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Pakistan

Pakistan's most rigged general elections

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ON 26 July 2018, in his election victory speech, Imran Khan gave a sober talk contrary to his very violent language used throughout the election campaign. He has "won" 116 seats of the 342 seats National Assembly of which 278 seats are contested directly on First Past The Post (FPTP) system. He is short of the 137 seats needed for the majority in the parliament. However, there are plenty of parliamentarians elected as "independents" who would either join his party or would vote for him.

Demonstrations in several cities have taken place against the post poll rigging. The majority of several dozen candidates has been turned into minority votes overnight by "unknown hands" These unknowns are known to everyone but if you write with the right name, you may disappear for this crime. Almost all the commercial media is under control by these "unknowns".

The media is instructed on daily basis by these "unknowns", all this to get a favourable mandate for their loved one "The great Imran Khan" who once was captain of the most popular game, the cricket, and won a world cup for Pakistan in 1992. Imran Khan is a conservative politician who had developed in recent years his magic love for the army generals and is keeping a kind heart for religious fanatics.

This was the most rigged election in the history of Pakistan. From Pre poll period until today on 28th July, all efforts were made to ensure that Imran Khan would get a simple majority. Prior to the elections, there were consistent attacks on Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz, the ruling party, by the judiciary on the question of accountability.

The PMLN has fallen apart from the military and judicial establishment on mainly two issues. The most important was the supremacy of civilians over the military. The second was the relationship with India. PMLN wanted more trade with India and no war.

Mian Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister and a right wing politician, has to pay a heavy price for his insistence that as PM, he rules Pakistan and not the army. He was ousted by the Supreme Court, disqualified for life and now serving a ten years sentence along with his daughter at a Rawalpindi jail.

When the election date was announced, the media portrayed Imran Khan as the cleanest politician with a plan to curtail corruption. His main election slogans were "change" and "a new Pakistan". Billions of rupees were spent on advertising by his billionaires party men. The richest always smells the changing directions of power and they accordingly change their political affiliations. Most of these are called "electable", a politician who could spend billions on elections and buy votes. Imran Khan Party, Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (Justice Movement), saw an influx of these "electable" who changed their party from PNLN to PTI without a hint of shame. They always did the same at the election times.

When PMLN gave tickets (nominations) to their probable candidates, phone calls were made by these "unknowns" to those nominated and were asked to return the tickets at the eleventh hour and contest elections as independent. Those who refused were beaten up physically in their offices and homes. Threats and intimidations worked and around 40 of those who were nominated by PMLN returned their tickets and announced to contest as independent.

During the election campaign, several PMLN nominees were arrested and some disqualified for life and sent to jail on pretext of corruption. All these measures gave a general impression that military and judicial establishment want

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Imran Khan to win the general elections at any cost. Imran Khan has already created a myth among the youth that we need a change and a corruption free government. There was euphoria among a large section of youth in Pakistan that Imran Khan is not corrupt and that he needs "electable" to win an overall majority.

The two banned outfits of religious fanatics were allowed to contest elections by the Election Commission. The strategy was if the extreme right would contest elections, they will reduce the PMLN votes who were favoured by these religious groups in the past. One religious group Tehreek Labaik became the third largest party in terms of fielding candidates all around Pakistan after PTI and PMLN.

Over 300,000 military men were deployed in all the polling stations with a judicial power to military officers on the "request" of the Election Commission to ensure a complete security. This was aided by the religious terrorists who carried out suicidal attacks on public meeting during election campaign killing hundreds including the candidates. In one unfortunate incident, over 150 were killed in Mastung district of Balochistan province including the candidate.

Most of the human rights groups in Pakistan including Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) criticized this gross pre poll rigging through press conferences and termed these extra ordinary measures to favour a certain political party.

On the Election Day, the polling went smoothly and military presence was at everywhere. However, the rigging work started after 10 pm, four hours after the counting started. Suddenly most of the results of the constituencies where the difference was between 1000-5000 were stopped. Then, there was an almost blackout of the counting, it remerged early in the morning, those winning elections at night time were losing and PTI candidates were always the winners.

The final results were delayed for over 72 hours, it never happened earlier.

The results showed PTI with 116 seats, PMLN 63 and PPP with 43 seats at the national parliament. PPP under the young leadership of Bilawal Bhutto improved from their previous devastating results of 28 seats. PPP kept control of Sindh assembly with more seats than they held previously, Khaiber Pukhton Khwa saw PTI "land slide". In Punjab, PMLN kept it majority with a drastic reduction of seats and PTI now vowing to form the government in Punjab also with the help of the elected "independents".

The two religious fanatic groups who contested got no national assembly seat but one of them Tehreek Labaik got two Sindh assembly seats. They did not do badly. In almost every constituency, they got from 1-10 percent of the votes and in some they got over 20 percent votes. This is quit alarming situation.

The Left contested almost 50 national and provincial seats from all over Pakistan. However, one Wazeer Ali from The Struggle group who is part of Left Democratic Front won a national assembly seat from former federally administered area called FATA. The area is dominated by religious fanatics. However Ali Wazeer comfortable majority of 16000 votes had given a new hope the forces of the Left in Pakistan. Ali Wazeer contested as independent candidate. He was leader of Pashtun Tahafaz Movement which organized this year mass public rallies across Pakistan for compensation of those victims of "war on terror".

In my home constituency of Toba Tek Singh, where I contested elections for Punjab Assembly in 2013 elections, AWP candidate Mohammed Zubair came on third position with 4586 votes leaving behind the candidates of the religious fanatic parties and Pakistan People's Party. I did not take part in the elections as candidate because of health issues, however, campaigned for our candidate with two mass rallies in the constituency.

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Almost all political parties except PTI has termed this general election as the most rigged. They have rejected the results. PTI who launched a three year long movement against the rigging during 2013 elections termed this election as the most free and fair in history of Pakistan, the only party to say so.

The new government is in the making. It is quite obvious that Imran Khan will become the new prime minister. This new government will be a weak one and would have to face a severe economic crisis. The designated finance minister of PTI has already hinted to turn to IMF for a new loan. One of the main issues that PTI campaigned on was the massive foreign loans obtained during PMLN five years from China. Now they have no shame to say even before taking over power that they have to turn to IMF.

The government would try to improve the tax base in the initial period and that would bring them into contradiction with strong traders lobby who have no habit of paying taxes. Imran Khan hinted to have friendly relationship with India. This would not be done. With an open support of the army generals, it is out of question that there will be improved relationship between Pakistan and India.

Religious fundamentalism will grow in the next period as Imran Khan has already pledged to "negotiate" with Taliban and he had always a soft attitude towards religious fanatics. He has supported some known Madarasas associated with Taliban with state subsidies while he controlled KP government during 2013-18.

The opposition parties have announced agitation against the election results and have demanded fresh elections. However, they might not succeed in launching a successful agitation. Interesting times ahead.

28 July 2018

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