

Gallup Pakistan History Project - Weekend Read 14 ‘**NA 246: Electoral Politics and History**’: by Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

Over the last month or so, domestic politics in Pakistan has been dominated by the incessant spectacle and drama surrounding the by-election in NA 246 (Azizabad) Karachi. The political context for this by-election set the stage for an intense and often acrimonious election campaign between the contesting parties in the constituency. In the post-Dec 16th Pakistan, the state’s security apparatus and institutions seem to have developed a concrete consensus: monopoly over violence ought to lie exclusively with the state and its institutions. While the armed forces are battling direct challengers to the state’s sovereignty in Pakistan’s restive tribal belt, the state has begun showing an interest in reclaiming its turf from political parties, and their paramilitary wings. The MQM, and its special role and influence in Karachi, has come under scrutiny and pressure in the last few months. Since the raid on nine-zero by Rangers, the party’s political infrastructure and operational activities in Karachi have come under severe criticism and national inspection.

It was in this context, that the by-election in NA 246 assumed a distinctive flavor. The election became a microcosm of the MQM’s recent political troubles, and its gradual political alienation from power in Sindh, as well as in Islamabad. The Party’s trouble with the law enforcement and security institutions in recent months seemed to have created space for political challengers to emerge in Karachi. PTI stepped into this emerging breach, and over the last month or so, the by-election in NA 246 became the focal point of attention for all national stakeholders. The results of the by-election are given below:

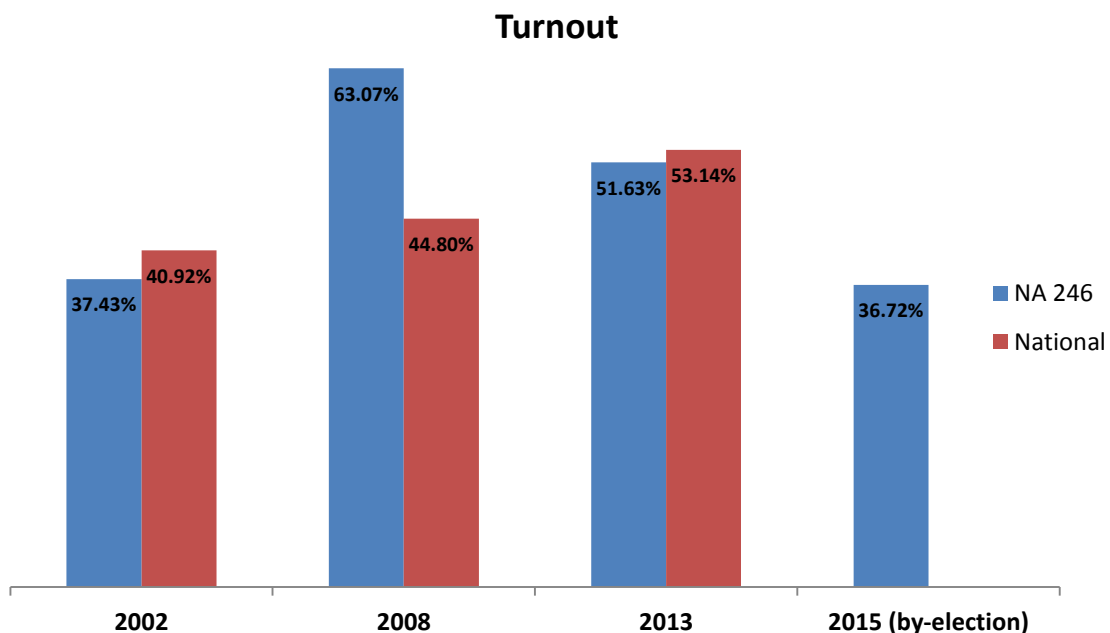
Turnout	36.72%
Winner	Kunwar Naveed Jamil – MQM (95,644 votes)
Runner-up	Imran Ismail – PTI (24,821 votes)

Now that the by-election in NA 246 has come to a conclusion, a retrospective deconstruction of electoral results and performances in the constituency would help untangle the politics of the constituency, as well as that of Karachi. This analysis makes use of Gallup Pakistan’s Electoral Database that contains wide-ranging data on elections in Pakistan, held between 1970 and 2013. This high valuable data, right down to the constituency level in each national Election, allows an insight into Pakistan’s democratic and political evolution over the last five decades. More crucially, when juxtaposed and read together, results and data on different pertinent electoral variables helps weave a political narrative that could explain the evolution of democratic politics and political stakeholders in the country.

NA 246 was chiseled out after the 2002 Delimitation Exercise conducted under General Pervez Musharraf; an exercise that also increased the total number of National Assembly seats.¹ The constituency is often conceived of as the MQM’s citadel: ground zero of the Party’s politics. The MQM has won the constituency repeatedly over the last few Elections with a handsome margin. So what does the electoral history of NA 246 look like?

TURNOUT

Voter turnout is a key variable in elections. It indicates the level of political participation in an electoral democracy, reveals the magnitude of political engagement and activity in a constituency, and is particularly significant in first-past-the-post electoral systems. Given that Pakistan’s electoral system uses the majoritarian, first-past-the-post electoral formula, voter turnout on Election Day can influence a candidate’s performance in a single constituency, as well as a Party’s aggregate performance in the Election exercise. NA 246 has had differing turnout proportions in each of the Elections since 2002. The figure below shows this comparative data:



Turnout trend in the constituency indicates that the voters in NA 246 have largely remained aligned with the national voter turnout trend. In Elections 2008, voters in the constituency bucked the trend, and came out in larger numbers (63.07%) than the national turnout (44.80%). In the 2002 and 2008 Elections, voters in the constituency showed slightly less enthusiasm and interest in coming out and casting their ballots. In the current by-election, 36.72% of the constituency’s voters exercised their right to vote. A number of important insights emerge from this data. Except the 2008 Elections in NA 246, the turnout has been low in the constituency. This indicates that voters in this constituency do not come out to cast their ballots in large

¹ <http://ecp.gov.pk/Delimitation/ConstituencyMap/na-246.pdf>

numbers. Two contrasting explanations can be drawn from this observation. First, the conventional understanding of MQM's politics in Karachi paints the Party as manipulating and rigging Elections in its favor by casting fake ballots for its candidates. If this were true, and MQM has indeed practiced these tactics in Elections, than voters in this constituency largely stay away from casting ballots – perhaps as a consequence of the fear of reprisals and intimidation popularly associated with the MQM. Furthermore, if fake balloting does occur in this constituency, the wrongdoers, despite the massive margins of victory for MQM candidates, are unable to artificially inflate the overall turnout in the constituency.

Second, and contrarily, if the constituency is understood as an ethnic enclave of Urdu-speaking, MQM-supporting voters, than there is a degree of voter lethargy in the constituency. This implies that because of the strong ethno-linguistic basis of political allegiances in the constituency, voters here are convinced of the homogeneity and monopoly of MQM's support, and therefore, avoid turning out for voting under the impression that the MQM would win inevitably. The current by-election shows that the MQM does indeed command sizable support amongst voters in this constituency. This election was conducted under intense scrutiny, and under the strict security control of Rangers. Allegations of rigging or wrongdoing are minimal in the recently concluded by-election. Therefore, the claims that there is genuine electoral support for the MQM in this constituency seem to be true. The margin of victory in this special by-election is sizable, and does underline the Party's command in the constituency.

PARTY PERFORMANCE

Another useful angle to adopt in understanding the electoral history of NA 246 is to look at each Party's performance in the three elections between 2002 and 2013. The Table below shows this data in detail:

PARTY & CANDIDATE ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE IN NATIONAL ELECTION 2002		
Winner	Haji Aziz Ullah (MQM)	53,134 (55%)
Runner-up	Rashid Minhas (MMA)	32,879 (34%)

PARTY & CANDIDATE ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE IN NATIONAL ELECTION 2008		
Winner	Sufyan Yousuf (MQM)	186,933 (96%)
Runner-up	Sohail Ansari (PPP/PDA)	6,741 (3%)

PARTY & CANDIDATE ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE IN NATIONAL ELECTION 2013		
Winner	Sardar Nabeel Ahmed Gabol	137,874 (74%)
Runner-up	Amir Sharjeel	31,875 (17%)

These three election results show that the MQM has been winning consistently and comfortably over the last three National Election cycles. The closest contest was witnessed in 2002, when the MQM's winning candidate bagged 53,134 votes, or 55% of the total votes

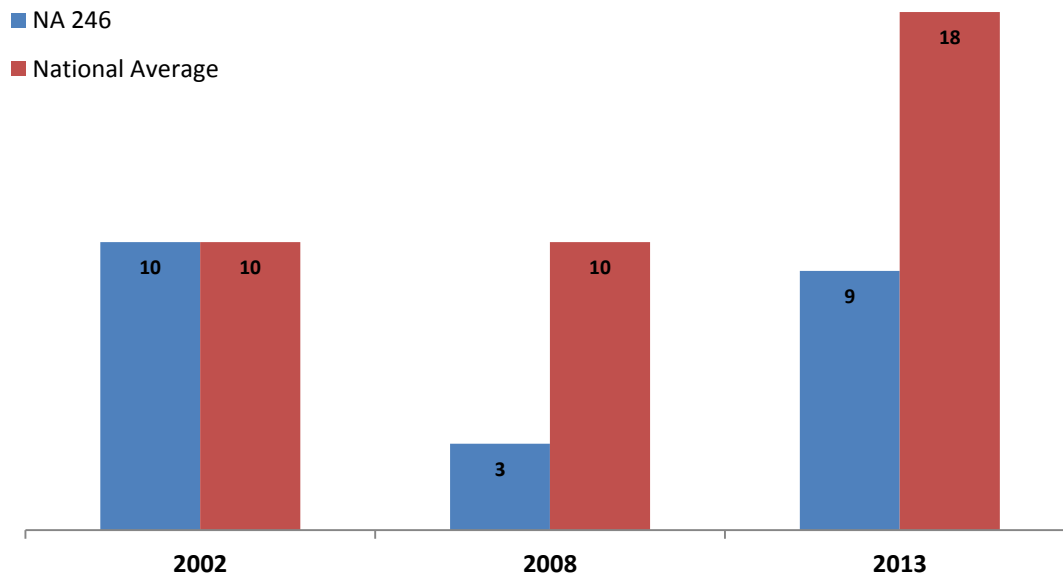
polled. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal's candidate received a sizable 32,879 (34%) votes in the 2002 Elections. Result from the 2002 Election shows that there is a significant pocket of Jamaat-i-Islami voters in NA 246, as well as voters favoring the religious political parties. Notwithstanding the allegations of manipulation surrounding the 2002 Elections held by General Pervez Musharraf, the MQM faced competition only in the 2002 Elections.

The current by-election result (discussed earlier) also reveals another interesting insight into the difference with the 2013 National Election in the constituency. The PTI's candidate in the 2013 General Election bagged 31,875 or 17% of the total votes in the constituency. In the current by-election, the PTI's candidate 24,821 votes under circumstances where the Election was closely monitored and supervised. Two important observations can be made about this trend. First, the current by-election, like most by-elections, received lukewarm interest from voters in NA 246, as shown in the overall turnout, despite the furore and political spectacle surrounding the event (mainly in the national media). Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, the PTI's open challenge to the MQM in this by-election, given MQM's recent political troubles, could have had the inverse effect of galvanizing the Party's core base of ethno-linguistic voters, and resulted in overwhelming vote of confidence for the MQM. This result should be read carefully, and the future of Karachi's politics, and observations made on the nature of electoral politics and mathematics in the city should be informed by these emergent realities and observations.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Political participation often indicates the level of political engagement, diversity, and openness in a multi-party democracy. More specifically, the number of candidates contesting Elections in each constituency can be read as a proxy for political participation in a constituency. The figure below shows the number of candidates that have contested Elections in NA 246 in the Elections between 2002 and 2013:

Number of Candidates



The data shown here indicates that the level of political participation in NA 246 dipped precipitously in the 2008 Election, when only 3 candidates registered to participate in the National Election. In the 2002 Election, the number of candidates on the ballot in NA 246 was in line with the national average. However, while political participation seems to have increased in the rest of the country, with an average of 18 candidates contesting Elections in each constituency, 9 candidates entered the field in NA 246. Alternatively, over the last two election cycles, the number of candidates contesting elections in NA 246 has been below the national average. This could be indicative of the political geography and support patterns in the constituency. With the MQM being the repeated victor in the constituency, the space for opposing candidates entering and contesting Elections in this constituency seems limited.

The data presented in this discussion shows that the electoral and political landscape and history of Karachi provides a fascinating reading. Karachi bears an important imprint on national and provincial politics in Sindh. The MQM has emerged as the dominant political force in the city over the last few decades. In particular, under General Musharraf's reign and support, the Party entered the Government in 2002, and has remained in power for more than a decade at the center and the province – until 2013. Currently locked out of the corridors of power, the MQM faces stiff scrutiny and criticism for its political infrastructure, operations, and attitude in the city.

The MQM political dominance in Karachi is indicative of the special ethno-linguistic context and flavor of Karachi's politics. The MQM's emergence in the 1980s and its subsequent rise over the last three decades has been an important event in Pakistan's political evolution. With its political roots in Karachi giving it an edge in the metropolis, the Party continues to exercise political relevance and importance given Pakistan's politically fractured society, and its majoritarian democratic system. By winning Elections and dominating politics in Karachi, the

MQM can continue to become an indispensable coalition partner for Governments in Sindh and Islamabad.

The recent turn of events in Pakistan's politics and society might be a watershed moment for the Party, as well as politics and peace in Karachi. As democratic politics in Pakistan matures, old operational pathologies and political attitudes would have to change and accommodate new socioeconomic and political realities. The emergent challenges and changes faced by the MQM could over time dilute the strength and attraction of its ethno-linguistic political narrative and agenda for voters in Karachi. These voters might find alternative voices to represent their interests, and might seek a different outlet for the expression of their political aspirations. In this context, the recent by-election in NA 246 should provide an interesting reading and case-study for students and observers of Pakistani politics and democracy.