

The Old and the New in Naya Pakistan

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The victory of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's party, the geographically fragmented verdict, the lack of a clear ideological distinction between the political parties in the fray and the poor showing of progressive, left wing forces - suggest that there are part things "new" and part things "old" in Pakistani politics following the election results in 2013.

The main slogan for the May 2013 Pakistan elections, was one of change, for a *naya* (new) Pakistan. In important ways, the 2013 elections were as important and as critical as the 1988 elections which began the process of electoral politics - albeit not democracy - in Pakistan after a long, dark and cruel military dictatorship. This time round, in 2013, while the transition, the first ever from a democratically elected government to another, is very different compared to 1988, the importance of a break from the past, is perhaps more powerful than that of the 1988 elections.

Breaking from the Past

There are numerous obvious examples of what is new in these elections and the many breaks from the past. For a start, perhaps the most important aspect of these elections was, that for the first time a democratically elected government held free and fair elections in Pakistan - albeit with allegations and proof of rigging in some polling stations. Moreover, the democratically elected government of 2008-13, willingly accepted its failure and congratulated the winning parties, and for the first time in Pakistan, a fully civilian government - no signs of Pakistan's model of praetorian democracy at play here - handed over power as per the Constitution to a caretaker government which is expected to pass on power to the elected governments in Pakistan by the end of this week. Given Pakistan's histories of military intervention, control, meddling, oversight, and much else, all these firsts are by themselves, quite a remarkable achievement. While perhaps anticipated and somewhat expected in many ways given the apparent trends and signs since 2007 and again in 2010,¹ nevertheless, it is always still surprising in Pakistan's context that this process happened without the military's interference.

What is also new, is that, Nawaz Sharif is about to be sworn in as Pakistan's first prime minister to be elected to that office for the third time, a record which is unlikely to be broken for many years to come. Equally refreshing, is the fact that the military general who

removed Nawaz Sharif from office in October 1999 and became Pakistan's chief executive, and forced Nawaz Sharif into many years of exile, is today in a Pakistani jail. It is not often that one can celebrate the fact that Pakistan's former president/general, the former Chief of the Army Staff, is under arrest and investigation by Pakistani courts, ironically by many of the lawyers of the Supreme Court who sanctified general Pervez Musharraf's coup in October 1999. While there is speculation that Musharraf will be allowed to "get away", even this temporary judicial and public humiliation, is an important first in Pakistan.

New, also, is the fact that almost all experts got the results of the elections very wrong. Barring just a handful, the results announced by a large and wide variety of analysts, all suggested that no single party would win enough seats to form a government on its own, and like the two previous governments, Pakistan's next government would also be a coalition government. Nawaz Sharif surprised everyone by winning enough seats in the end to form a government which is formed largely by his own party, and by some new entrants who have joined him after the elections.

Not only that, one can also argue, that Nawaz Sharif is probably - one should always be cautious about making predictions about Pakistan - the first prime minister since Z A Bhutto in 1971, who ought to see a full term of five years ahead of him. All elected governments after Z A Bhutto - there have been seven - have been sworn in and functioned under the dark clouds of the Pakistan military, often with a serving general as President of Pakistan or with help from the notorious Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). Nawaz Sharif, at the moment at least, seems to be free of such fetters, again, a novel way to start the term of a democratically elected government in Pakistan.

Other equally new developments include the rise and fall of two parties, one new, the other old. For the first time since 1968, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) did not have a leader leading it into the elections, the 10th since 1970. Not only was there just no leader, there was no Bhutto to lead the party, clearly one of the two factors which led to the party, again for the very first time, receiving the third, rather than the second, highest number of votes.² Since 1970, the PPP has been either in government or in opposition as a formidable force lead articulately by a Bhutto. Not this time. Likewise, probably the most newest of all new trends of the 2013 elections - again a new phenomenon not seen since 1985 when the Muhajir Qaumi Movement became a major political force in Karachi - has been the emergence of former national cricket team captain Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik Insaaf (PTI).

The fact that 56% of the electorate voted, the highest proportion since 1970, must rest on the emergence of a second (or third) force on the political map of Pakistan. The PTI received 18% of the popular vote, converting into 24 National Assembly seats and the ability to form government in the highly important and sensitive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This, from a party which had only one member of the national assembly and only one member of the provincial assembly in 2002, and none in the previous elections of 2008 as the PTI boycotted

Musharraf's elections. By all accounts, much credit for bringing out the elite as well as this diverse category being called "the youth" as voters, goes to Imran Khan's highly motivated and inspiring political campaign, although perhaps not so much his political imagination - see below.

The PTI also deserves credit for becoming one of the few political parties to confront the major political force in Karachi, the MQM (Muttahida Qaumi Movement). Others have arisen and failed, yet numerous members contesting the elections on the PTI ticket from Karachi were brave enough to challenge and confront the hold of a party variously described in the past as "militant", "authoritarian", "fascist", and with such other epithets. It is certainly no mean achievement to stand up to the MQM in Karachi, suggesting perhaps that the party may be losing its hold on the city. The fact that the PTI received as many as 30,000 votes from the heartland of the MQM in Karachi, signifies a shift in the politics of Karachi, and also shows that even entrenched political parties can be challenged.

The end of ideologies?

In the past, it has been possible to suggest some sort of ideological divide between political parties in Pakistan. The PPP was seen to be "progressive" by many, Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN) socially conservative with an Islamic bent, the Awami National Party (ANP) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as the nationalist Pakhtun party of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his heirs, and of course, the Islamists parties as just that. The 2013 elections have made such categories very fuzzy, and what is leftist, rightist, and especially conservative in the course of political ideology, has become very blurred and far more complicated than one envisages.

Take the argument doing the rounds in Pakistan which suggests that a "right wing wave" has swept Pakistan's recent general elections. The arithmetic based on the numbers of seats won and votes cast, would suggest that conservative parties have won the election, and this in turn would also suggest, at least at first glance, that Pakistanis have consciously shifted to, and chosen, conservative and right wing candidates. Clearly, such analysis simplifies electoral choices and does not fully explain Pakistan's apparent, and differentiated, turn to the right.

By all accounts, the numbers are persuasive and do support these conclusions. At the national level, Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz has received 35% of votes and Pakistan Tehreek Insaf 17.8%. If we add some of the Islamist parties such as the Jamaat Islami and Fazlur Rahman's Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUJIF), and not counting the minor parties, then the total votes received by parties which are conservative - and there ought to be no two views about them being conservative - at least 57% of the votes cast went to such parties, whether overtly Islamist or conservative of a different kind. If one wants to distinguish non-conservative parties, and include the PPP, ANP and MQM in this group - clearly a highly problematic proposition to call them liberal and secular given the nature of

their politics - but just for the sake of the argument, then these three parties received merely 23% of the popular vote.

Such analysis ignores many of the nuances which have had an effect on Pakistan's elections. One needs to examine the votes cast in light of broader factors. Take the case of the PMLN. It won resoundingly in the Punjab, perhaps not because there was a sudden lurch towards conservatism, but perhaps because the previous PMLN government at the province was seen by the voters as a party of choice worth investing in again. Re-electing a political party is not an ideological swing, but just reaffirms faith in that party. The PMLN was reelected in Punjab because the perception of the electorate was that the party had delivered whatever they felt was necessary. Of course, there was also a strong anti-PPP sentiment for its failure to govern at the federal level, which added to the PMLN getting more votes overall. The PPP in Punjab was also a leaderless party, which didn't help its cause much. The bastion of the PPP, southern Punjab, also collapsed on account of poor politics and poor governance.

In Khyber Pakhtunkwa, where the PTI made extraordinary inroads, it is again difficult to sustain the argument that these were consciously political choices in favour of an Islamic conservatism. Having dismissed both of the last two elected governments in 2002 and 2008, the Pakhtunkhwa electorate has only shown its commitment to address problems of Islamic militancy in the province, by choosing the party it best feels able to do so. The fact that their choice is the conservative PTI, is a reflection of how the PTI has promised to deal with drones, the Taliban, and other militant factors. To suggest that this is also an ideological "right wing" choice, is only partially correct.

A distinction needs to be made about the different types of conservatism in Pakistan and the electorates' choice of such politics. For instance, there is no doubt that Islamic political parties, such as the JUIF and the JI, are conservative because of their understanding and politics based on religion. About the PMLN, one is probably not wrong in calling it a European Christian Democratic party or one closer to Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP), rather than to the Muslim Brotherhood. The PTI, most of the time exudes the worst forms of conservatism and in many ways is an English-speaking Jamaat Islami, but also talks about issues not very dissimilar to those of the PMLN. In terms of administrative reform and governance, it sounds more like World Bank right wing technocratic crusaders, rather than Islamist ideologues, although by joining its twin (the Jamaat Islami) to form the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, perhaps its real colours will be revealed.

The corporate, so called "good governance" conservative agenda of both the PMLN and the PTI - which none of the so-called liberal parties articulated - distinguishes them from Islamist political conservatism, and may have been a choice of the electorate in terms of service delivery, and is different from what is normally called conservatist politics in Muslim majoritarian countries. Moreover, specific and local issues of politics may have also had a strong impact on how voters have voted.

The argument that Pakistan has moved to the right politically, or that the elections show a rise of politically and ideologically conscious conservatism, needs to be differentiated for its layered distinctiveness. Moreover, which party supports which ideology, also becomes a little problematic. For instance, the PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is imagined as a largely conservative political party, while it is seen as being progressive and “enlightened” by many who voted for it in Karachi. However, even if voters may not have made a conscious choice for conservatism, whether Islamic or of the “good governance” variety, such choices bring numerous unintended consequences which have far reaching ramifications on society and politics, and perhaps the distinctiveness of ideological moorings will be better exposed as political praxis proceeds. Nevertheless, questions about which party supports which political ideology, remain largely unclear in the *naya* Pakistan.

Remnants of the Old

If anyone was tuned into Pakistan’s growing and vibrant virtual social media, the verdict was clear: Imran Khan would sweep the elections and become prime minister. Not just social media, but the electronic media too, was caught up in a hype of the PTI, where the potential election tally was raised each passing day as Imran Khan became perhaps the most vibrant and potent symbol of Pakistan’s elections. Nevertheless, Imran Khan’s tsunami turned out to be a virtual wave, rather than a real one. As some bloggers have confessed, the social media is an echo chamber which simply repeats itself and gives itself self-importance, believing only in itself. Anyone following different products of the virtual media would have indeed been led to believe that this new form of politics – dare one call what happens on social media as political – trumped the old form of real and hard campaigning and contact with real people. However, in the last elections, in the real world, it was the old, real, form which scored over the new and the virtual.

Despite the resounding victory of Nawaz Sharif, the electoral map of Pakistan continues to show a highly fragmented picture of regionalisation. Although the PMLN can claim that it has won seats in all four of Pakistan’s provinces, its victory in Pakistan rests almost exclusively on its victory in the Punjab. Similarly, although the PTI has won 27 seats, 16 of these are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. With the MQM and PPP in Sindh, the PMLN in the Punjab and PTI in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan’s’ politics reflects a deep fragmentation. Balochistan, as always, with the lowest turnout from any region, remains even further fragmented, with no single party anywhere near a majority, unlike the three provinces. With the lowest of the voter turn-out, in some constituencies politicians were elected with less than a thousand votes.

New expectations from the Old

Nawaz Sharif is not the fresh face of the elections which supporters of PTI had hoped for, and has been in electoral politics since 1985. He is an old hand, if ever there was one, having been dismissed twice as prime minister of Pakistan, the last time when he even had a

so-called heavy mandate, with a two-thirds' majority in parliament. However, Pakistan has changed fundamentally since Nawaz Sharif was last prime minister in significant and, perhaps, permanent ways, some better and some which clearly reveal retrogression of the worst kinds. Despite being an "old hand", indications so far, are that Nawaz Sharif has changed radically since his earlier days as Pakistan's prime minister.

The terms being used in the media to describe Nawaz Sharif compared to 14 years ago, include those which suggest that he has matured, learnt his lessons, become wiser, more accommodative, and other such positive terms to describe his new politics. There is ample evidence that these flattering terms are well deserved. Not just in 2013, but since 2007 when he returned to Pakistan after his exile, and especially as Pakistan's "friendly opposition" during the last government's tenure, Nawaz Sharif has done as much in protecting Pakistan's fragile democracy as has President Asif Ali Zardari. Both have put their personal differences apart and have been committed to strengthening democracy from all kinds of hostile forces, such as Islamic militants as well as Pakistan's military establishments and its many surrogates.³ The past history of the PPP and Nawaz Sharif throughout the 1990s was one of putting each other down, and looking to the military to oust the incumbent and replace it with the ever-ready opposition-in-waiting. Perhaps Pakistan's democrats have learnt some lessons.

When one thinks of the "old" Pakistan, perhaps the one single institution which comes to mind, is the military. It has ruled Pakistan directly for 33 years, and has ruled indirectly for another 11. In the last five years, since 2008, its overbearing presence in the political life of Pakistan has been partially marginalised, at least for the moment. Nevertheless, despite the rise of new institutions, such as the media, judiciary and Parliament, few would be hasty to dismiss the military as a powerful, perhaps even the most powerful, institution of Pakistan. Hence, Nawaz Sharif's pronouncements of how he is going to deal with the military, suggest a confidence not shown by any leader in the past except Z A Bhutto. This is probably not simply bravado and there have been enough indications from Nawaz Sharif, that he expects to be the civilian head of all institutions in the country. Whatever the eventual outcome, the old seems to be looking like something new.

The same, and linked to it, has been his announcements which have been frank and outright, that Pakistan will befriend India, perhaps like never before. It is important to point out, a point missed by many, that India does not feature in the politics - and certainly in its electoral politics - of Pakistan. It did not in either the 2002 or 2008 elections, and given Pakistan's numerous and multifaceted problems, one didn't hear much of India in the 2013 elections either. If anything, the right-wing press castigated Nawaz Sharif for being soft on India. Again, much of the old changes.

Conclusions

To say that the 2013 elections have been the most fascinating since 1988, is an

understatement. Even though some parties which had been in power in the past were reelected, one cannot deny that even the old is now showing numerous signs of a newness. Whether it is Nawaz Sharif, or even the MQM in Karachi embarrassed and in retreat, or the military, at least in retreat, or the PPP completely decimated, electoral politics in Pakistan has had a significant impact on challenging and perhaps even altering, old ideologies and outcomes. The public discourse of politics in Pakistan has also undergone change, where the virtual sphere has formed false and comfortable ideologies and self-indulgent self-believers. The terms which existed in political circles for many years, particularly amongst the lower and middle urban classes, and perhaps particularly in Karachi, highlighting social, cultural and class distinctions, such as *burger and bun-kebab*, have found widespread expression in the political public sphere as well. Pakistan's political discourse and perhaps even its narratives have also been changing.

Whether such articulation, expectation and promise, brings about a *naya* Pakistan, still needs to be seen. The more important question, however, knowing that not all newness is necessarily desirable - and clearly, there is much in the new which one would rather not have - is what exactly will be this *naya* Pakistan? With the clear absence of left-leaning and progressive alternatives similar to those which appeared after years of military dictatorship and after some initial years of conservative and right-wing democratic politics across Latin America, for many reasons, unfortunately, one fears that the best *naya* Pakistan might do, is look a little like Turkey, and not at all like Brazil.

[1](#) See S Akbar Zaidi, 'Is Pakistan Collapsing?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 46, No 25, 2011.

[2](#) Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated prior to the 2008 elections, but she lead the party into those elections and the party received a fair share of sympathy votes on account of her assassination.

[3](#) S Akbar Zaidi, 'Resilience in Pakistan's Democracy? The Tahir-ul Qadri Episode', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 48 No 5, 2013.