in the last few years necessitated harsh decisions such as that of repatriating the Afghan refugees. Islamabad has maintained this, since long, that Afghan refugees have been involved in terrorist activities in Pakistan, using Afghan soil for the support. Returning the 3.7 million Afghans from our soil could have proved a difficult decision to make by any elected govt. However, there being an interim govt in place, having no political interests, took this decision bravely and also ensured its execution. Thus, conduct of elections has little to do with countering terrorism, as many argue.

While the arguments of those who don't believe in elections as a panacea for our problems may be valid to some extent but a deeper analysis reveals that all the multi-dimensional problems of Pakistan are somehow connected with our democracy and therefore, elections. As far as the low literacy rate is concerned, it cannot be used as an excuse for an authoritarian regime. In fact a government, effectively in place and truly mandated by people will be better positioned to address the problems being faced by the education sector. Therefore, timely elections and sustained democracy will eventually lead to an educated Pakistan.

Moving ahead, it is very difficult to negate the link between the elections and the economy. The manner in which our economy is being run from last one year does not show any prospect of a sustainable recovery.

Despite securing a standby agreement from IMF, all Pakistan is managing to avert a default. Increasing money supply to cover the budget deficit, which has resultantly sky rocketed the inflation, depict unprofessional handling of our economy. In order to get long term results Pakistan needs to increase the production and exports be it products or services. The policies required to achieve this goal necessitates a stable government in place in Islamabad, which is not possible without conduction of timely elections.

Elections can prove to be a pivotal point as far as countering the rise of militancy is concerned. The recent upsurge in terrorist attacks in Pakistan can largely be attributed to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISKP), both of which utilize Afghan soil as a launching pad. In order to deter the Taliban government in Kabul from providing them any kind of support, the torn diplomatic ties with them need to be repaired. Therefore, conduct of elections and the resultant government formed will be better positioned than anyone else to indulge in meaningful talks with Kabul in relation with countering terrorism.

Therefore, in the light of the detailed discussion above, it can safely be concluded that there is no doubt that Pakistan is currently standing at a very <sup>important</sup> junction. Its 76 year long checkered history and finds itself struggling against a number of crises, ensuring the conduct of timely and free and fair elections can solve many, if not all, of our problems. Our history is a witness that interference in elections conducted in 1970 led to disintegration of our country, while any sustained growth that took place was during the tenures, followed by elections, of stable governments.