

Scenario 277**GENERAL ELECTIONS 2024-I**

- The details of **July 2018 elections** have already been laid down in the previous book titled as **RISE & FALL OF IMRAN KHAN** (456 pages), published in 2024 by the GHP Surrey UK.

On 8th February 2024: General elections were programmed to be 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; with following details:

Sr no	Poll Event	Schedule
1	Public Notice Issued by the Returning Officers	19 December 2023
2	Dates of filing Nomination papers with the Returning Officers by the candidates	20 December 2023 to 24 December 2023
3	Publication of names of the nominated candidates.	24 December 2023
4	Last date of scrutiny of nomination papers by the Returning Officer	25 December 2023 to 30 December 2023
5	Last date of filing appeals against decisions of the Returning Officer rejecting/accepting nomination papers.	3 January 2024
6	Last date for deciding of appeals by the Appellate Tribunal	10 January 2024
7	Publication of revised list of candidates	11 January 2024
8	Last date of withdrawal of candidature and publication of revised list of candidates	12 January 2024
9	Allotment of election symbol to contesting candidates	13 January 2024
10	Date of Polling and Counting of Votes	8 February 2024

The general elections were supposed to be held in Pakistan less than 90 days after the dissolution of the National Assembly, which was dissolved on 10th August 2023 by President Arif Alvi on the advice of the Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif. This meant that the election must have been held not later than 8th November 2023.

On 5th August 2023: the results of the 2023 digital census were approved by the Council of Common Interests [CCI] headed by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif. Therefore, elections were to be delayed to February 2024 at the latest, as announced by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). On 13th September 2023, President Alvi proposed 6th November 2023 as a date to the ECP and advised it to seek guidance from the Supreme Court for the announcement of the election date. On 2nd November 2023, the ECP and the President agreed on 8th February 2024 as the date for the general election.

DE FACTO BAN ON PTI:

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. 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. During 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'***. Responding to this, on 11th January, the ECP contested the ruling in the Supreme Court. On 13th January 2023, a three-member bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan [SCP] sided with the ECP, reinstating their initial decision to deny the PTI its election symbol, the cricket bat, ***due to the party's failure to conduct intra-party elections*** in accordance with 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. See the details below....

SAGA OF PTI'S ELECTION SYMBOL:

On 11th January 2024; the ECP challenged the PHC's decision of restoring the PTI's election symbol. Simultaneously, the PTI initiated legal action in the PHC, filing a contempt petition against Chief Election Commissioner [CEC] Sikandar Sultan Raja and other ECP members for not implementing the high court's order in the case.

During the previous hearing, CJP Qazi Isa had observed that democracy was a fundamental right, which should be present in both a country and a political party. Justice Isa had also highlighted that the case was *time sensitive* with the 8th February general elections approaching, adding that the matter required *immediate attention*.

On 12-13th January 2024: A 3-member SCP bench led by the CJP Qazi Faez Isa heard the ECP's plea challenging the Peshawar High Court's decision to restore the PTI's iconic 'bat' election symbol. The ECP's petition, submitted by former attorney general Makhdoom Ali Khan, argued that the PHC should not have proceeded with the case without first issuing a notice to the Attorney General for Pakistan (AGP). That the said procedural step was necessary because the legal question at hand pertained to the federal government, involving the interpretation of Article 17 of the Constitution and its relationship with the provisions of the Elections Act of 2017.

The petition also highlighted that the PHC's order conflicted with previous Supreme Court rulings, which had consistently discouraged high courts from intervening in the electoral process, which, as per the Constitution, was exclusively within the ECP's jurisdiction. Further, the petition emphasized that the PHC's judgement effectively nullified key sections of the Elections Act and Election Rules by restricting the ECP's constitutional and statutory roles in regulating and supervising intra-party elections of political parties. This interpretation contradicted the principles established in previous superior court rulings.

Furthermore, it undermined the fundamental purpose of Section 215(5) of the Act, in conjunction with Rules 157 and 158, which aim to foster democracy, pluralism, and transparency within political parties by ensuring timely intra-party elections, it was added. Moreover, the PHC ruling disregarded the essence of Section 208(2) of the Elections Act, which is intended to guarantee equal opportunities for all party members to contest elections for any political party office.

ECP's petition also said that the Peshawar High Court order not only rendered relevant provisions practically redundant but also enabled a political party to undertake 'sham' intra-party elections without any checks and balances. This was not only contrary to Article 17 of the Constitution but was also in conflict

with the principles of democracy. The petition also pointed out that the PHC's order overlooked the fact that the Elections Act was enacted under a democratic government and led to the repeal of various election laws, some of which were introduced during times of extra-constitutional rule.

ECP counsel Makhdoom Ali Khan had contended that the PTI had held its intra-party polls *secretly* and the elections were not in accordance with the party's own documentation. Upon being repeatedly questioned, he also assured the bench that no discriminatory behaviour had been adopted (by the ECP) with the party.

PTI's INTRA-PARTY ELECTIONS (?)

On 22nd December 2023: The ECP voided, for the second time in less than a month, PTI's internal elections following ***a first-of-its-kind microscopic examination of the inner workings of a political party*** and declared it ineligible to obtain an election symbol to contest the upcoming general elections. The ECP said in its 11-page order:

"It is held that PTI has not complied with our directions rendered therein order dated 23rd November, 2023 and failed to hold intra-party election in accordance with PTI prevailing Constitution, 2019 and Election Act, 2017, and Election Rules, 2017."

Rejecting a certificate and Form-65 filed by erstwhile PTI's chairman Gohar Khan, the commission declared the party ineligible to obtain an election symbol under Section 215 of the Elections Act, 2017. Moments after news of the ECP's decision was aired, the PTI took to X to term the decision part of the ***'famous London Plan and a disgusting and shameful attempt to stop PTI from [participating in the] election.'***

According to the court, the PTI was entitled to the election symbol ***"strictly in terms of sections 215 and 217, read with any other enabling provision of the Elections Act 2017 and Election Rules 2017"***. In fact, the scores were being settled with the PTI and Imran Khan since much earlier; might be as a deep-planned strategy. See a media report of dated 23th December 2023 [here](#).

"The ECP took PTI intra-party polls 'unconstitutional', revoked electoral symbol; party vowed to challenge decision. PTI candidates would have to contest as independents,

won't be able to join their party unless ECP got it re-listed. ECP's decision came hours after SC; ECP assured party concerns over 'level playing field' would be addressed;"referring to **daily DAWN's** wording of that day.

Earlier the same day, observing that fair elections would give legitimacy to the elected government, the Supreme Court of Pakistan [SCP] had called for the provision of a **level playing field** for all political parties, including the PTI, to foster healthy electoral competition. In an order on a petition, filed by Gohar Ali Khan, a three-member bench of the apex court, headed by Justice Sardar Tariq Masood and comprising Justice Mansoor Ali Shah and Justice Athar Minallah, said the ECP plays a crucial role in the democratic process, especially in conducting elections, adding:

"[The] ECP is to ensure that elections are conducted in accordance with democratic principles and that elections are free from undue influence, coercion, and corruption. (It's) stressed that ECP should also ensure that all political parties and candidates have an equal opportunity to participate in the election process.

Despite assurances of being provided a level playing field, it was evident that the PTI would be playing its election innings without its signature 'bat', as the ECP deemed its intra-party polls '*unconstitutional*' and revoked its claim on the iconic electoral symbol. The reserved verdict was announced a day after the Peshawar High Court (PHC) directed the electoral watchdog to decide the matter of PTI's intra-party polls and electoral symbol on immediate basis.

Some members of the PTI got upset to that extent - claiming that the party would still win the general elections, maintaining that it would appeal the decision at every forum. PTI's that faction also asserted that its candidates would indeed contest the polls with the 'bat' symbol, come what may.

- *It is important to remember that organizing free and fair elections is more important than the results itself. The petitioner or any other person representing any other political party in the electoral process could approach the ECP at 3.00pm for the redressal for their grievance relating to the elections.*

Following the SC order, ECP had assured the SC it would address PTI's concerns regarding the denial of a level playing field ahead of general elections, promising to replace the district returning officers (DROs), returning officers (ROs) creating hurdles in the way of obtaining and submitting nomination papers. The assurance was held out to a PTI delegation, which had met

commission officials on Supreme Court directions. PTI's Barrister Gohar Khan, while addressing the media in Islamabad, mentioned that:

"....the withdrawal of the party's electoral symbol had led to the loss of 227 reserved seats, potentially paving the way for corruption. None of the 14 petitioners had ever been PTI members.

None of the 837,950 members has raised objections on party polls. While we accept the apex court's decision, we are confident that people will respond to Imran's call on Election Day."

During that day's hearing, the CJP Qazi Isa said that the detailed order of the PHC restoring the PTI's symbol was issued, at which the party counsels felt pleasant. That day was the last day to submit the party tickets to the ECP; on which the CJP indicated that the court would announce its verdict the same day. Justice Mazhar noted that there were two questions: **whether the court (PHC) had jurisdiction or not** and **whether the ECP had the authority to investigate intra-party polls.**

PTI's Barrister Ali Zafar argued that neither the Constitution nor the Elections Act 2017 granted the electoral watchdog the right to review a party's intra-party elections. Citing Article 17 of the Constitution, he asserted that contesting the elections with an electoral symbol was among a political party's rights and that depriving a party of the same would be in violation of the Constitution. Adding that:

"The election commission has discriminated against the PTI. The ECP has apparently been mala fide by taking away the 'bat' symbol; contending that the watchdog (ECP) was not a court that could grant the right to a fair trial."

Ali Zafar also claimed that none of the PTI members had challenged the intra-party polls, asserting that they were held according to the PTI's constitution. The ECP had given 20 days to hold the intra-party elections, which the PTI complied with due to the fear of the **party being excluded from the elections**. His basic argument was **that those challenging the intra-party polls were not party members**; adding that the PTI had responded in writing to the ECP's 32 questions; BUT amazed that the ECP set aside the intra-party elections without pointing out any wrong answer if it was there.

Barrister Ali Zafar further contended that **"the election commission (ECP) had not mentioned any irregularity in its Dec 22 order but said that**

the reasons given were strange". Also, that The ECP said it would not accept the intra-party polls as the appointment of the party CEC was not done correctly. The records indicated that only a day before the ECP counsel had raised technical objections and talked about '***democracy within the party (PTI)***'.

At this point, CJP Qazi Isa, reiterating his remarks from yesterday, noted:

"There should be democracy within political parties as well as within the country. The basic question is of democracy, not of complete implementation of the party constitution. It should at least be seen that [intra-party] elections were conducted; (and that) Akbar S. Babar was also a party member even if disliked by the party."

Meanwhile, the CJP asked PTI to share '***whole context of allegations of mala fide against the ECP***' or to keep the arguments strictly legal. The CJP told the PTI counsel: "*Substantiate if you are taking the angle of mala fide. If they're mala fide then we look at them with very suspect eyes or you take away this allegation. I am not saying 'take it away'. It's your call.*"

At this, PTI's lawyer Hamid said he would keep his arguments non-political. When asked if he was withdrawing his allegation of "***mala fide in fact***", the lawyer replied he would not "***go into that arena***". The CJP recalled that the ECP had issued notice to the PTI when the party was in the government. Justice Mazhar asked whether the PTI had followed the election schedule it had issued; exact wording was:

"Were the [intra-party] elections transparent? Was it clear that who could contest the elections and who could not? You ask for a level playing field [but] would also have to give your party members the same; noting that the ECP had not taken action on its own but upon receiving complaints."

The top judge, Qazi Isa, said:

"Nowadays everyone uses the word establishment, the real term is army. We should talk openly and fully; he respects constitutional institutions. If we talk about [General] Ayub's rule, political parties in Pakistan have a history. The PPP's sword symbol was taken from them, after which PPP-Parliamentarian was created. PMLN has seen a similar time; it must be seen who was in the government at the time."

Justice Mazhar noted that any irregularities identified by the ECP were from the PTI constitution itself, to which Ali Zafar replied that the ECP had not identified any irregularities in the election schedule and venue. Here, Justice Isa remarked that the main matter is whether intra-party elections were conducted or not; had PTI let Akbar Babar contest the intra-party elections, and (as) he lacked support, he would have lost anyway. The CJP wondered that: *"The PTI founder is facing a trial in jail; if he comes out of jail tomorrow and wonders who these officials are, then what will happen? (Also asked the PTI counsel that) why he does not have faith in the party's 850,000 members."*

Ali Zafar said that he was pointing out the laws which the ECP used to withdraw the party's election symbol. One learned judge remarked:

"The basic point is the authority of the ECP. If that is not present, the rest of the matter will end by itself. If the elections were conducted in a regular manner, then the election symbol should be given in any case. Just tell me whether all party members got an equal opportunity in PTI's intra-party elections or not; the ECP cannot be shown a piece of paper and be told that elections were held."

The PTI lawyer Ali Zafar reiterated that the ECP did not have the authority to scrutinize the intra-party polls, to which Justice Mazhar said that **the real issue is of the jurisdiction**. Here, CJP Isa remarked:

"Or you can accept whether you want democracy or not. You cannot say that democracy remains in the house but not outside it. You want politics, not democracy. Politics is democracy; why the PTI did not allow the 14 people challenging the party polls to contest them."

Barrister Gohar's own election became questionable: The PTI lawyer said the ECP could impose a fine for not holding intra-party polls properly but at the same time argued that it did not have authority for other matters. Here, Justice Hilali wondered **'...if the ECP could do nothing (?) even if a political party issues a certificate for holding intra-party elections without actually conducting them'**.

Meanwhile, Justice Mazhar observed that *the party had gone beyond the stage of fine* by holding the intra-party polls. The chief justice remarked: **"Barrister Gohar's own election has become questionable. If the PTI founder had given (him) a certificate, then it would have been another situation."**

Justice Hilali said, *"Your party's slogan is to empower people but the same cannot be seen here."* Justice Qazi Isa added that: *"This is talk from three*

*and a half years ago that the ECP had directed you (the PTI) to hold elections; your response was that one year was given. The ECP showed bravery by submitting a notice during the [PTI's] government. **Why is PTI afraid of elections?**"*

PTI LOST THE 'SYMBOL APPEAL' IN SC:

After long exchange of arguments, the CJP Qazi Isa announced the verdict as the PTI legal team was present in the courtroom. In a massive blow to PTI, the SCP set aside the Peshawar High Court (PHC)'s order which had reinstated 'bat' as the party's electoral symbol for the upcoming general elections. The verdict meant the PTI's ticket holders could (only) contest the elections as independent candidates, if they desired so. The PTI's bid to join the elections using the ***PTI-Nazriati splinter group's*** symbol, the batsman, also hit a snag after the latter went back on an agreement that would have allowed the PTI candidates to stand in the elections with their symbol.

The verdict was announced a little before the midnight after a marathon hearing that lasted two entire days. A three-member bench — comprising the CJP, Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar and Justice Musarrat Hilali — heard the ECP's petition. The CJP said:

"The ECP has been calling upon the PTI to hold its intra-party elections since 24th May 2021 and at that time the PTI was in the federal government and in some provinces. Therefore, it cannot be stated that ECP was victimizing PTI. Nonetheless we wanted to satisfy ourselves that the ECP had not acted mala fide of ulterior reason or that PTI was discriminated against; it transpired that ECP had passed orders against 13 other registered political parties which were far more severe than the order passed against PTI."

The order said further:

"One such case of All Pakistan Muslim League came before this court on 12th January 2024 and the order of the ECP delisting the said political party was upheld. The ECP wanted to ensure that PTI holds intra party elections. The mere production of a certificate stating that such elections were held would not suffice to establish that intra party elections had (actually) been held when a challenge was thrown to such an assertion. Nor, in our opinion, should ECP concern

itself with minor irregularities in the holding of a political party's elections."

The apex court noted that 14 PTI members, with stated credentials, had complained to the ECP that elections had not been held. However, these complaints were brushed aside in the writ petition by simply asserting that they were not members of PTI and thus not entitled to contest elections, but this bare denial was insufficient, particularly when they had credibly established their long association with PTI. The order mentioned: "If any member of a political party is expelled it must be done in accordance with section 205 of the Act, but no evidence in this regard was forthcoming."

The court further observed:

"We also do not agree with the learned judges (of the PHC) that the ECP did not have 'any jurisdiction to question or adjudicate the intra-party elections of a political party.' If such an interpretation is accepted it would render all provisions in the Act requiring the holding of intra party elections illusory and of no consequence and be redundant."

PESHAWAR HIGH COURT'S VERDICT:

However, earlier **ON THE SAME DAY**, the **14th January 2024**, the Peshawar High Court [PHC] passed an order contrary to the decision taken by the SCP. The PHC's judgment said:

"The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has no jurisdiction to issue a decision on political parties' intra-party elections. (The PHC) issued a detailed order on PTI's petition challenging ECP's decision of not allotting the party its election symbol BAT."

The detailed verdict came three days after a two-member bench, comprising Justice Ijaz Anwar and Justice Syed Arshad Ali, overruled ECP's decision. In their order, the judges said in their 26-page detailed judgement that:

"...a political party has the right to contest elections under a common symbol and this constitutional right can't be denied to it on the basis of an absurd provision of law. The impugned decision of the ECP is

backed by no legal provision either under the Act [Elections Act] or under the Constitution. Therefore, the same is illegal.

.... The Commission (ECP) can't question intra-party elections."

While setting aside the ECP's order of 22nd December 2023, the bench had also directed the ECP to publish 'bat' as PTI's symbol on its website. Referring to past precedents set by superior courts, the bench ruled:

"The survey of the case law stated above and the enabling provision of the Constitution, as well as the Act, lead us to the conclusion that it is the fundamental right of every citizen of Pakistan not only to form political party but the political party should be provided a conducive atmosphere to contest election for the Parliament, Provincial Assembly, Senate and to form a Government.

Indeed, the Constitution of 1973 has ensured that every citizen in Pakistan has the right to form or to be a member of a political party subject to any reasonable restriction imposed by law in the interest of sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan."

The judgement, authored by Justice Ali, added that different provisions of the Constitution and the Elections Act were discussed, and the outcome of that discussion was that:

"ECP's action of refusing PTI its symbol has 'the effect of depriving the petitioners and its members to freely participate in the affairs and governance of Pakistan through political activities as guaranteed through Article 17(2) of the Constitution."

The bench also discussed ECP's jurisdiction to question, probe and issue an order on intra-party election disputes. About section 208 of the Elections Act, dealing with intra-party polls, the bench observed:

"The verbiage of Section 208 does not authorize the ECP either to supervise the intra-party election or entertain any complaint regarding any irregularity in the said election. However, under Section 209, a political party is bound to submit a certificate signed by office-bearers with the ECP within seven days of the intra party polls to establish that they were held in accordance with the party's constitution of a political party and the Elections Act.

It was ECP's statutory duty to publish the party's symbol on its website within seven days of the submission of intra-party documents. Section 209 of the Elections Act, 2017 does not confer any jurisdiction on the ECP to question the intra-party election process. Any party who has complied with sections 202, 206, 209 and 210 of the Elections Act 2017 becomes eligible for an election symbol for contesting election for national, provincial and local assemblies."

The order added that: "Section 215(5) (— outlining the condition for not allocating an election symbol to a party —) *can be invoked only when a political party, despite a show-cause notice, fails to comply with provision of sections 209 or 210 of the Elections Act, 2017.*"

THE SCP's JUDGMENT & AFTER:

Referring to Zahid Hussain's essay titled as '***the judgment and after***' published in daily DAWN on 17th January 2024:

"The verdict of the three-member bench led by the chief justice has not only divested a political party of its election symbol, it has, arguably, also taken away the fundamental right of political participation. The controversial ruling depriving the PTI of its iconic bat symbol has seemingly stripped the electoral process of whatever legitimacy it was left with.

There is not even a semblance of fair play as political parties prepare to go to the hustings. The hope for a democratic transition has now been dented further by Saturday's late-night decision."

More importantly, the ruling came as a disappointment to those who believed that things would change at the top judiciary under the new chief justice, with his reputation for integrity. Instead, the verdict announced by the CJP Qazi Faez Isa, after hearings telecast live, evoked memories of some of the most controversial rulings in the past by the Supreme Court, which had caused irreparable damage to the democratic process in Pakistan.

Reema Omer of the ICJ Organisation [**@reema_Omer at X**], and a leading constitutional lawyer, said:

"The SC judgement upholding ECP decision to deny PTI election symbol is an excessive, punitive response to not conducting intra-party polls as per law. It is a huge blow to our fundamental rights jurisprudence regarding political parties + political participation. Extremely unfortunate."

11:35 PM · Jan 13, 2024 185.2K Views

It may not be the first time a political party has been deprived of its symbol, but there is no precedent of candidates of a major political party being denied the right to fight elections on a common symbol. PTI ticket-holders would have to contest the polls as independent candidates, thus putting a major electoral contender in an extremely disadvantageous position. The decision, just weeks before the polls, was being described by some as part of the political manipulation aimed at keeping the PTI out of the contest. There was hardly any precedent in Pakistan's chequered political history of such action - the hope for a democratic transition was dented further.

By validating the controversial decision of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the SCP lent itself to criticism of not being nonpartisan. Nothing could be worse than the judiciary getting sucked into the political maelstrom. The ruling intensified the divisions within the institution - reflecting the deepening crisis within.

The controversial ruling on the PTI's symbol apparently reinforced a growing public perception of the superior judiciary becoming part of the prevailing political polarisation. This view gained traction, given the overall persecution of the PTI and the evident aim of marginalising the party. This was certainly not a good omen for a country facing systemic collapse. Indeed, one couldn't justify the PTI's own failure to conduct a transparent intra-party election, and there can also be no two views about the importance of intra-party democracy, as pointed out by the CJP, for democracy to work; but the criteria must not be seen to be applied selectively.

Indeed, it was obligatory for the political parties under the ECP rules to hold intra-party elections and there were flaws in the way the PTI conducted the mandatory exercise. But it was also a fact that elections within other political parties could hardly be called democratic. In this country, where most political parties stand turned into family enterprises, there was no concept of intra-party democracy.

ECP's PARTISANSHIP (?) - THE SAME DAY:

Interestingly, the ECP never questioned how democratically the elections in other parties were conducted. One glaring example of the double standards being applied on the issue was the **case of the Awami National Party which also had not conducted intra-party elections but the ECP merely imposed a fine and ordered it to hold elections by May 10 that year. The party was not stripped of its symbol**; see the media news dated 14th January 2024 in detail:

"Only a day after delisting 13 political parties over their failure to conduct the mandated intra-party elections, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in its decision announced on 13th January 2024 allowed the Awami National Party (ANP) to contest polls on its election symbol of 'Lantern' despite its failure to fulfil the legal requirement.

While announcing its reserved verdict, the ECP imposed a fine of Rs:20,000 on the ANP with the direction to hold intra-party polls till 10th May 2024, even some three months after the 8th February general elections. The order made many wondered under which law the ECP could allow one party, and not the other, to participate in general elections on its election symbol without intra-party election. Why the concession was not available to Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, [PTI].

The ECP had earlier noted that ANP's last intra-party polls were conducted in May 2019, and since the term of office-bearers was four years according to its constitution, the same had already expired over eight months back. The verdict, which was reserved on 21st Dec 2023, on the intra-party polls of ANP was announced on the last date for allocation of symbols to the contesting candidates by the returning officers. Sections 208, 209, and 210 of the Elections Act 2017, were invoked to delist over a dozen political parties for failure to meet the legal requirement to be eligible to get poll symbol."

But the rules were applied differently in the PTI's case, despite the fact that most of its leaders were either behind bars or had quit the party allegedly under coercion. Arguably, the PTI was not even allowed to hold public rallies as part of its election campaign. Also, there were several reports of PTI candidates not being allowed to file their nomination papers.

All the above facts raised the question of whether the ECP was fulfilling its constitutional responsibility of conducting a free and fair electoral exercise. There was a ring of truth to the allegations that the elections had already been stolen. A partisan caretaker administration appeared to be acting NOT for the democracy at least. This state of affairs required the judiciary to play

a more active role in protecting the fundamental and democratic rights of the people. Unfortunately, the institution got confronted with its own crisis of credibility that was accentuated by the latest ruling on the PTI's electoral symbol case.

The chief justice remarked on flawed judgements in the past that validated authoritarian rule, and on the need to rectify mistakes. But the court's ruling on 13th January 2024 didn't indicate a departure from the questionable rulings of his predecessors. With his reputation as an upright judge, it had been a valid expectation that Justice Qazi Isa would uphold fundamental democratic rights and restore the credibility of the apex court – but like the earlier, CJs couldn't act differently.

PRE-POLL RIGGING?

Some observers pointed to what appeared to be pre-poll rigging in the run-up to the upcoming elections. There were notable actions against the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party and its leader, Imran Khan, particularly regarding the rejection of their nomination papers. This situation led to widespread allegations of '***election engineering***' and manipulative practices that could potentially favor certain political groups, casting doubts over the fairness of the electoral process.

[Electoral system of Pakistan: The 336 members of the National Assembly consist of 266 general seats elected by general voters in single-member constituencies, 60 seats reserved for women elected by proportional representation based on the number of general seats won by each party in each province, and ten seats reserved for non-Muslims elected through proportional representation based on the number of overall general seats won by each party.

The PTI government had passed a bill that required the next general elections to be held using EVMs (electronic voting machines). This was aimed at bringing an end to the allegations of rigging that have plagued previous elections in Pakistan, but the opposition's opinion was that it would make it easy for PTI to rig the elections in their favour through security loopholes; a write-up titled as '***PM vows to defeat the corrupt***'. Published in **The Express Tribune** dated 25th April 2021 is referred.

In 2022, when the PTI-led government was ousted through a successful vote of no-confidence in the National Assembly, the 11 opposition parties, some of them being long-time rivals, formed a new government and passed the Elections Amendment Bill, which nullified the use of EVMs in the next general elections.]

It may be of interest for some that on 25th July 2023, the total number of registered voters in Pakistan stood around 127 million as compared to 106 million (including 59.22 million men and 46.73 million women voters) in 2018, according to the data released by the ECP.

{FACTS: Till that date, the gender gap among voters reduced with the addition of 11.74 million women, compared to 9.28m male voters, to the electoral rolls since 2018 general elections, bringing the total number of registered voters in the country to around 127m from the erstwhile 106m.

The latest statistics released by the ECP showed that the difference between men and women of voting age stood at around 10m in the country, where women made up 49pc of the population.

More than 21m voters were added to the electoral rolls since the last general elections of 2018, as the number of women jumped from 46.73m in 2018 to 58.47m till ending July 2023 and the number of men swelled from 59.22m in 2018 to 68.50m.

The official data shows the number of registered voters in the country in 2018 was nearly 106m, including 59.22m men and 46.73m women voters. This difference of 12.49m, however, further increased to an all-time high of 12.72m next year when 62.55m men and 49.83m women became eligible to cast vote. A major drop in the gender gap was witnessed in 2022 when the total number of registered male voters fell from 66.50m to 66.40m, while the number of women jumped from 54.69m to 55.78m.}

In late September (2023), the ECP announced that the citizens over 18 can update their voter details until 25th October 2023. The ECP decided to “un-freeze” the electoral rolls to allow registered voters to rectify or update their details.

On 2nd November 2023; President Arif Alvi and the ECP came to an agreement on holding general elections on 8th February 2024, after a meeting was held in Aiwan-i-Sadr on the orders of the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP).

The SCP had instructed the ECP to consult with the President on the poll date.

On 15th December 2023, the ECP issued the election schedule; it's given in above paragraphs.

Coming back....

Looking at the elections 2024 in Pakistan, the intelligentsia couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel. What exactly were the political parties fighting for in the upcoming general elections? What were their plans? What promises were they willing to make to their constituents, the vast majority of whom were expecting significant improvement in their social and economic conditions after the elections if at all held smoothly?

The main contestants — the PTI, the PMLN and the PPP — largely avoided providing details about how they planned to conduct their governments. The PPP issued a 10-point to-do list it named as 'manifesto', but this could hardly be considered one given how lacking it was in details about how its ambitious promises were to be achieved. Meanwhile, the PMLN kept delaying the unveiling of its long-awaited manifesto, while the PTI made one abortive attempt before fresh challenges to its survival began consuming all its energies.

The arguments remained that the parties haven't had enough time to prepare. Additionally, Pakistan's economic troubles had been thoroughly dissected over the past year and a half, meaning each party's policy tsars had more than enough time and material to come up with their proposals on how best to address them: Clearly, nobody took much interest in doing their homework. The parties were greatly underestimating the burden they would receive if they come to power. Considering the plethora of challenges being faced by the country, navigating through deep mud was an uphill adventure.

BUT, in Pakistan who bothers to judge each party's suitability to govern at such a critical juncture in the country's history. Unfortunately, the bigger parties preferred the ad hoc approach: get power first, decide what to do with it later – pity on such leadership and then on the nation – comprising of irresponsible and mostly un-educated voters.