

Scenario 278

ELECTIONS 2024-II

[During the elections in Pakistan [2024], 128 million people were registered to cast their votes, almost half of whom were under the age of 35.

More than 5,000 candidates - of whom just 313 were women - were contesting the 266 directly-elected seats in the 336-member National Assembly.

*As per government documents and planning, the PMLN and the PPP were considered the two major parties going into the vote; however, picking out candidates from Imran Khan's PTI was more difficult, **after it was banned from using the symbol of cricket bat** under which all its candidates could run the voting process.]*

In Pakistan, for 2018's general elections, the two major parties were the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PMLN], led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan Peoples Party [PPP], led by Bilawal Zardari. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf [PTI], founded by Imran Khan, had surfaced as the largest party then.

For 2024's General elections, however, the PTI had to make choice fielding its candidates **as Independents** after a controversial Supreme Court ruling stripped them of their electoral symbol (cricket-bat) in the run-up to the elections; Khan had also been barred from politics for five years following convictions; **REUTERS** dated 21st December 2023 is referred.

On 8th February 2024: General elections were held in Pakistan to elect the members of the 16th National Assembly. The detailed schedule was announced by the Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP] on 15th December 2023.

Pakistan held general elections for its National Assembly and provincial assemblies in its four provinces of Baluchistan, Khyber PK, Punjab and Sindh. More than 128 million voters across the country were registered to vote in

the general elections, with nearly 18,000 candidates competing for 336 National Assembly seats and 749 Provincial Assembly seats. These seats were to be filled for single-member constituencies as well as the allocation of reserved seats for women and non-Muslims through proportional representation. These elections came at a critical time for Pakistan, as it was facing significant economic, security, and environmental challenges that elected leaders would be responsible for addressing in the next term of five years.

For the 2024 elections, there were 128,585,760 registered voters including 22,000,000 NEW VOTERS in comparison with previous 2018 elections.

WHO WERE IN THE ELECTION-RACE?

Pakistani politics are dominated by men and three parties: the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The top contender is PM-N and on its ballot are two former prime ministers, Nawaz Sharif and his younger brother Shehbaz Sharif.

Their ally the PPP, led by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, a member of another political dynasty, has a power base in the country's south. Though it's unlikely to get enough votes to get him the premiership, he could still be part of a Sharif-led coalition government. However, it is the absence from the ballot of PTI's founder Imran Khan, that's at the forefront of public discourse in Pakistan. Though it's become the norm for corruption allegations and court cases to dog prime ministers — many of Pakistan's leaders have been arrested, disqualified or ousted from office — the intensity of the legal action against Khan was unprecedented. Despite the major 3 cases in which he was sentenced to 3, 10, 14 and 3 years, to be served concurrently, there were about 150 more legal cases pending against him.

Smaller, religious political parties that appeal to a section of the conservative Muslim country have no chance of getting a majority but could still be part of a coalition government. The Pakistani military isn't on the ballot but is the real power behind the scenes — it has ruled the nation for half of its history and calls the shots in most government decisions.

Most Pakistanis are fed up after years of political infighting and no improvements in their living standards. People on the street are quick to tell you they don't believe things will be different after this election. Also, there

was no guarantee that PTI votes will be fairly counted. The Foreign Ministry says there will be 92 international election observers, including from the European Union and foreign embassies.

PTI claimed widespread foreign interference in the election; *Hannah Ellis-Petersen's* analysis in **THE OBSERVER** & **THE GUARDIAN** both papers dated 11th February 2024 are referred. Multiple foreign media outlets pointed at the military-interference in the elections allegedly in favor of PMLN. Many international observers, including United States, European Union and the United Kingdom voiced their concerns about the fairness of the elections. Further details are available on next paragraphs / pages starting from the events of about two months earlier.

On 22nd December 2023; the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) decided against allowing the PTI to keep its electoral symbol, asserting that the party had failed to conduct intra-party elections to the Commission's satisfaction. Subsequently, on the same day, the PTI appealed to the Peshawar High Court (PHC) challenging the ECP's decision. Consequently, a single-member bench suspended the ECP's order until 9th January 2024.

On 30th December 2023; the ECP submitted a review application to the PHC. In the following days, a two-member bench lifted the suspension order while hearing the case. However, **on 10th January 2024**, the two-member bench deemed the ECP's order ***"illegal, without any lawful authority, and of no legal effect."***

On 11th January 2024; the ECP contested the above ruling in the Supreme Court of Pakistan [SCP]. Two days later, a three-member bench, headed by the Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, upheld and reinstating ECP's initial decision to deny the PTI its election symbol, the cricket bat, due to the party's failure to conduct intra-party elections by its constitution. Consequently, the PTI was unable to allocate party tickets to any of its candidates, resulting in all party candidates being listed as independent candidates with individual electoral symbols. The party also lost the ***right to nominate candidates for 226 reserved seats across the central and provincial legislatures.***

The SCP's decision led some legal experts to describe the ruling as a ***"huge blow to fundamental rights and a defeat for democratic norms"***, daily **DAWN** dated 14th January 2024 is referred.

During the week before elections, Imran Khan was sentenced to jail terms in three separate cases.

- **On 30th January 2024**, with the government seeking a death penalty, he was sentenced to 10 years in a case dealing with the handling of state secrets by Judge Abu al-Hasnat Zulqarnain.
- **On 31st January 2024**; a day later, Judge Muhammad Bashir, sentenced him and his wife, Bushra Bibi, to a jail term of 14 years, along with a fine of Rs:787 million (US\$2.7 million) each for retaining a jewelry set that was a state gift from Saudi Arabia against an undervalued assessment from the country's *Toshakhana*. The ruling also barred Khan from holding public office for 10 years.
- **On 2nd February 2024**; two days later, a civil Judge Qudratullah declared the marriage of Khan and his wife against Islamic law and sentenced both to prison for a term of seven years for allegedly solemnizing their marriage during Bushra's *Iddat* period. The case was lodged on the complaint of Khawar Maneka, Bushra's former husband, five years after her marriage to Khan – considered a laughing stock for many sane religious people.

All three trials were held behind closed doors in Adiala Jail, where Khan was confined since August 2023 on corruption charges, and were marked with rushed proceedings, sudden replacement of defendant's lawyers with state consuls, and other procedural irregularities that led his party to term the decisions baseless. Khan's sentencing in the marriage case was decried by lawyers and members of the civil society as an overreach and a blow to women's rights. Meanwhile, some observers termed the sentences as a continuation of the routine Pakistani revengeful political culture to keep Khan out of power in the upcoming elections – for details see **THE ECONOMIST** of 6th February 2024.

- *"Pakistan's Elections Are Being Brazenly Rigged. Why Doesn't the US Seem to Care?"* **weekly TIME** of 5th February 2024 & *"With Imran Khan Jailed, Pakistan's Election May Be Torpid, But the Aftermath Might Not Be"* **COUNCIL**

ON FOREIGN RELATIONS dated 7th February 2024 are also referred for commentaries with more facts.

PRE-POLL RIGGING? Some observers, including the United Nations and Human Rights Watch, had pointed to what appeared to be pre-poll rigging in the run-up to the upcoming elections. There were notable actions against the PTI party and its leadership, including snatching of nomination papers, arbitrary arrests of candidates and their supporters, systematic rejection of nomination papers, and disruption of campaign events. This situation led to widespread allegations of '***election engineering***' and manipulative practices that could potentially favour certain political groups, casting doubts over the fairness of the electoral process. ECP was also accused of gerrymandering in favour of PMLN during the redrawing of voter maps before the elections, with a record 1,300 complaints made; **THE GUARDIAN** dated 29th November 2023 is referred.

Many candidates affiliated with the PTI complained that following the ban on the usage of the cricket bat as the party's logo for the ballots, the ECP provided them with symbols carrying obscure meanings and sometimes awkward connotations such as a calculator, an electric heater, a dice, a bed, a vegetable (like an eggplant), which were deemed anatomically suggestive, and a bottle, which carried suggestions of alcohol consumption in the majority-Muslim country like Pakistan.

On 26th January 2024; PTI's official website, insaf.pk, and a separate website made for disseminating information regarding the individual electoral symbols of the party's candidates were blocked in Pakistan. A voter helpline created by the PTI party was also blocked. Previously, social media was blocked in the country during the party's virtual electoral events on at least three separate occasions as per internet watchdog, NetBlocks. Journalists covering the elections reported a '*near-blanket ban*' on their ability to cover PTI candidates fairly. News channels allegedly received messages from unknown but powerful individuals instructing them to remove all references to PTI in their visuals, graphics, and talking points; **AL-JAZEERA** dated 20th January 2024 is referred.

PRELIMINARY ELECTION-REPORTS:

As per assessment of the **Dunya News TV**: Approximately 60 million voters went to the polls in Pakistan on the election day of 8th February 2024 to

elect their representatives in 265 National Assembly and 590 provincial assembly constituencies in one of the country's most competitive political contests.

Two days later, the Free and Fair Election Network [FAFEN] issued a report saying the elections followed two tumultuous years of political upheaval, discord and polarisation, which left behind ***a debris of constitutional confusions, judicial misadventures, communal stress, economic downturn and growing public distrust in electoral institutions*** (ECP) – issues that must be taken up by the future governments. Fafen added that despite a spiral of allegations by multiple political parties about not getting a level playing field as well as a spike in militant violence in some parts of the country, none of the political parties backed out of the electoral race. All parties continued until the last minute their efforts to muster up public support, which augured well for Pakistan's pseudo democracy.

On 8th March 2024: Gallup Pakistan Digital Analytics on Elections released on media pages a short report telling the nation that a total of 59.22 million people voted in the 2024 elections, 6.47 million more compared to the 2018 Elections, all top 4 parties (PTI, PMLN, PPP and TLP) gained voters in absolute term between 2018 vs 2024.

It was based on the data released (till then) by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). This Press Release was part of series of Press Releases under this program. OTHER KEY POINTS FROM THIS PRESS RELEASE were:

- *"A total of 59.22 million people voted in the 2024 elections.*
- *Total votes for the 2024 elections were 6.47 million more than the 2018 Elections, where total votes were 52.75 million*
- *PTI / PTI(IND): 18.46 million people voted for PTI Independents in 2024, which is 1.69 million more compared to the votes for PTI in the 2018 Elections*
- *PMLN: 14 million people voted for PMLN in 2024, which is 1.05 million more compared to the votes for PML-N in the 2018 Elections.*
- *PPP: 8.24 million people voted for PPP in 2024, which is 1.36 million more compared to the votes for PPP in the 2018 Elections.*
- *TLP: 2.89 million people voted for TLP in 2024, which is 0.76 million more compared to the votes for TLP in the 2018 Elections.*
- *PTI gained close to 1.5 million votes in Punjab and around 1 million votes in KP between 2018 vs 2024 election. However, it lost close to 800,000 votes in Sindh and around 72,000 in Balochistan and Islamabad.*

- *By receiving close to 400,000 more votes MQM receives a major boost in seats between 2018 vs 2024."*

Fafen: On elections 2024 in Pakistan ... report is out.

I picked up ***one Interesting fact*** in it with respect to **rejected votes...** as follows:

- a) 48.2% turn out - app 6 crore votes were casted.
- b) 1.6 million votes were rejected.
- c) These rejected votes pertain to 25 seats where they were MORE than the ****winning margin**** of the winner for the seat in that constituency.
- d) 23 out of those 25 were in Punjab

Only 1 each out of the 25 was in KPK and SINDH.

14 such seats out of the 23 in Punjab were where ****PMLN WON****

Yes..., it is getting interesting... right?

- One of the seats where the statistics were noteworthy - NA 59... Chakwal: total votes casted 355,586 ... 58% & *votes rejected = 25, 547*...And the winner was Sardar Ghulam Abbas of PMLN.
- Ok back to the interesting 'rejected votes stats'... 5 out of those 23 were those where PPP WON
- And 4 out of those 23 were where INDEPENDENTS WON (those may or may not be from PTI?)

Based on Fafen's assessment of the Form 47 (Provisional Consolidated Statement of the Result of the Count) from 235 National Assembly constituencies, as announced by the Election Commission, the voter turnout for these elections was 48.2 percent. Islamabad witnessed the highest voter turnout with over 54.2 percent of registered voters participating in the polls across three NA constituencies, followed by Punjab with 51.7 percent voter turnout in 133 NA constituencies. In Sindh, the voter turnout reached 43.9 percent across 56 NA constituencies; in Khyber PK, it was 41.4 percent

across 40 constituencies; and in Balochistan, it was 35 percent across three NA constituencies.

The late delimitation of constituencies, triggered after announcement of the Seventh Digital Population Census days before the dissolution of the National Assembly in August 2023, delayed the elections beyond the constitutionally-stipulated 90-day period, and created a disadvantage for political parties and candidates in their election preparations.

There were sporadic incidents of irregularities, but the voting process on Election Day generally was smooth and orderly. In addition, the voting remained accessible to media, observers and candidates or their agents - BUT NOT the counting process.

Contrary to fears of disorder, discord and violence against the backdrop of a highly polarised political atmosphere and spike in militancy, the Election Day generally remained peaceful, orderly and organised amid heightened security measures by law enforcement agencies across the country. Some political parties including the PTI raised their voices against what they called an unlevel playing field for their candidates. In many cases, the PTI claimed that their rallies were obstructed, candidates were arrested or coerced into withdrawing from the race.

Fafen said the ECP must immediately address the complaints of illegalities and irregularities by political parties and the candidates and initiate proceedings against those responsible under Section 55 of the Elections Act, 2017.

Nearly everyone in Pakistan kept his eyes on only one thing: the election 2024 result board where arch rivals PMLN and PTI with its independent candidates were battling it out, with PPP a close third as at 9pm of 9th February 2024. The key results were:

- **Nawaz Sharif**, who has been famously vying for a fourth term as prime minister, lost Mansehra's NA-15. He managed 80,382 votes while PTI-backed Gustasif Khan claimed victory with 105,249 votes. However, Nawaz had clinched a landslide victory in Lahore over PTI-backed Yasmin Rashid, winning 179,310 votes to her 104,485.

- **Javed Latif**, the chief of PMLN, was thrashed by PTI-backed Khurram Shahzad Virk in NA-115 Sheikhpura III. Latif managed 94,144 votes compared to Virk's 130,255.
- PTI's **Sher Afzal Marwat** had a landslide victory with 117,988 votes over JUI-F's Asjad Mehmood with 68,303 votes.
- PTI-backed **Zain Qureshi**, the son of imprisoned PTI leader Shah Mahmood Qureshi, took an easy win in Multan with 126,770 votes. PMLN's Javed Akhtar had 76,758 votes.
- PTI-backed **Zartaj Gul Wazir**, who was the former minister of climate change, had a landslide victory with 94,881 votes over independent candidate Mehmood Qadir Khan with 32,929 votes.
- **Akhtar Mengal**, the former Chief Minister of Balochistan won his Surab-Kalat-Mastung seat with 3,404 votes over PPP's Sardar Sanaullah Zehri of PMLN came in second with 2,871 votes. However, he had a narrow loss in the Quetta seat to PPP's Jamal Khan Raisani, who was former caretaker minister. Mengal had 9,929 votes to Raisani's 10,678.
- **Jahangir Tareen**, the chairman of Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP), faced defeat in both constituencies of the National Assembly. Tareen contested from NA-149 and NA-155 Lodhran-2 but was unable to clinch victory as per unofficial results. The results from 369 polling stations in Lodhran revealed that PMLN candidate Sadique Khan Baloch emerged victorious in NA-155 with 117,671 votes, while Tareen garnered only 71,128 votes. Similarly, Tareen suffered defeat in NA-149 Multan where he secured 50,166 votes. PTI-backed independent candidate Malik Amir Dogar triumphed with 143,613 votes.

Following a reduction in the total strength of the National Assembly from 342 seats to 336 under the 25th Amendment, parties require the support of at least 169 lawmakers to form the government.

The results of 245 out of the total 265 National Assembly constituencies where elections were held had been announced by late Friday, which showed the independents in the lead with 99 seats overall. The PMLN and PPP had won 69 and 52 seats, respectively, and were set to bag most of the 70 reserved seats for women and non-Muslims in the house. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement [MQM] had bagged 15 seats, while the PMLQ had

three. The Istehkam-i-Pakistan Party (IPP) and JUI-F had secured two seats each. PkMAP and MWM had clinched one seat each.

RWP COMMISSIONER'S ADMISSION FOR TEMPERING:

On 17th February 2024: Another layer of controversy was added to the already disputed elections when the Commissioner Rawalpindi, Liaquat Ali Chatha, made explosive claims on media, asserting that the results of the 8th February 2024 general elections were '**manipulated under his watch**'. He also resigned from his position. Speaking to reporters outside the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium, Chatha said:

"I am taking responsibility for all this wrongdoing; also, that the chief election commissioner (CEC) and a top judge of the Supreme Court (the CJP Qazi Isa) were involved in this.

We made independent candidates — who had leads of 70,000-80,000 votes — lost by putting on fake stamps."

In a handwritten letter, the Commissioner said: '***...he is resigning from his post and service as he was deeply involved in serious crime like mega election rigging 2024***'. The letter was addressed to Punjab Governor Haji Ghulam Ali, interim provincial Chief Minister Mohsin Naqvi and the provincial Chief Secretary. There were '***irregularities***' in the electoral process and the local returning officers had delayed the transmission of results — and that '***irregularities is a minor word for it***'. The commissioner further said that:

"...stabbing the country in its back does not let him sleep. I should be punished for the injustice I have done and others who were involved in this injustice should also be punished; there was 'pressure' on him to the extent that he contemplated suicide in the morning but then resolved to present matters before the public.

It is my request to the entire bureaucracy to not do anything wrong for all these political people."

Responding to Mr Chatha's claims, both the CJP and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) rejected the allegations, with the former saying the Supreme Court only dealt with election-related petitions. The CJP, while speaking to the reporters in Islamabad, said:

".....the evidence should be produced after Mr Chattha's allegations of rigging. His role in the Feb 8 elections was limited to merely directing President Arif Alvi and the chief election commissioner to decide a date.

Supreme Court judges did not give any order for elections. Let me make this clear... an argument was ensuing between the president and CEC so we merely told them to sit and decide. If someone else did not want them [elections] to take place, it's another thing. Also, that the court may not initiate contempt proceedings over the rigging allegations - I am against contempt myself."

The ECP or the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) held that the commissioner of any division don't play a direct role in the conduct of elections. However, the ECP ordered an inquiry into the matter as soon as possible. The panel was to be headed by a senior ECP member and include the secretary, special secretary, and the Additional Director General (Law).

Caretaker Punjab Chief Minister Mohsin Naqvi had also ordered an **impartial probe** into the allegations levelled by Mr Chatha, the out-going Commissioner. Meanwhile, Punjab's caretaker Information Minister rejected the claims made by Mr Chatha – saying that the commissioner had 'not shown any proof' of the alleged tampering of election results.

- ***The above statement of Punjab's Information Minister made a laughing stock for the media and the general populace because the 'Independent Candidates', who were made to lose after mid-night manipulation of 8-9th February (2024), had bundles of their respective original FORMs-45 with them but no court or tribunal was there to see the same.***

[The ECP appoints officials from the bureaucracy as election officials for the conduct of elections. Deputy Commissioners (DCs) of all the six districts of Rawalpindi Division, including Rawalpindi, Attock, Murree, Chakwal, Jhelum, and Talagang, were appointed as the district returning officers (DROs).]

In fact, there was no avoiding for the ECP; the inevitable was ahead. Rawalpindi Commissioner Liaquat Ali Chattha's press conference, during which he dropped bombshell allegations against the CEC, further strengthened the demands for an immediate and independent audit of election results. The senior officer, while expressing regret **for facilitating the rigging of election results**, asked to be punished while also holding the respective heads of the judiciary and ECP responsible for **'the theft of the people's mandate**.

Lending credence to allegations that were made by scores of contestants from different political parties over the past 10 days or so, Mr Chattha said that:

"On his orders, candidates who were winning with large margins in the constituencies of the Rawalpindi division were made to lose, while the losing candidates were declared victorious.

I am taking responsibility for this wrongdoing and telling you that the chief election commissioner and the chief justice are also completely involved."

[A commissioner is no ordinary officer. They are some of the most powerful bureaucrats in service, handpicked by the state to oversee entire administrative divisions. By virtue of their position, they exercise immense power and influence over the machinery of the state.]

It was, therefore, no surprise that Mr Chattha's 'confession' caused quite a storm. It was widely inscribed as an example of a bureaucrat resisting pressures from powerful quarters and choosing to stand on the right side of history. Humans have tendency to believe anything that affirms what one already holds to be true. For this reason, it was in everyone's best interest that any supporting evidence that was unearthed could be brought before the public. The claims he made were not to be dismissed.

These elections would be remembered as the most controversial electoral exercise held in the last few decades in Pakistan. The credit for this unforgettable ignominy would accrue mainly to the ECP, which, despite being empowered by the law in every possible manner to conduct **'free, fair, impartial and inclusive polls, betrayed its mandate in the worst possible way'.**

Its failure to ensure transparency in the vote-counting process, purposefully planned maneuvering, changing the FORMs-45, re-fabricating the FORMs-47, in particular, caused unaffordable chaos, with multiple stakeholders now unwilling to accept the results given how stark the irregularities were. Instead of addressing the public's apprehensions - the ECP had chosen to stay mum. Later, much more serious allegations were levelled against senior officials of the state.

The ECP's silence caused irreparable harm to the state. On 17-18th February 2024: PROTESTS against the ECP and the sitting government were seen in Pakistan.

MORE MEDIA POSTS ON ELECTIONS-2024:

Few actions / steps of EC / Govt Machinery had laid the foundation to raise eyebrows, genuine or suspected in the minds of public at large.

- -Kicking the candidates from ROs offices during compilation of results on Form 47
- -Thronging of RO offices by LEAs / or *Na-maloom Afraad*
- -delay in announcing results by EC where there was no reason to withhold
- -prima facie lead of thousands of votes for some "chosen" candidates as compared to the data flashed on TV screens around mid-night
- -Comments of media men on- or off-screen
- -dented credibility even prior to election process

The misgivings / suspicions have ruined the very purpose for which elections were held.

See a media post from **Iftikhar Kazmi**, a retired Ambassador who served in many key countries representing Pakistan (dated 11th February 2024):

*"*BONAPARTES*, listen to the voice of the people:*

Under constant repression, The Kaptaan (Imran Khan) in jail, the (PTI) party's first, second & third leadership either imprisoned, hounded or under-ground, the entire electoral process rigged, judiciary largely compromised, the state administration bullying, amid

hostile media, Imran Khan's supported candidates won over 100 seats, the largest block of MPS.

The Company's incoming, puppet government is devoid of the people's mandate. It has no legal, constitutional, and moral authority. Its foundation is weak. It may blow away with the first hurricane of street dissent. It has no strength to address the challenges that the nation is faced with today.

This is a moment of reflection. There is a wisdom in bowing to the will of the people. It cannot subdue the national sentiment with force."

Cooking election results during that NIGHT clearly indicated that fictitious [Ja'ali] Ballot papers were printed by PMLN as was done by Najam Sethi's caretaker....he got them printed from Urdu Bazar and even from hispersonal Connections....***how can there be more ballot papers than the voters in a constituency.***

In those grim moments, see a media post of another **retired Police Chief Fiaz Toru** on the social media pages of the Elections Day:

"I wonder why the International organizations, countries, press & media, slept or kept mum on the happenings in our country relating to the elections. Many a times the question of not providing a level playing field for the parties concerned was raised, but put a side on the pretext that it was our internal matter to be dealt within our laws & constitution. It seems that all of a sudden, they have woken up after a deep slumber, raising hue & cry in a chorus. Be it Aljazeera, BBC, Bloomberg, New York Times, the UN, the state Department, and many others. Where were they earlier? When all principles & norms of democracy were being trampled, by all & sundry.

Do they want to contribute to more Chaos & disorder? Do they wish to rekindle the fire letting the situation go out of our hands? give credence to these controversial elections."

The United States, Britain and the European Union have separately expressed concerns about Pakistan's electoral process in the wake of a vote on Thursday and urged a probe into reported irregularities. The main battle

was between former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's party and candidates backed by ex-prime minister Imran Khan. Both declared victory separately.

Some US lawmakers such as Democratic US Representatives Ro Khanna and Ilhan Omar also expressed concerns, with Khanna saying "the military is interfering and rigging the result." Both Khanna and Omar urged the State Department not to recognize a winner until investigations are conducted into allegations of misconduct. Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center think tank in Washington, said: *'...both EU and US State Department statements were relatively mild ... considering the great scale of the rigging that went down.'* British foreign minister David Cameron's statement noted *'...serious concerns raised about the fairness and lack of inclusivity of the elections.'*

See the remarks of a former Inspector General of Pakistan (IGP), **Pervez Rahim Rajpoot**, on media pages dated 29th February 2024:

"Arm twisting and police actions to stifle dissenting voices are least helpful for the image of the rulers. On the contrary these further tarnish their image and bring bad name nationally and internationally. In this age of electronic media it simply impossible to block differing voices opinions. Freedom of expression can be controlled and managed only in regimented societies and dictatorships. Unfortunately, we are passing through a period of undeclared dictatorship in a controlled democracy."

URGE TO AUDIT BOGUS ELECTION RESULTS:

On 18th February 2024: The Free and Fair Election Network (**FAFEN**) proposed a *three-stage methodology for the audit of election results*, urging the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to scrutinize the results of constituencies that were duly challenged by political parties and candidates at the appropriate legal fora using data analytics and forensics to establish the legitimacy of the outcome of General Election (GE) 2024.

Such an audit must include representatives nominated by the political parties concerned as well as independent observers to ensure the transparency and credibility of the process. The ECP could have conducted scrutiny of results of all constituencies before the notification of winners in an effort to strengthen the integrity of election outcomes and to minimize the post-election disputes. The post-elections situation warranted an urgent and

prompt response by the ECP to ascertain the veracity of the claims of illegalities and irregularities by political parties and candidates.

FAFEN's proposed audit urged for a technical investigation purely based on the physical evidence - official election documentation available with the ECP under Section 99 of the Elections Act, 2017. These documents include tamper-evident bags containing:

- (a) the packets containing the ballot papers each of which shall be sealed with the seal of the Presiding Officer or, if opened by the Returning Officer, with the seal of the Returning Officer;*
- (b) the packets containing the counterfoils of issued ballot papers;*
- (c) the packets containing the marked copies of the electoral rolls used in the poll;*
- (d) the packets containing the Ballot Paper Account;*
- (e) the packets containing results of the count, provisional and final consolidated statement of results of the count and final consolidated results;*
- (f) the packets containing the Tendered Ballot Papers included in the count; the Tendered Ballot Papers excluded from the count; the Tendered Votes List, and the Challenged Ballot Papers included in the count; the Challenged Ballot Papers excluded from the count; the Challenged Votes List; and the Spoilt Ballot Papers; and*
- (g) such other papers as the Commission may direct.*

FAFEN's election result audit methodology also comprised of the following three stages:

- 1. The first stage involves assessing the availability, authentication, completeness and correctness of the election documentation including the result forms, and the consistency of information within and amongst these forms.*
- 2. The second stage involves ascertainment of material effect of unverified forms on election outcome and taking corrective action.*
- 3. The third stage involves determination of the omission and commission and accountability of election officials.*

For general elections-2024, nearly 1.5 million election and polling officials were appointed. These officials managed the election operations including the counting, tabulation, and consolidation of results, which led to controversies and disputes. The election process entails an exhaustive list of forms to be maintained; however, these forms were never referred to after their preparation - most challenges to election results revolved around Form-45 and their subsequent consolidation.

FAFEN urged the ECP to also clarify the legality of multiple copies of the forms that were generated on the Election Day. Under Election Act, 2017 and corresponding rules, there were multiple copies of Form 45:

- *copy sealed by the Presiding Officer in a temper-evident bag that is placed in the bag of election material;*
- *picture of Form-45 transmitted by the Presiding Officer to the Returning Officer through mobile app;*
- *original copy sealed in a temper-evident bag by the Presiding Officer for physically delivering it to the Returning Officer;*
- *copy that is affixed by the Presiding Officer outside the polling stations;*
- *copy that is retained by the Presiding Officer for own record;*
- *copy sealed in a temper-evident bag by the Presiding Officer for dissemination to the District Election Commissioner;*
- *copies that are given by the Presiding Officer to polling agents at the polling stations; and 8) copy that is given by the Presiding Officer to the observer.*

Pakistan's Elections Act, 2017 does not establish which copy will be considered legal in case the available and produced (duly signed) copies are different - when dispute.

FAFEN also called upon the Election Commission to encourage the political parties and candidates to promptly reach out to it with their complaints of illegalities and violations of the Elections Act, 2017 - under Section 9(1) of the Act.

INTERNET & WI-FI KEPT SUSPENDED ON POLL-DAY:

The Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the closure of its borders with Iran and Afghanistan on the eve of the general elections on 8th

February 2024, as a measure to enhance security. Ten minutes before polling stations opened, the interior ministry announced the ***suspension of mobile internet services across the country***, citing some terrorist incidents around. **NetBlocks** director Alp Toker called the outage ***'amongst the largest that they had observed'***. The PPP's Bilawal Zardari demanded that the government should restore services and said its lawyers would challenge the decision in court. The PTI called the outage a ***spineless and pathetic show of guts*** on behalf of the government. An analysis titled as *"Polls close in Pakistan after millions vote in election"* appeared at **FRANCE 24** (8th February 2024) is referred.

In countries like Pakistan, where the journey towards democratic stability is intertwined with governance challenges, economic disparities, and political transitions, elections take on an even greater significance. The 2024 elections in Pakistan were anticipated with hope and scrutiny, given the country's history of electoral controversies and the global emphasis on democratic norms. These elections came when the nation sought to affirm its commitment to democratic principles amidst internal pressures and international expectations. The significance of the 2024 elections laid Pakistan's adherence to the fundamental principles of democracy with the assurance of free and fair elections.

Pity that complex interplay of historical, social, and political factors couldn't shape Pakistan's journey towards democratic governance. Central to this journey was recognition and display of free, fair, and periodic elections as the cornerstone of democracy – *but country's institutions failed in the sense; the constitutional framework was totally ignored or misinterpreted for many thus the factors of electoral integrity, transparency, and accountability were seen vanished once again*. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), established under the Constitution, remained a stooge allegedly for PMLN, thus didn't provide level field for other parties taking part in elections.

- As a member of the United Nations and a signatory to various international treaties and conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Pakistan is committed to respecting and promoting human rights, including the right to participate in the governance of the country through democratic elections.

Pakistan had voluntarily agreed to adhere to regional and international standards for democratic elections, as articulated in documents; these

standards mainly emphasize on transparency, impartiality, and inclusivity in the electoral process, which Pakistan couldn't uphold in its 2024 elections in more vulnerable way than the previous ones.

The 2024 elections in Pakistan represented a critical moment in the nation's democratic journey. While the electoral process was not without its challenges, including allegations of irregularities and concerns about electoral violence; overall, the elections were conducted with following reservations:

1. Pakistan should have strengthened its electoral institutions, mainly the ECP, to ensure their independence, impartiality, and effectiveness in overseeing the electoral process.
2. Efforts should have been made to enhance transparency and accountability in the electoral process, including measures to address concerns about money's influence in politics.
3. Steps should have been taken to ensure the inclusivity and participation of all segments of society in the electoral process, including marginalized communities, women, and youth. This could involve initiatives to increase awareness about choosing the right candidates and remove political participation barriers.
4. Measures should have been taken to address electoral violence and intimidation, including strengthening law enforcement mechanisms and providing security assurances to candidates and voters.
5. Dialogue and engagement among political stakeholders, civil society organizations, and the public were essential for building consensus and trust in the electoral process. Efforts should have been made to foster constructive dialogue and cooperation among all stakeholders.

Pakistan could further strengthen its democratic institutions and processes; thus, advancing the cause of democracy and the rule of law in the country – but, instead it became a laughing stock for the world media channels. In the whole country, the polls were closed after the state-authorities suspended mobile calls and data while millions voted for a new government in **a controversial election**. Though the interior ministry said incidents of terrorism made the measure necessary – but no one in Pakistan (*and in the whole world, in fact*) believed it.

The elections came almost two years after the previous Prime Minister Imran Khan, was ousted. Three-time PM Nawaz Sharif was on the ballot. Many analysts held this was among Pakistan's least credible elections. Mr Khan, jailed on corruption charges (in 2023), was barred from standing and his party called **the internet cut a cowardly act**.

Counting got under way as soon as polling ended, with first results expected during the same night, but voting patterns actually emerged after TWO days - even then were not clear. **Results must have been released before 12 midnight the polling day.** The ECP and the other government functionaries were not expecting so much turn out of voters which, in fact, flooded the polling booths everywhere in the country. **The presiding officers at most polling stations had started receiving instructions after 3pm that the voting speed should immediately be curtailed.** In real terms, the follow-up of the new conditions was beyond the direct control of the presiding officers – and more especially at the ladies' booths. So, they put all the responsibility to make the voting process slow on the police and the security agencies on duty.

Referring to the **BBC** dated 8th February 2024:

".... It was thought (that low turn-out of voters) would hamper the chances of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. The suspension of mobile services made it harder for voters to find their polling stations. Both calls and data services were suspended just 10 minutes before voting started, although Wi-Fi networks still appeared to be working.

.... that the internet blackout meant it was not possible to book taxis to go and vote, while others said they couldn't chat to other family members to co-ordinate when to head to polling stations."

The shutdown of the Wi-Fi & internet was also criticized by Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leadership which had **called for services to be re-stored immediately.** The country was purposefully brought on high alert, with heavy security presence at polling stations across the country; armed guards at the entrance were seen and army officers roaming around the area. Border crossings with Afghanistan and Iran remained closed for both cargo and pedestrians **to ensure full security during polling.**

On 18th February 2024: The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) raised serious concerns about the integrity and credibility of the 8th February elections, citing a range of issues that had cast a shadow over the democratic process.

In a REPORT released a day earlier, the HRCP urged an independent audit of general elections - 2024 under the supervision of a parliamentary body. According to HRCP's election observers, who conducted spot-checks in 51

constituencies, ***the nationwide shutdown of internet and cellular services on polling day***, coupled with arbitrary changes in polling information, hindered voters' access to polling stations. The report also said:

"This was particularly true for women with restricted mobility, persons living with disabilities, the elderly, and low-income voters. Of particular concern is the protracted delay in announcement of election results by the returning officers."

While the polling process itself was generally transparent and peaceful, the post-polling procedures raised significant concerns. Also, that in a fifth of all polling stations observed by the HRCP, the presiding officer either failed to affix the statement of the count in a conspicuous place for public display or was not observed transmitting a photo of the result to the returning officer and ECP. In many instances, the returning officer's announcement did not tally with the presiding officer's counts. Worryingly, reports of candidates, polling agents and observers being denied permission to witness the provisional consolidation of results – ***a mockery of elections***.

Additionally, HRCP demanded the ECP publish all relevant Forms 45, 46, 48, and 49 in accordance with the Elections Act 2017 – which the ECP and the government didn't follow.

People were able to vote for Nawaz Sharif - the PMLN leader, who at the time of the last election (in 2018) was beginning a sentence for corruption; he was ousted in a 1999 military coup and had his third term cut short in 2017 - but he recently returned from self-imposed exile. He had his lifetime ban on holding office overturned, and also got his criminal record wiped clean at the end of last year (2023), allowing him to stand for what would be a record fourth term. See **BBC's note** dated 2nd February 2024 in this regard:

*"One might say that **Mr Sharif is the king of comebacks**. He's certainly done it before.*

Ousted from his second term in a 1999 military coup, he returned in the 2013 parliamentary elections, staging a triumphant comeback to become prime minister for a record third term.

But Nawaz Sharif's last period in office was marred by upheavals - starting with a six-month opposition blockade of the capital Islamabad, and ending with court proceedings over corruption allegations

which eventually led to the Supreme Court disqualifying him in July 2017. He resigned shortly afterwards. In July 2018 he was found guilty of corruption by a court in Pakistan and given a 10-year sentence. But he was released two months later when the court suspended the sentences, pending a final judgement.

*By December 2018 however, he was jailed for corruption again, this time for seven years, in relation to his family's **ownership of steel mills in Saudi Arabia**. He then fought for bail arguing he needed medical treatment in the UK. This was granted in 2019, allowing him to flee to London where he lived in a luxury flat in exile for four years until his return last October (2023).*"

The ECP categorized half of the 90,675 polling stations as either '**sensitive, meaning there is a risk of violence, or most sensitive**', indicating a higher risk. Although voting ended peacefully, strict rules around election coverage - including what could be said about candidates, campaigning and opinion polls - remained in place until 23:59 local time (19:00 GMT) on 8th February 2024, the elections day.

...MORE FOREIGN VOICES ON WI-FI SHUT:

See **VOA's analysis** dated 8th February 2024 on **WHY WI-FI + INTERNET WERE SHUT DURING ELECTIONS** in Pakistan:

*"Pakistan held its long-delayed elections Thursday, but sporadic violence and the nationwide suspension of mobile phone and internet services overshadowed the polls, **raising credibility concerns about an already controversial vote.***

Polling stations across the South Asian nation closed at 5pm local time after nine hours of balloting. An early morning Interior Ministry announcement just before the polls opened for some 128 million eligible voters said the disruption in phone service was meant to 'mitigate potential security threats and maintain law and order.'

*Analysts say whoever wins the election will serve a public that is **deeply disappointed in the political system, has little faith in the electoral process***"

Three-time former PM Nawaz Sharif's PMLN was portrayed as the favorite of the powerful military, while the last elected PM Imran Khan, was in jail. JUI's Fazal-Ur-Rehman was among those who did not vote, citing a lack of trust in the process. The Pakistani government deployed more than 650,000 army, paramilitary and police personnel to provide security for tens of thousands of polling stations across the world's fifth most populous country, with an estimated population of 241 million.

Several hours after the polling ended, the interior ministry partially restored the mobile services nationwide; the suspension of phone and internet services sparked widespread allegations on the state-administrators **to rig the polls**, allegedly to prevent candidates loyal to Khan's party from gaining an upper hand.

Imran Khan, the 71-year-old politician, was convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms for highly disputed corruption and other charges in the lead-up to the vote. The PTI had been subjected to a months-long nationwide clampdown, in which hundreds of workers and **candidates were arrested without charges and released only after quitting the party or withdrawing from the election.**

Michael Kugelman, Director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, told the VOA:

*"Despite being in jail, Khan remains a central figure in the election. He retains a large base that will want to vote for the independent candidates sponsored by his party. But it appears the state is creating an enabling environment for **rigging with its suspension of mobile services**. This threatens to deny many Pakistanis the right to vote for who they choose, casting doubt on the government's insistence that this election will be free and fair."*

The United States condemned the situation on the Election Day; Vedant Patel, the State Department principal deputy spokesperson's briefing to the reporters in Washington is referred while saying:

"We're tracking reports of restrictions on internet and cellphone access across Pakistan on polling day. We along with the international community will continue to emphasize the importance of democratic institutions, a free press, a vibrant civil society and expanded opportunities for political participation of all Pakistanis."

Amnesty International denounced the *Election Day internet shutdown* as "reckless" and a "blunt attack" on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. [*Pakistan has nearly 190 million cellular subscribers, including 128 million using mobile broadband services.*] The suspension of service left many voters unable to access the election commission's data system to retrieve polling station locations and other details.

Referring to an essay placed at middleeastmonitor.com dated 13th February 2024: For Pakistan's election-2024, it was predicted that there would be vote rigging and outright fraud as a central feature of the Pakistani ECP's plan, and there was. What was not anticipated was that former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party, the PTI, would win the most parliamentary seats of any single party. It was a miraculous outcome, given the horrendous levels of repression of the PTI – which was being prevented from even contesting in the election.

Journalists with mainstream Pakistani television channels could not promptly report rigging incidents and other irregularities from the field throughout the day due to the suspension. **Arifa Noor**, a prime-time political talk-show host on the **Dawn News** channel, stated during a live broadcast:

"There are no two opinions about it: This measure was designed to manipulate election results and restrict news coverage. That's what it is. Shutting down mobile networks on polling day is the beginning of Election Day rigging. Cutting candidates off from their agents and staff on Election Day is unacceptable. How's one supposed to keep a check and highlight any irregularity? By the time news comes out, [the] election would have been stolen."

The US-based **Gallup** polling company found in a survey on the eve of the elections that more than two-thirds of Pakistanis **'lack confidence in the honesty of their elections'**. Pakistanis were increasingly discouraged by economic, political, and security challenges. The political atmosphere was equally as glum as the economic one ahead of Pakistan's general election since 2018 - **"Seven in 10 Pakistanis lack confidence in the honesty of their elections."** In addition to their skepticism about elections, 88% of Pakistanis also believed corruption was widespread within their government. Pakistanis' economic pessimism had hit an 18-year high, with 70% believing conditions were worsening where they live.

Gallup had conducted face-to-face interviews with a random sample of 1,000 adults aged 15 and older in Pakistan between September and Octo-

ber 2023. The poll found that the political landscape in the nuclear-armed South Asian nation of about 241 million didn't help the sitting PDM coalition government. PTI was (and still is being) subjected to months of state crackdowns, with hundreds of grassroots workers, including candidates, detained, abducted, and forced to quit the party or back out of the elections or politics altogether. Many PTI candidates used social media platforms affiliated with the party to campaign and avoid getting arrested. Gallup researchers further said:

*"The state crackdown had been met with **palpable public anger**. It is likely linked in some way to the **low levels of confidence in honesty of the elections**. Despite the crackdown, Khan is the most popular politician, with his party the largest political force in Pakistan, according to public polls.*

*Political unrest arising from a disenfranchised voting public may lead to increased instability over the short term. This may further deter the foreign investment Pakistan badly needs to grow its economy and reverse its fortunes in the long term. **They (ECP & the government) underscored the importance of the outcome of Thursday's election in Pakistan for regional stability.**"*

The United States said on 12th February 2024 that: **"It was closely monitoring Pakistan's electoral process. We're concerned by some of the infringements we've seen in that space;"** ref: Vedant Patel, the US State Department principal deputy spokesperson's briefing to reporters in Washington.