

## **PAK ELECTIONS: TOO CLOSE AND YET TOO FAR**

**BY**

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Pak has moved into the election mode, with an interim government in place. Elections are scheduled for 25 Jul. Almost all political parties have stated that they would not allow elections to be delayed or postponed. This was aimed at sending a message to the deep state to prevent it from considering any tricks to continue with the present arrangement. The mystery would remain till they are held. The irony is that every political party is expecting postponement of elections for unknown reasons. It is only in Pakistan that politicians do not trust its own state institutions, whether it be their army or their courts.

From the day the interim government was sworn in, hiccups began. The Lahore High Court based on a PIL directed that nomination forms be amended to include additional details. This sparked a fear that there are attempts to derail the election process. The Pakistan supreme court came to the rescue and cancelled the high court's orders but added that an affidavit would need to be filed by candidates with details missing in nomination forms. Thus, one hurdle was cleared. The judgement by the high court was announced a day after the interim government came into place.

JuD, a terrorist organization, banned by the US and even Pakistan has announced its decision to field 200 candidates for the forthcoming polls, under the banner of a dormant political party, 'Allaha-u-Akbar Tehreek, though its leader, Hafiz Saeed, who carries a bounty of USD \$10 Million, will not contest. Pak had also issued directions banning the public from donating funds to the JuD. It is only in Pakistan that a banned group is supported by the army to contest national polls, on the banner of a dormant party.

Nawaz has been banned for life by the supreme court from holding any political office including that in his party for not being honest and righteous. He is being pushed to the corner, with the resignation of his lawyer.

At the same time, the same court has allowed Musharraf to contest elections, despite him facing charges of murder and treason. It has even stated, that though he remains a proclaimed offender, he would not be arrested on arrival, if he comes to attend court hearings. His cancelled passport and national ID has been restored. The message going out to all politicians and political parties in Pak is clear. Tamper with the deep state

and you can be banned for life or even jailed. Support them or be a retired general and despite all your crimes, you are immune from arrest and would be protected.

In election rallies across the globe criticism of the government, its policies and failures are invariably raised. However, when these rallies criticise policies which impact the deep state, the speeches are termed as 'hate speeches against state institutions'. The government of South Waziristan has banned all gatherings, rallies and processions to be held in the tribal region for a month. This is the region where the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) is dominant. The aim is to target only one ethnic group, the Pashtuns.

In any normal nation, the armed forces maintain a distance from politics and political parties, especially as elections draw close. Media criticism increases so do political comments. The DG ISPR firstly congratulated the national assembly for completing its term, then went on to add a warning to journalists commenting against the deep state. Few journalists have even been picked up and released, leaving them so traumatized that they refuse to comment on the incident. In addition, the press is warned to stay away from state institutions including the deep state.

The army has a significant role to play in the elections. It has ensured that Nawaz is side lined, his party has been pushed against the wall. The PML (N) is aware that it has almost no chance of coming back to power. Hence, even the ex-PM, Abbasi sits alongside him in courts and press conferences. Within the nation there are already quiet rumblings. Experts across the globe have been pointing out that there are 'fears of whether the upcoming elections would be free and fair'.

Even within Pak, Senator Dashti stated to a German broadcaster, DW, 'The army will not leave any stone unturned to keep Sharif out. In short, the military establishment does not accept the supremacy of civilian political parties in Pakistan because they want to call the shots in the country.' Can the elections be fair?

Probably the army would have already decided whom it desires to be the next Prime Minister. The game was between two, Imran Khan and Zardari. Imran has suddenly gained prominence with the proposed release of a book by his ex-wife, Reham Khan, highlighting weaknesses in his character, excerpts of which have been leaked. Legal notices may have been sent, but the damage has been done. Thus, the army would now be closing in on Zardari, against whom all corruption charges were suddenly dropped at the end of last year, despite them being far greater than that of Nawaz. It is almost a pre-decided election.

The decision of adhering to the 2003 ceasefire with India was announced by their army, a day after the interim government took office. The selection of the timing was aimed at sending a message to India. Talk to us, not to any political authority, if you desire to seek peace. After all, presently there is no political authority. The interim government is only there in name.

Elections in any democracy are closely watched and commented upon, as friends and foes seek a favourable government. In Pak, doubts exist on even whether they would be held on time, and if held, are the results pre-decided. The world is also aware, that despite any party coming to power, the reins would remain with the deep state. At the end of the day, it would be an exercise which would cost the state exchequer an amount it can ill afford, with no change in the state's policies and its domination by the army.

India would keenly observe elections in neighbouring countries, seeking a favourable government assumes power. In the case of Pakistan, it would make no difference. Zardari or Imran, irrespective of the new PM, it is the army which would call the shots. It has already sent a message to India, by proposing adherence to the ceasefire. If India desires to talk, then it must engage with the army chief. Will it take the bait?

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