

# General elections in Pakistan: Elections yes, democracy not yet!



DR. SIEGFRIED  
O. WOLF

**THE GENERAL ELECTIONS ON MAY 11 CONSTITUTED THE FIRST 'REGULAR' TRANSFER OF POWER BETWEEN TWO CIVILIAN GOVERNMENTS IN PAKISTAN. UNDOUBTEDLY, THIS IS A MILESTONE IN THE COUNTRY'S CHEQUERED POLITICAL HISTORY**

The general elections on May 11 constituted the first 'regular' transfer of power between two civilian governments in Pakistan. Undoubtedly, this is a milestone in the country's chequered political history, and therefore it does not come by surprise that this event was caught up in an extraordinary way the media's attention in Pakistan, South Asia as well as on a global scale. The walk of around 60 per cent of Pakistan's vote bank to the ballot for the 14th National Parliament as well as for the provincial assemblies was portrayed by enthusiastic observers as an event which could function as the greatest game changer in Pakistan's political landscape. Regardless of this artificial atmosphere of democratic transition created by the party leaders during the campaigning period, analysts are now starting to evaluate the reality on the ground on the basis of the official results which are becoming increasingly available. Due to the relatively active Pakistan Election Commission (EPC) and the various international institutions and organisations observing the elections, foremost the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM); or the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), or Reporting Democracy International (DRI) increasingly more data are becoming available – in addition to the tremendous amount of information provided by the Pakistan's domestic and international media.

However, to begin with, from a retro-perspective point of view one has to state that the 2013 elections were highly unpredictable. Due to numerous old and new 'wild cards', it was very difficult to forecast a credible outcome of the polls. However, one can identify several elements which determined the electoral process and which need to be taken into consideration in order to evaluate the outcome. First of all, there were the Taliban-induced massive disturbances which created an atmosphere of terror and anxiety. This not only seriously hampered the elections but also raised questions regarding the legitimacy of the elections, even before the actual voting process start-

ed. The 2013 elections, with respect to the electoral campaigning process and the election day itself, were the bloodiest elections in Pakistan's history. More than 200 Pakistanis lost their life and at least 700 got injured.

Next, there was the so-called Imran Khan-phenomenon. The cricketer-turned-politician and his political party PTI emerged as an 'unknown factor' which gained increasing popularity during the campaigning period, especially among the urbanised, young and new voters. Before having an accident during his last public event, he carried out a vigorous campaign which gained much publicity in the media, and therefore made the established political forces nervous. Nevertheless, one of the latest pre-poll surveys came to the finding that 28 per cent of the Pakistanis still did not know Imran Khan. This was the highest 'don't know response' regarding Pakistan's leading politicians. This made it difficult to assess the PTI's impact on the election outcome. Much linked with the Imran Khan factor was the appearance of the youth and new voters as an unknown element in the country's vote bank. The question which emerged was – do they vote at all. If so, will they break out of traditional, family or community orientated voting behaviour or will they go to ballots for a protest vote?

Fourth, also an element of unpredictability was a reinvigorated and relatively active Election Commission. Most noteworthy, the Commission was able to overhaul the complete list of those eligible to vote. Therefore 37 million bogus names got removed and 36 million new names were added. In addition to that, the Commission drew attention to themselves by declaring numerous established politicians ineligible for elections due to possession of fake degrees and other offenses. In total, more than 1,000 nomination papers got rejected.

Also an unknown factor was the 'female vote'. There was much talk about the increase of the registered female voters and that compared to the 2008 elections more than twice as many female candidates compared the one who contested

the elections. But, as in 2008, the big question remained: will the increase in female voters and candidates translate into a higher female voter turnout? And, will Pakistan see split family voting (i.e. different voting behaviour within a household)? And will the PTI with its woman's wing be able to bank on this?

To sum up, the overall question is how much this election might be a key for change and may or may not lie down the foundation for a more stable future of Pakistan.

However, even though these general elections constituted

cratic requirements free and fair political participation is a condition sine qua non. This means that universal and active suffrage, passive right to vote (meaning the eligibility for election), and political as well as civil rights must be guaranteed. Subsequently, there must be the opportunity given to formulate freely opinions, interests and demands. Most important therefore is to ensure the right of freedom of speech as well as the right to association and demonstration in the public arena. Democracy is also characterised by the existence of

process. Most noteworthy is the selective targeting of candidates especially through direct physical attacks. Being confronted with potentially life-threatening situations, a large number of the leading politicians did not, or only very limitedly, join the public campaigning of their parties. This is a severe challenge towards free and fair political competition. Especially in a Pakistan which is marked by an extraordinary cult of personality, beside mass communication through cell phones, computers and TV the personal interaction between candidates

a higher voter turnout.

In this context we have to stress that taking the results of the 2008 General Elections, which was around 44%, as a point of reference does not help at all. The 2008 election with its very specific context, especially the prevailing deep mistrust regarding potential manipulations, is not comparable in this direction. Second, the fact that there was a threat or the possibility of a life-threatening situation is already enough to define a challenge towards the right of exercising the active suffrage.

The third indication that Pakistan is not a liberal democracy is that there are serious doubts regarding the realization of the universal suffrage. In other words, it remains difficult to identify whether the implementation of gender equality in the political sphere has been ensured yet. The 37.5 million Pakistani women that were registered for voting make up 41 per cent of the country's female vote bank. However, Pakistan's female population amounts to around 49 per cent, which means that approximately 10 million women did not get registered for voting. Demands for the increase of reserved seats for women in the National Assembly as well as in the provincial assemblies got ignored by the political leadership.

There is also not much improvement when it comes to the inclusion of women in the internal decision making process of political parties nor to the option to set up internal elections for female candidates. In consequence, the opportunity for Pakistan's female citizenry remains still much limited to aggregate their interests via female politicians and parliamentarians into the political process. The fact that the 2013 elections were enriched with more than double the number of female candidates than in the 2008 elections does not distract from the fact that Pakistan's political landscape is still marked by remarkable gender gaps.

Fourth, another serious challenge towards the country's democratic transition are the persistent growing hindrances towards freedom of speech and opinion. The 2013

elections were an outstanding expression of this trend. The Taliban were threatening particularly secular political parties before the electoral campaigning and were also attacking them during respective public campaign events. In the primary focus of their activities were the PPP, ANP, and MQM. In contrast, political parties which were recognized as having a so-called 'soft corner' towards the Taliban, who are willing to negotiate with the Taliban and are working towards the stop of the drone attacks like Imran Khan's PTI or Nawaz Sharif's PML-N got largely spared. The tactics of the Taliban in this direction were actually pretty clear: to polarize and divide the civilian political landscape either pro or against them. However this means also that the expression of an opinion which was not in favour of or at least neutral towards the Taliban or other religious fundamentalists had serious consequences – risking one's own life and property!

Finally, the fact that the military did not intervene in the electoral process did not mean that civilian control is established.

Holding elections were definitely a step forward in strengthening civilian self-confidence but at the same time it definitely did not provide a major boost to the notion of civilian supremacy, as perhaps was hoped for. There is still no formal civilian control over the armed forces.

Decision-making in significant policy fields will be still influenced by the military. A statement by General Kayani regarding the role of Islam in the country's politics as well as the role of the armed forces makes clear who continues to call the real shots after the elections. To conclude, without ensuring free and fair political participation and the establishment of civilian control, we can speak about elections but not about consolidation of democracy or democratic transition in Pakistan.

The writer is a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations as well as a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University



a very big step in the right direction, it is argued here that Pakistan is still relatively far away from being a fully-fledged democracy. Elections are after all a vital ingredient of democracy, but it is most definitely not the only ingredient that makes a democracy. And therefore Pakistan's prospects for democracy, peace, and stability should not be exaggerated. In fact, the current state of Pakistan's democracy would be better described with terms like illiberal democracy, partial democracy, low intensity democracy or defect democracy. For that one can bring up following arguments:

As said, democracy goes far beyond the technical aspects of elections. This means that democracy is not only based on people's sovereignty but also on liberty and equality. To fulfil these three core demo-

individual rights of protections which means in practice the grant of protection of life, freedom and property. This covers also the protection against terror, torture or undue intervention into personal life, both on behalf of the state and on behalf of private or anti-systemic forces like the Taliban and other religious fundamentalist groups.

Looking at the elections as well as at the electoral campaigning the weeks before election day, we have to state that Pakistan is still far away of matching this commonly accepted democratic understanding. And this is due to several reasons.

First, the passive right to vote got challenged. The Taliban and other extremist groups have been able to carry out several types of activities to disturb the democratic

and the electorate is of crucial significance.

The moderate success of the PTI, which spent substantial efforts in mobilizing voters through the internet, can be seen as a strong indication thereof. However, the threatening of the candidates determines clearly a limitation of the rights of freedom of expression, association and information. As such it significantly hampered the opportunity for free political participation of the candidates.

Second, the active suffrage got challenged. During the election campaign more than one hundred people died due to Taliban attacks. This created without doubt an ambience of fear. Despite the relatively high voter turnout one should remain sceptical regarding the assessment of this phenomenon. First, there could be even