

## **Local Elections: Devolution of power to elites at grassroots**

**By Shafqat Munir**

Though four years are too less a time to judge apparently a new system of governance and democracy but Pakistan's recent experience of Devolution of Power Plan at local level proved to be the one that ultimately devolved power to elites instead of the grassroots people at local level. When first local bodies elections were held under Devolution Plan four years ago, nobody could have imagined that in the next elections stakes would be high and more power elite join the race.

The Devolution Plan, which replaced a relatively similar system that has been in place since 1800s, introduced concepts of devolution of political power, decentralization of administrative authority, de-concentration of management function, diffusion of the power-authority nexus and distribution of resources to the district level. All these five functions at close of the first term ended with a new power structure at district level that proved to be even more attractive for the power elite of Pakistan. Their stakes were high in the local bodies' elections of its kind under the plan for the second consecutive term.

In the new local government system at district level, even ministers and members of parliament took keen interest either to become district nazims themselves or install their relatives against such powerful posts. This 'big power game' in the second such local elections, introduced the excessive use of money and rigging tactics by the traditional 'establishment' backed power elites. The world media, analysts and people are witness to the facts that are enough to prove the manipulation in elections in two phases. Now for the third phase of city, tehsil and district nazims elections, it is taken as sure that only those who would be backed by the establishment would win and some nazims from opposition could also manage a few seats so that the establishment could hoodwink the world opinion saying nothing has been manipulated as opposition also got some seats.

It is only politically correct in Pakistan's electioneering context that the polling in the first and second phases of the local bodies' elections was fair, free and impartial and the opposition's claims of rigging were just routine allegations. But those who have closely monitored the process can make some real observations for the final analysis of what happened and what led to violence that claimed lives of over 30 people injuring hundreds across the country. The first phase was comparatively calm and peaceful but the second phase turned to be violent because this time rival groups showed resistance against rigging tactics used in the first phase. This resistance led to clashes and resulted in loss of precious lives. Another importance point is that women in large number of constituencies were not allowed to vote and contest elections. This aspect of elections has been widely condemned by independent observers and women groups.

The government's claim of a comfortable turnout could be partially true because in local bodies elections, thousands of local influential people take keen interest and they are directly involved in the elections while in general elections only a few hundred people take part in the elections process. This turnout cannot be used to conclude that this government is very popular among the masses. The real turnout is expressed through popular public participation in the general elections for a change at larger national level. In the recently concluded two phases of the local bodies elections 2005, majority of seats were claimed by the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Q) or their allies and the opposition

lost. Though in the second phase, in some constituencies, opposition has also gained some seats and in NWFP, Mutahida Majlis-e-Aml is in comfortable position. With completion of the two phases, now the third and final phase would see the height of power game that would lead towards formation of the district and tehsil governments. Already an in-fight is going on even within the ruling party to get their favourites installed.

If we see electioneering in Pakistan as a process, we feel that it is neither a democratic nor a people-centered rather an elitist and power-centered engineering that aims at power grabbing and not primarily focuses on ascertaining the people's will. Majority of the people believe that Pakistan's power elites are expert in election engineering and management but the people have really 'no say' as the so-called free for all referendums and successive elections have proved that elections in Pakistan are only managed to bring some allies and the elite in power.

The two phases of local bodies' elections have exposed some shortcomings that led to election engineering to benefit the government sponsored candidates. First of all the electoral lists used in the elections were not uniform as there were two types of voters lists. Some of the candidates were given photocopies of electoral lists used in the previous local bodies' elections (2000-2001) with some updates while some of the candidates were given 2002 lists. Voters' lists partially carry national identity card numbers. Many a voters coming from the opposition camps complained that they could not trace their name in the voters list and hence they could not cast their vote.

National Identity Cards (NIC) proved to be a potential election engineering tool as both old and new computerized cards were declared valid to cast votes. It is a fact that since inception of National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), all fresh or duplicate identity cards are made by this authority. But in the elections, thousands of fresh identity cards made on the old patron were in circulation at almost all the polling stations. Actually these bogus NICs were confiscated at certain polling stations in hundreds. A voter caught with such a freshly made old style bogus identity card at a polling station told this writer that the card was given to him by a key aide of a government sponsored candidate in Southern Punjab. Later inquiry into such bogus NICs revealed that these specially produced cards were distributed among voters or proxy voters almost in all leading constituencies to ensure victory for the "powered" (officially backed) candidates.

'Money for votes' also played as tool and the "powered" candidates distributed money among the poor voters and done some instant development work in the constituencies. The balloting procedure has been too complicated both for the candidates and voters. Full union council (UC) with more than 10,000 voters has been used to be a single constituency for nazim, naib nazim and councilors but their roles and powers are different. All the candidates have to contest union council elections across the UC and not in the specified constituencies. Councilors are declared elected on top score basis. This has proved really unfair as a councilor having vote bank in one specific area (formerly known as local body constituency) needed to campaign in other areas fall across the union council. This tricky scheme provides room for maneuvering for those who have either the official backing or have too much money to contest even a local councilor's election.

Six confusing ballot papers also provide space for rigging as voters get confused with a lot of ballot papers with dozens of election symbols. Reports from several union councils say even elections symbols of a number of opposition backed candidates did not appear on the ballot papers. A number of voters told this writer that they stamped two to four election symbols on a ballot paper as they want that these two, three or four should win the polls. Similarly, they also left some of ballot papers blank. This confusing balloting in a country where a large majority is illiterate proves to be counter productive as it opens up avenue for those who are trained in engineering techniques to win elections. Some of the candidates took advantage of this six ballot papers by asking those voters whom they had paid money to bring along certain required ballot papers and hand over to certain candidates or their staff so that they could ensure that these were stamped on the symbol for which they had paid money. After receiving such ballots from these voters, they manage to poll them in the ballot boxes through their staunch workers. The six-ballot procedures were the single largest cause of cancellation of a large number of votes at almost all the polling stations.

Moreover, it is an open secret that almost all the government ministers and chief ministers were busy in election campaigns and engineering. Those who have been returned to union councils are considered to be hailing from those groups who have now been branded by the government as “moderates and enlightened”. They are almost the same groups and families which had sided with the Islamization and extremism of Late Gen Ziaul Haq. Actually they are ‘the power elite’ who want to remain in power and side with those who manage to bring them into power right from local to national levels.

The government’s claims of having attained popularity among the masses and the assumption that the masses have rejected the opposition in the local bodies’ elections need to be substantiated by credibility. A government’s credibility is judged by its pro-people actions and relief efforts and the rejection of the opposition is also judged by its relevant actions. We need to analyze whether the two have been fulfilling this criteria. Opposition’s role is obvious but there is no reason to believe that the government is so popular that it emerged as the leading party having mandate at local level as the government seems failed in delivering any relief to the people. Prices of daily use items including petrol and unemployment are high manifold; welfare aspect of the state is going to minimum level while repressive mechanism is on rise. Poverty is growing rapidly; real incomes are decreasing while only the officially engineered data is used to hoodwink the people. Who is going to believe that the country’s two popular political parties (Pakistan People’s Party and Pakistan Muslim League-N) that have been in power twice and have credit and discredit on their part have lost their vote bank. How long could we continue with such an engineered power brokering? We sincerely need to go for a real elections if we want to see Pakistan progressing.

If we look at the other side of local government system in Pakistan, we find that though the power has been devolved to elites even at local level, yet benefits of this system in terms of social and infrastructural development reached to the people at grassroots level. Several water supply schemes, provision of civic amenities and small scale participation in decision making have raised common men’s stakes in the local bodies’ elections. As a nutshell, we can say that local government system too some extent could address the issue of poverty in Pakistan’s less developed areas. Apart from electioneering, the local

government system has some inbuilt positive things that include the idea of Citizen Community Boards (CCBs). The CCBs are responsible to generate 20% local resources to get 80% matching funds from the government for education, sanitation, potable water and local level development and community work. The last four years' experience tells that CCBs could not properly work due to lack of capacity and ownership. In the second phase of their existence, if CCBs work properly, we can hope that they can play a vital role to eradicate poverty from their respected areas.

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