

General Election 2018 : Predictable outcome of an unpredictable Election

TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACKWARDS

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Ancient Chinese wisdom tells us that the progress of history is not linear; history progresses two steps forward and one step backwards. As far as the electoral race is concerned, its outcome remains unpredictable, as forecasted by almost all colleagues in the polling industry. However, the political outcome of the elections is quite predicable: it will be a step backwards, after the two steps forward we took in the decade between 2007 and 2017. This observation is based on my personal assessment of the pre-election phase of the current elections.

Beginning with the judicial movement in 2007, Pakistan made remarkable strides on the way to rule of law and democratic consolidation. During this period, we witnessed the strengthening of independent media and civil society, which resulted in improvements in governance and lead to a stronger check on financial corruption in at least the federal government and the governments in Punjab and KPK. Together these governments constitute more than 80% of the entire fiscal space. We saw an open and democratic debate on the choice between physical infrastructure favored by the government in Punjab and social infrastructure favored by the government in KPK proceeded in a

healthy manner. On the whole, the nation came together, the threat of terrorism receded, extremist ideas were pushed to political fringe, Pakistan was able to negotiate a shift in its strategic direction according to its own compulsions in a changing global calculus of hard and soft power. The dramatic improvement in energy supply and resulting resurgence of the large and medium industry created considerable hopes visible in the annual polls on hope and despair, direction of the country, and hopes about personal and national finances.

The pre-election half year has already reversed most of the above-mentioned gains. Our gravest loss in this pre-election half year is in the field of rule of law. Analysts sometime forget that it was with a struggle for the rule of law that we started our democratic progress in 2007. It was the defiance of the judicial class to unconstitutional powers which first triggered this advance. Eventually all political parties across partisan lines and society at large also lent active support and as a result of this collective effort, Pakistan experienced its first ever transfer of power from one genuine constitutional power to another, through the 10th election in 2013.

Today, in 2018, as we approach the polling day, a good part of the gains made in the field of rule of law during the last decade appear to have been lost. It is, in my personal assessment, one step backwards after the two steps forward which we took in the preceding decade.

What caused the one step backwards? It was a combination of enhanced threat from those who lost power as a result of democratic resurgence and the inability of the elected leadership to generate countervailing power to withstand this backlash. It is in the nature of things that power asserts itself unless it is checked by countervailing power.

The two steps forward reflected the power of the masses to check the power of the elites who dominate centers of power in both the society and the state. It was in fitness of things because assertion of masses is what democracy and universal suffrage are all about. The resulting empowerment of the masses generated a resentment in the upscale educated segments of the voting population as well as the not elected parts of the state structure.

It is easy to forget that except on the election day, the power of the not elected parts of the state structure always exceeds the power of the elected. Between one election and another, the power of the not elected parts of the state can be kept in check only through the social contract embedded in the Constitution. The social contract can only be enforced by tapping into the grass-roots, latent power embedded in the approximately 150,000 neighborhoods of our 200 million strong country.

Democratic forces could have tapped into the grass-roots, latent power embedded in our 150,000 neighborhoods through strengthening formal and informal institutions of local government.

In most democracies, it is the ability to govern and rule local neighborhoods that lends power to the leaders of masses as they compete for the constitutional power split between them and other wielders of state power. Unfortunately, during the decade between 2007 and 2017, our political leadership remained completely oblivious to this dimension of democratic consolidation. They simply failed to build any countervailing power which would protect the system in times of trouble.

I often tell those of my students who are in the profession of politics that to think of organized political parties in a competitive democracy without having elected governments at the grass-root is to conceive of university graduates without having primary schools.

The one step backwards we are now seeing in our march towards democracy is a result of this political incompetence of the political class as a whole. They failed to strengthen the Parliament; they failed to strengthen their cabinets; and above all, they miserably failed to strengthen the formalization of elected power in the 150,000 neighborhoods of the country. When push comes to shove, it is only through mobilizing the power of these institutions that democracy can be protected from the assaults that it inevitably invites. That explains the one step backwards we are now seeing.

The winners of the 11th election will be confronted with the same, difficult, existential choice which faced the winners of the last elections: whether to build an inclusive, all-encompassing political class represented in the Parliament or to be humbled by its natural competitors. No matter who wins the election, for our democracy to thrive, a new political consensus and a new political class would have to be forged. At the moment, I see little empirical evidence of this happening. I certainly have no data to suggest it.

That said, despite being in the profession of ‘data’, I don’t subscribe to theories of data determinism. I strongly believe that, at critical moments in their history, nations and institutions which still have in them that miraculous spark we call life, are able to go ‘beyond the data’ and to achieve what seemed previously improbable, if not altogether impossible. As a citizen of Pakistan, I hope that we would be able to do that.