

Glimpses Of Electoral Politics In Pakistan

Altaf Ullah

Electoral Politics plays a pivotal role in the political history of a democratic society. The main purpose of an electoral system is to enable the people of a particular state to manage national institutions through their elected representatives. Electoral process stimulates political interests in the citizens to exercise their political voice.

The creation of Pakistan on 14th August 1947 was the result of electoral politics and voting response of the Muslim of the sub-continent. The Constituent Assembly was elected as the country's first parliament from amongst the members of provincial assemblies. Quaid-i-Azam was a staunch believer of the democratic values because he took all the initiatives for the uplift of democratic norms and traditions.

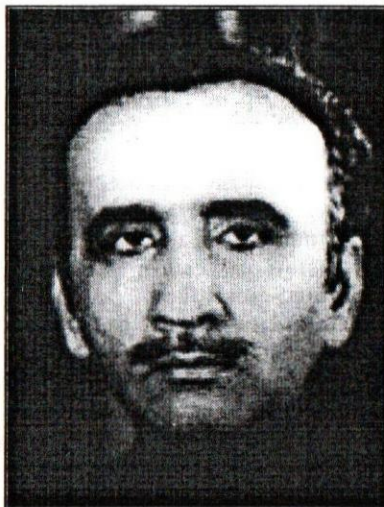


Nawaz Sharif

basis. This was followed by indirect presidential elections in January 1965. The five opposition parties formed combined opposition parties with Miss Fatima Jinnah as their presidential candidate. She called for the abolition of Ayub's political system and promised the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the country, whereas Ayub Khan campaigned his record, promising progress and stability. Ayub Khan won the election obtaining 63.3% of the electoral college votes as compared to 36.4% for his rival Fatima Jinnah. These elections were followed shortly by indirect party based election to the National Assembly and the East and West Pakistan Assemblies in which the faction of the Pakistan Muslim League led by Ayub Khan emerged victorious. Later on in March 1969 following a four-month anti-Ayub agitation movement, the President was forced to resign and hand over power to Pakistan's second military ruler, General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan. He abrogated the 1962 constitution, banned all political parties, dissolved the National and Provincial Assemblies, dismissed the Central and Provincial Cabinets and proclaimed martial law through the state. It goes to the credit of Yahya Khan that he conducted the first general elections in 1970 under the Legal Framework Order. As a result of these elections Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

In January 1977 all the major opposition parties formed Pakistan National Alliance when Bhutto announced the general elections to be held in March 1977. The rigging charges on these elections could be

elections, Zia ensured that mass mobilization could not take place. Prime Minister Mohammad Khan Junejo and the elected National Assembly along with Senators were convinced by Zia-u-Haq to pass the Eighth Amendment Bill, which greatly increased the constitutional powers of the President. In 1988 he dismissed Prime Minister Junejo and dissolved the Assembly. In July Zia announced general elections to be held in November 1988. On August 17, he died in a mysterious plane



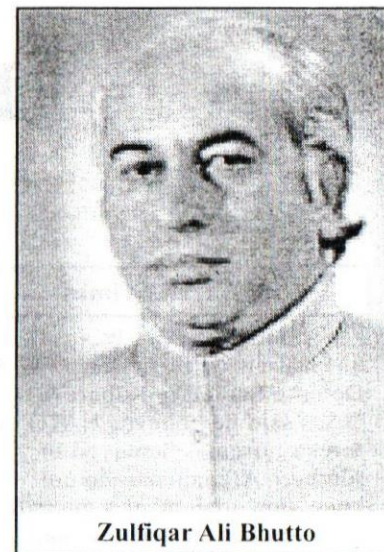
Muhammad Khan Junejo

crash along with several top Generals and the US Ambassador.

In the election of 1988 Pakistan Peoples Party got 93 National Assembly seats and Benazir Bhutto became the Prime Minister of the country. She did not stay for long when President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed her government on 6 August 1990. Next elections were

Mr. Sharif was interfering in the appointment of Judges. Consequently, Nawaz dismissed all the three opponents i.e. the President, Chief Justice and COAS. He appointed General Pervez Musharraf as COAS but that relationship deteriorated too in July 1999. On 12th October 1999 General Pervez Musharraf took control with popular domestic acclaim and without declaring Martial Law, named himself as Chief Executive of Pakistan. He suspended the Parliament and the constitution as well.

On 12th May 2000 the Supreme Court ruled a petition against the legality of the military regime and validated the take over under the doctrine of 'state necessity'. After assuming the office of President in April 2002, Musharraf managed to hold general elections on 10th October 2002. In these elections more voters cast their votes than in the two previous elections. The major characteristics of these elections were that million of voters were registered, hundreds of contestants campaigned through the length and breadth of the country and dozen of political parties formed strategies and alliances and mobilized voters in the electoral process. The two Houses of Parliament and four provincial assemblies were considerably expanded. Female representation in the elected assemblies went up several times. A large number of new faces occupied seats on the floor of assemblies, thus bringing forth a whole new generation of



Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

Although successive elections have been held in our country yet it didn't necessarily increase political awareness in the general masses and also failed to create a sense of commitment to democracy among the political leadership. It is obvious that elections in Pakistan were held from time to time but these elections often meant to provide legitimacy to a particular ruling class. The parliament which came into existence as a result of the 2002 national elections has for the first time in the political history of Pakistan completed its five years term though it functioned in an ordinary manner and couldn't achieve the desired results. The current political situation in the country is fragile because the year 2007 saw many tragedies such as the death of the PPP-P Chairperson, the deposition of judges and a lot of other security problems in the country. Though the government had announced that

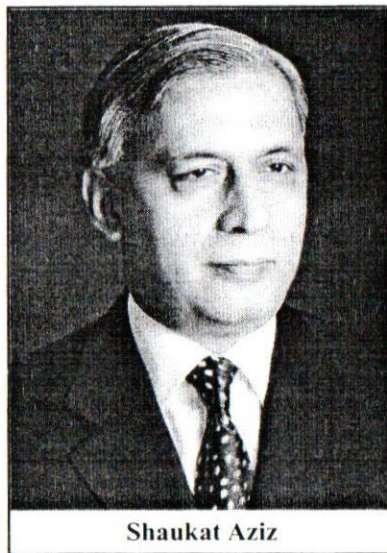


Nawaz Sharif

Following the Pakistan first constitution in 1956, it became difficult for Pakistan ruling elites to continue postponing elections while maintaining the façade of a parliamentary democracy. In October 1958, shortly before elections were finally scheduled to be held, the façade was removed - President Iskandar Mirza declared martial law, abrogated the constitution and cancelled the elections. Less than three weeks later Mirza was removed by the Army Commander, General Ayub Khan who was to govern Pakistan under a system of 'guided democracy' for more than ten years. He introduced the system of Basic Democracies in May 1959. It provided for the elections of 120,000 Basic Democrats, were to be elected on direct adult franchise and were to provide membership of four-tiered structure of local government. The Basic Democrats were used as an electoral college to indirectly elect the President, the members of National Assembly and the members of East and West Pakistan Assemblies. The system achieved the desired results in the referendum of February 1960 when 95.6% of BDs elected Ayub Khan to be the President of Pakistan. After the promulgation of 1962 constitution, the Basic Democrats elected the members of the National and Provincial Assemblies on a non-party

1970 under the Legal Framework Order. As a result of these elections Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

In January 1977 all the major opposition parties formed Pakistan National Alliance when Bhutto announced the general elections to be held in March 1977. The rigging charges on these elections could be guessed that 19 NA candidates were declared elected unopposed. Later on the PNA boycotted the provincial elections and started an anti-PPP agitation movement. In the meanwhile Bhutto was overthrown in military coup d'état by General Zia-ul-Haq,



Shaukat Aziz

the COAS. After electing himself as President through referendum Zia announced that general elections to be held in February 1985. In these elections Zia adopted the electoral strategy that the elections would be held on non-party basis. By not allowing political parties to contest

crash along with several top Generals and the US Ambassador.

In the election of 1988 Pakistan Peoples Party got 93 National Assembly seats and Benazir Bhutto became the Prime Minister of the country. She did not stay for long when President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed her government on 6 August 1990. Next elections were held in October 1990 in which IJI got a resounding victory securing 105 seats in National Assembly. As a result Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Nawaz government functioned when President Ghulam Ishaq dismissed his government. In 1993 the Pakistan Peoples Party under the leadership of Benazir Bhutto once again got victory in the elections and assumed the office of Prime Minister. In 1996, after allegations that the government was interfering in the court and packing benches with its own supporters, the Supreme Court issued a judgement curtailing the government powers regarding judicial appointments. In the following months a power struggle started between the President and Prime Minister which resulted in the dismissal of Benazir's government.

The ensuing 1997 elections were won overwhelmingly by PML (N) Party. Nawaz Sharif being the new Prime Minister moved swiftly to consolidate his hold on power by using his two third majority to repeal the Eighth Amendment, thus curtailing the President's power to dismiss the government. Standoffs between Mr. Sharif and President Leghari intensified as their dispute extended to involve the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court with allegations that

Houses of Parliament and four provincial assemblies were considerably expanded. Female representation in the elected assemblies went up several times. A large number of new faces occupied seats on the floor of assemblies, thus bringing forth a whole new generation of



Benazir Bhutto

politician. The alliance of Islamic parties, MMA formed the government in NWFP and became a coalition partner in Balochistan. The two big parties PPP-P and PML (N) suffered through the shenanigans of military government. While the PPP-P stayed aloft with a considerable number of seats to its credit, the share of PML (N) was meager. The PML (Q) party sprung up a total surprise on the political stage of Pakistan and formed its government under the leadership of Mir Zafrullah Khan Jamali as Prime Minister. Later on, he was replaced by Mr. Shaukat Aziz as Prime Minister.

term though it functioned in an ordinary manner and couldn't achieve the desired results. The current political situation in the country is fragile because the year 2007 saw many tragedies such as the death of the PPP-P Chairperson, the deposition of judges and a lot of other security problems in the country. Though the government had announced that elections were to be held on 8 January 2008 but the tragic death of Muhtarma at Liaquat Bagh Rawalpindi changed the country's overall political atmosphere. Consequently, the government has postponed the general elections till 18 February 2008.

However, unless and until the following recommendations would not be given proper heed, the desired results cannot be achieved. Firstly, fairness of elections can only be ensured when democratic institutions are functioning effectively. Secondly, under military intervention in national politics hamper the smooth functioning of political process in the country so military establishment must be subject to the political leadership. Thirdly, the coming elections should be held under neutral caretakers with their power explicitly defined. Finally, the establishment of a strong and independent Election Commission is essential which is insulated from the pressure of partisan caretakers, capable of acting impartially and taking suo moto action to prevent rigging in the elections. Only these prerequisites for the free and impartial elections can bring harmony in the electoral process of the country and help ultimately in the democratization of our society.