

General Election in Pakistan: A critical study

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An election is a critical component of democratic governance. In the formation of an elected government, elections play a decisive role. The Election Commission of Pakistan derives its authority from the constitution of Pakistan 1973. It deals with conducting elections in constitutional intervals. The Chief Election Commissioner of Pakistan is the head of this institution. However, the forty-eight-year electoral history of Pakistan is full of accusations, rigging, and malpractices. The defeating parties do not accept the electoral results that create uncertainty, political instability, and erode democracy. The paper examines the "Part VIII of the constitution of Pakistan." It delves into the electoral history and critically evaluates the role of subsequent elected governments in manoeuvring the disagreements over the results of the General Election. It argues with electoral reforms and analyses their applicability in the next general elections. It answers why these reforms did not resolve electoral issues. The paper contributes to clarifying ambiguities that persist with elections. It identifies issues and suggests recommendations to make the electoral process transparent. This research is conducted using various approaches, i.e., critical, analytical, deductive, and qualitative.

Keywords: constitution, democratic governance, vote, rigging, political instability

In a modern state, citizens keep themselves involved in governance through the representatives they elect through the election. The election legitimises a person's assignment to an office of authority in the state. The electoral system establishes a link among the citizens, government, and lawmakers. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is an independent institution. The Constitution of Pakistan stipulates the role and responsibilities of the election commission and specifies the electoral laws. With all constitutional directions, the election process remained controversial in Pakistan. The recurrent practices during elections are targeted killings of rival political parties, allegations of fraud, fake vote casting, attacks on polling stations, and pre-poll rigging. The elected governments have made several amendments and introduced reforms and Acts to overcome these issues to make elections transparent, but their efforts did not yield effective results. In 2017 the legislative body passed a bill regarding Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and the right of overseas Pakistani to cast a vote. There was a consensus among all political parties to initiate pilot projects for these two developments. The subsequent government passed the Election Second Amendment Bill 2021, approved EVMs in the 2023 election, and fulfilled an old demand of overseas Pakistanis to cast a vote. However, there was a political change in Pakistan, and the new government passed another Amendment Bill in 2022 that reversed all the progress. Neither the usage of EVMs nor overseas Pakistanis would be allowed to cast a vote in the 2023 general Elections.

Elections: in the Constitution of Pakistan

The constitution is a supreme law of every state. It embodies fundamental principles to govern a country. In the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, Part VIII deals with Elections. It states all aspects of the election commissioner, election commission, electoral laws and conduct of elections. The Part is divided into two Chapters, the first deals with "Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissions." It has nine Articles from 213 to 221. The second chapter deals with "Electoral laws and Conduct of Elections." It has five Articles from 222-226.

Chapter 1, Article 213 states that the President shall appoint the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) (Rizvi, 2002). A high court or supreme court judge would be elected for this position. The Chief Election Commissioner shall serve the office for three years (p.1260). According to Article 214, the Chief Justice of Pakistan shall take the CEC oath. The CEC's term is set to be three years in the following Article. Article 216 bars the CEC from holding any other lucrative position while serving Pakistan. Then it provides that in the absence of the CEC, a Supreme Court judge appointed by Pakistan's Chief Justice shall act as Commissioner. Article 218 deals with the establishment of an election commission to conduct elections in a fair, just, and honest manner. The preparation of election rules is addressed in Article 219. Article 220 is to assist the Commissioner, and the Election Commission shall be the duty of all executive authorities. In the subsequent Article, "until (Majlis-e-Shoora) Parliament by law otherwise provides, the Commissioner may, with the President's assent, establish regulations governing the appointment of officers and employees for use in connection with the Commissioner's or an Election Commission's duties as well as the terms and conditions of their employment (p.1267)."

Chapter 2, Article 222 specifies seat distribution in the National Legislature, constituency delineation by the Election Commission, compilation of electoral rolls, election administration, and election petitions; the decision of doubts and disputes, and matters related to corrupt practices (p.1268). The next Article put a bar against double membership, i.e., both houses (p. 1271). Article 224 states that in line with election and bye-election when the National Assembly or a provincial assembly is dissolved, a bye-election shall be conducted within sixty days prior to the day on which the term of the assembly is scheduled to expire. A general election for the assembly shall be held within ninety days, and the results shall be announced no later than fourteen days after the election. 2) No sooner than thirty days prior to the expiration of the members of the Senate's terms, elections shall be held to the vacant positions in the Senate (p. 1273)." Article 225 is related to election disputes (p. 1277), and the following Article avers the mode of election to be by secret ballot (p.1283).

Election in Pakistan: through the prism of history

General elections have been held ten times in Pakistan since the adoption of the third Constitution on August 14, 1973. The first was held in 1977 under Justice Sajjad Ahmad Jan, the Election Commissioner of Pakistan. The Pakistan Peoples Party won a resounding victory, obtaining 155 out of 200 seats in the National Assembly. The opposition parties established the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), which won only 36 seats (Volume 2 Index of Electoral Record: 1977, 2013).

The political upheaval again directed the country to third martial law, enforced on July 5, 1977. The Chief Martial Law Administrator put the constitution in abeyance. The second general election was held under Martial Law in 1985. Justice S. A. Nusrat, Judge of the Supreme Court, was the CEC (Report on the General Elections 1988, 1988). He served seven years from March 1982 to April 1989, contrary to the constitutional period of three years. He was the author

of General Zia's Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO). He supervised the presidential referendum in 1984 and the elections of 1985 and 1988. He did not earn the repute for holding local or general elections in a fair, free and transparent manner. After passing the 8th Amendment in 1985, General Zia restored the 1973 constitution. The amendment authorised him to designate the Chief Election Commissioner.

The third general election was held in 1988 and proved to be free and fair (H. Khan, 2011). There was some displeasure about the requirement of voter identification cards (CNIC) and suspicions of manipulation in some places, but these were by and large reported impartial (Zafarullah & Akhter, 2001). In 1990 the fourth general election was conducted between two alliances, the Peoples Democratic Alliance (PDA) and Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI). The election was accused of widespread rigging. On October 6, 1993, the fifth general election was held, but the results dissatisfied all political leaders because of the split decision.

The PML-N won the sixth general election held on February 3, 1997, by a decisive number of two-thirds of the National Assembly members. It was the second time in the history of Pakistan that a party earned such a large majority. ("The General Election in Pakistan, February 3 1997," 1997). In this election, a new political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), participated for the first time. However, out of 134 candidates for national seats, no one came in at even the runner-up position. Imran Khan was the candidate who received the most votes as he polled just over 10,000 votes in two of the nine seats that he contested. As per international observers, the elections met the minimum requirements but were not free and fair.

On October 10, 2002, a general election was held under General Pervaiz Musharraf, who lessened the voter's age from 21 to 18 years (K. A. Khan, 2011). He executed a coup d'état on October 12, 1999, and the constitution of 1973 was once again suspended. The leaders of two major political parties, the PPP and the PML-N were exiled. A new faction PML-Q, from PML-N, has arisen in the election. Musharraf endorsed support to this new faction, which won the general election in 2002.

Justice (ret'd) Qazi Mohammad Farooq became the CEC in 2006, committed to holding elections as per international demand (I. Khan et al., 2021). Musharraf called for the eighth general election in 2007. A settlement was reached on October 5, 2007, known as the National Reconciliation Order (NRO) (F. Khan, 2016) that provided immunity to public officials accused of corruption between 1986 and 1999 ("Shahbaz Joins Legal Battle against NRO," 2007). Following the signing of the NRO, the leadership of two major political parties returned to Pakistan. The PPP chairperson Benazir Bhutto landed on October 18, 2007, and Nawaz Sharif on November 25, 2007, to participate in the general election 2008. Unfortunately, the PPP chairperson was slain on December 27, 2007, during the election campaign. The election was postponed from January 8 to February 18, 2008. The Pakistan Peoples Party earned the most seats, but not enough to establish an independent government. It established a government coalition. President Pervez Musharraf resigned due to the threat of impeachment on August 18, 2008 (Perlez, 2008). The widower of Benazir Bhutto, Asif Ali Zardari became the President of Pakistan on September 5, 2008. He easily won a parliamentary vote (Shah & Tran, 2008).

Table 1 below presents the election year, winning party, the opposition party, voters' turnout, electoral dissensions, and dissolution of the National Assembly.

Table. 1*General Election in Pakistan under the Constitution of 1973 (1977-2008)*

Election Year	Winning Party	Opposition Party	Voter turnout	Electoral dissentions	Dissolution of the National Assembly
March 7, 1977	PPP	Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), nine parties	55 %	PNA rejected the election results	The National Assembly dissolved on January 10, 1977
February 28, 1985	Election on a non-party basis	Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD)	52.93%,	the main opposition alliance (MRD) boycotted the polls	premature dissolution on May 29 1988
November 16, 1988	PPP	Islamic Democratic Alliance (II)	43%.	Free and impartial, accepted by all political parties	premature dissolution on August 6, 1990
October 24 1990-1993	Islami Jamhoori Ittehad_(IJI)	Peoples Democratic Alliance (PDA)	40%	fraudulent election to defeat PDA	premature dissolution on April 18, 1993
October 6 1993-1997	PPP (after securing support from minor parties and independents)	PML-N	40.54% (Khan 2011, p. 426)	no serious irregularities	premature dissolution on November 5, 1997
February 3, 1997-1999	PML-N	PPP	36%	Election met basic conditions	Military coup on October 12, 1999
October 10 2002	PML-Q		40.59% (The Herald Magazine, November 2002)	Seriously flawed	Constitutional tenure completed on November 15, 2007
February 18 2008	PPP	PML-N	45%	Free and fair	Completed five years on March 16, 2013

Source: The data in the table is collected from the reports on the General Elections available on the Election Commission of Pakistan website. <http://www.ecp.gov.pk/frmGenericPage.aspx?PageID=3274>

Electoral reforms: 2008-2013

After nine years, the civilian government took office. The Pakistan Peoples Party, that formed government in the centre, was determined to restore the original constitution and incorporate certain amendments in Part VIII to improve the integrity, impartiality, and transparency of the electoral process; it initiated working on the eighteenth amendment. Following the parliamentary procedure, it was endorsed by the President on April 19, 2010 (Shah, 2010). General Zia and Musharraf had distorted the Constitution. The 18th amendment made the CEC's appointment more transparent and subject to parliamentary oversight. In the past, the President had sole authority in appointing the CEC and the four members of the Election Commission. The Prime Minister (PM) and the opposition leader in the National Assembly shall now consult on the issue, which shall then be examined by a joint parliamentary committee formed of legislators from the ruling or coalition parties and an equal number from the opposition will make the final decision. Furthermore, the 18th Amendment set up a sufficiently self-contained ECP, and a method for holding elections under an interim setup was also devised.

The eighteenth amendment amended Article 48, falls in Part III, and deals with "The President." It is related to the appointment of a caretaker cabinet. From Part VIII, Chapter 1, amended Articles 213, 215,216,218, 219, 221, and from Chapter 2, Articles 224 and 226 were amended (The Constitution (Eighteenth Amendment) Act, 2010, 2010).

To enhance electoral integrity, the twentieth Amendment Bill was passed on February 28, 2012. It established a neutral caretaker government with an independent Election Commission to oversee polls (Adil & Afridi, 2020). A neutral caretaker setup was not a novel concept; PPP and PNA had proposed it in 1977. The amendment provided that a caretaker government would take control and convene general elections in ninety days at the end of the National Assembly's five-year constitutional term. Within three days, the caretaker PM and his cabinet will be chosen by a parliamentary committee consisting of four Treasury officials and four opposition members. The provinces would go through the same process. The Election Commission will appoint the caretaker PM if the parliamentary committee fails to elect him in three days.

The 20th amendment amended Article 214, 215, 216, 218, and 219 from chapter 1 of Part VIII, and in chapter 2, a sub-article 224A was inserted entitled "Resolution by Committee or Election Commission ("Senate Approves 20th Amendment Bill after Consensus," 2012)It ensures that if the PM and Opposition Leader do not come to a final naming decision for the caretaker prime minister, the matter shall be referred to a parliamentary committee with four members from each party to finalise the decision on the caretaker PM's appointment. The caretaker setup must be unbiased and free of any political attachments.

Another change was made to the Constitution's Second Schedule. "Election Commission of Pakistan" was substituted for "Chief Election Commissioner(The Constitution (Twentieth Amendment) Act, 2012, 2012)." The Constitution's Third Schedule was also amended. The words "or A MEMBER OF THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN" put after the term "COMMISSIONER" in the title (p.97).

The government constituted after the 2008 general election was constitutionally dissolved on March 16, 2013. It was a time to evaluate the applicability of legislative revisions.

General Election 2013: applicability of electoral amendments

According to Article 52, "The National Assembly shall continue for a term of five years from the day of its first meeting, unless sooner dissolved, and shall stand dissolved at the end of its tenure." After February 2008 general election, on March 17, the first session of the National Assembly was convened. At midnight on March 16, 2013, the National Assembly was dissolved constitutionally (Gishkori, 2013). It was the first assembly that completed a constitutional term. Article 224(Clause:1) required general elections to be held within 60 days to carry on the democratic process.

The 18th Amendment mandated collective decision-making in the appointment of the CEC, a parliamentary process that involved the opposition instead of only presidential discretion. According to the 20th amendment, Prime Minister and the opposition leader had to agree upon a caretaker PM within three days. Both tabled three names ("Parliamentary Committee Constituted to Select Caretaker PM," 2013), and the PM remained in his seat without cabinet members until a caretaker PM was selected. However, the PM and the opposition leader disagreed on the name of a caretaker PM, and the matter was moved on to an eight-member parliamentary committee composed of former National Assembly members. The committee was formed of four representatives from each administration, and the opposition (constituted by the speaker as per constitutional provisions inserted under the 20th amendment) would have to decide on the caretaker PM within three days, failing which the matter would go to the ECP. The committee also failed to elect the caretaker PM and finally the ECP had to enter into this political matter, which made the Commission controversial. It was not new in Pakistan's politics that politicians themselves could not rise above their personal and party interests. The ECP had to choose one of the six proposed names ("Caretaker PM: Political Disharmony," 2013). All the mainstream

parties proved unable to draw consensus over this significant issue. It further indicated that the pool of politicians in Pakistan was too incompetent to bring forth a person, being not objectionable for a caretaker PM. It was also embarrassing for the bastion of Parliament's supremacy that failed to find a man up to the mark (2013).

The ECP elected retired justice Mir Hazar Khan Khoso as caretaker PM on March 25, 2013 (Khan et al., 2019), by a 4-1 majority. The CEC, Fakhruddin G. Ibrahim, who was then 84 years old, announced the name of a caretaker PM. Mir Hazar Khan Khoso, also 84, was the first caretaker PM to be chosen under the 20th constitutional amendment.

The next general election was held on May 11, 2013, and the following day protest began in Karachi and Lahore against the election results. An opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), had reservations over the results of 25 National Assembly seats (Gishkori, 2013). The Party head raised allegations of systematic rigging and asked the ECP on May 15 to order recounting of votes, with forensic examination of voters' thumb impressions, in four constituencies of the National Assembly "to regain public confidence in the elections." He also asked ECP to remove reservations three days before announcing the results (Malik, 2013). The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), established in 2006, also not found discernible improvement in polling station management. It reported that unprecedented anomalies persisted, including polling officials interfering with voting and unauthorised people in polling booths and stations (2013 *General Elections Observation and Analysis of Election Day Processes*, 2013). The other two main political parties were also found dissatisfied with the results. The PML-N, that won the election, claimed that rigging took place in Sindh, and the PPP said it was the returning officers' election. Hence all parties declared the election controversial (Media Talk of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, 2020). A three-judge inquiry commission rejected the PTI allegations. A 237-page report wrote that despite some lapses on the part of ECP, "the 2013 general elections were in large part organised and conducted fairly and in accordance with the law (Malik, 2015)." However, the verdict did not satisfy the opposition parties.

Electoral reforms during 2013-2018

The next civilian government also passed an amendment and Election Act 2017. The 22nd Constitution Amendment Bill was signed by the President on June 8, 2016, after being passed by the two houses of the Parliament. This amendment made bureaucrats, government officers and technocrats eligible for appointment as the CEC and members of ECP in addition to serving or retired judges of apex courts ("President Approves 22nd Constitution Amendment," 2016). Previously, only former Supreme Court or High Court judges were qualified to become CEC members. The 22nd Amendment amended Articles 213, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 221 and 222 (The Constitution (Twenty-Second Amendment) Act. 2016, 2016). It also sets the maximum age limit for the CEC and members of the ECP at 68 and 65 years, respectively (Mohal, 2016). A Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reforms (PCER) was also constituted on July 25, 2014. Ensuing detailed deliberations extending over about three years, the Electoral Reforms Package was put forth by the PCER to the Parliament for approval in 2017 ("The Elections Act, 2017 An Overview," 2018).

Elections Act, 2017

For further improvement in the general elections, the "Elections Act 2017" was passed by the Parliament on October 2, 2017, with barely ten months till the National Assembly's term ended. The Act introduced new election regulations with 15 chapters and 241 provisions, providing financial and administrative autonomy for PEC ("Major Reforms Approved in Elections Bill 2017," 2017). The final section 241 of the Act repealed eight election laws and

strengthened the ECP by making it independent and autonomous. The eight laws were consolidated in this Act included "Electoral Rolls Act 1974, Delimitation of Constituencies Act 1974, Senate Election Act 1975; Representation of the People Act 1976, Election Commission Order 2002, Conduct of General Elections Order 2002, Political Parties Order 2002, and Allocation of Symbols Order 2002 (*The Gazette of Pakistan*, 2017) ." The PML-N government had to face public outrage over the changes made in sections 7B and 7C of the Conduct of General Elections Order, 2002. The change was made in the declaration form of the public office holders. The ruling party was accused of the legislation that removed the requirement of the declaration regarding *Khatm-e-Nabuwwat* (finality of the Prophethood) in a candidate's election pro-forma (Shafiq et al., 2017). In a provision referring to a candidate's belief in the finality of Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) prophethood, the words 'I solemnly swear' have been substituted with 'I declare' in the new Form-A. Furthermore, it did not apply to non-Muslim candidates.

As per law experts, the changed statement in the form converted it into a mere declaration rather than an affidavit (Haq, 2017). The opposition parties demanded the restoration of the original form. The immense pressure from opposition parties compelled the government to table the 'Election Act 2017' again in the National Assembly to reinstate clauses 7A and 7B pertaining to the finality of the Prophethood in its original form (Chaudhry, 2017). Major reforms envisaged in the Bill included a strengthened, independent, and autonomous Election Commission. It entrusted powers of the High Court for specific directions, administrative powers to control the transfer of election officials and disciplinary action against them, full financial autonomy, and powers to make rules without prior approval of the President (*The Gazette of Pakistan*, 2017). In the Election Act 2017, two sections were significant, section 94, and section 103.

Section 94 stipulates that "(1) The Commission may conduct pilot projects for overseas Pakistanis to cast a ballot in bye-elections to determine the technical effectiveness, invisibility, reliability, and economic feasibility of the proposed voting. The Commission will share the findings with the Government and place the report to both Houses of Parliament within fifteen days of the inception of the project." (2) In the section, "Overseas Pakistani refers to a Pakistani citizen working or living in a foreign country either permanently or temporarily for a minimum period of six months and possessing a National Identity Card for overseas Pakistanis issued under the National Database and Registration Authority Ordinance, 2000 (VIII of 2000), (*Elections Act*, 2017, 2017)."

By section 103, the ECP was tasked with organising trial-run programmes for using EVM and biometric verification systems in bye-elections in addition to the currently used manual procedures for voter verification, casting, and counting of votes to evaluate the technical efficacy, secrecy, security, and financial viability of the EVM and biometric verification system and shall share the results with the Government, which shall, within fifteen days from the beginning of a session of a House after the receipt of the report, present the same before the Parliament (p.38). Since the general election 2013, the PTI had been requesting in parliamentary committee meetings to incorporate the provisions of electronic voting machines and the right of overseas Pakistanis to cast a vote to the Elections Act, 2017. As a committee member, Arif Alvi (the then secretary general of PTI) was at the forefront of persuading the ECP to adopt both provisions (Haq et al., 2019).

General Elections 2018: applicability of electoral amendment and Act

The third consecutive general elections held in 2018 could measure the applicability of the electoral amendment and Act made during 2013-2018. However, all such efforts seemed futile when next day of the elections, a multi-party conference (MPC) was held, excluding the

Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), which rejected the poll results and called for a coordinated strategy to deal with alleged election meddling (Hussain, 2018). It was evident that neither the 22nd amendment nor the Elections Act 2017 brought transparency to the general elections held on July 25, 2018. A difference in complaints was recorded as in the 2013 elections, 133 persons submitted complaints, whereas only 102 petitions were filed in the 2018 elections, indicating that fewer people claimed election rigging (“Opposition Invited for Electoral Reforms,” 2020)

The pilot projects regarding sections 94 and 103 were in progress and not implemented in those general elections.

Table: 2 below presents the election year, winning party, opposition party, voters' turnout, electoral dissensions, dissolution of the National Assembly, and voter's age.

Table: 2

General elections in Pakistan 2013 and 2018

Election Year	Winning Party	Opposition Party	Voter turnout	Electoral dissensions	Dissolution of the National Assembly	Voter's age
1 May 11 2013	PML-N	PPP	55.75% ¹	International observers called elections partly fair, Most violent in Pakistan's history	Completed five years on May 31, 2018	18
2 July 25 2018	PTI	PML-N, PPP	51.7 %	Opposition parties alleged that election was stolen	Will be dissolved on August 13, 2023	18

Source: The table is developed by the author. The data is collected from the website of the Election Commission of Pakistan. <https://www.ecp.gov.pk/frnGenericPage.aspx?PageID=3274>

Electoral reforms during 2018-2022

The third uninterrupted civilian government approached the opposition leader in the National Assembly and expressed readiness to form a commission on electoral reforms. The government was determined to make a transparent election system in which even the losers would admit their defeat.

The Elections (Amendment) Bill, 2021

Two years later, an Elections (Amendment) Bill, 2020, comprising 49 amendments to Elections Act, 2017, was introduced in the National Assembly on October 16, 2020. It focused on transparency and emphasised the yearly declaration of holdings and accountabilities to be submitted by the members of the Federal and Provincial legislative body members to the ECP. Moreover, the declaration should be available on the ECP website. It further proposed an open ballot for Senate elections (*The Elections (Amendment) Bill, 2020, 2020*). A presidential ordinance called the "Elections (Second Amendment) Ordinance 2021" was promulgated on May 8, 2021, under Article 89 of the Constitution. It further amended the Election Act 2017, when the Senate and the National Assembly were not in session (*The Elections (Second Amendment) Ordinance, 2021, 2021*). It obliged the ECP to buy EVMs so that expatriate Pakistanis could exercise their right to vote in the next general elections (Haq, 2022). The President presented two amendments to Section 94(1) and Section 103 of the Elections Act 2017 via ordinance. The Bill passed by the “Standing Committee on Parliamentary Affairs” on June 8, 2021, despite the fact that there were only 8 of the 21 members present. The law was passed without any debate. The National Assembly passed 20 other Bills on this day, and the opposition walked out when its desire to debate the Bills was denied. On November 17, 2021, a joint session of Parliament passed the Bill (Muhammad, 2021). According to the Bill, the ECP with the technical assistance

of NADRA or another body, shall authorise Pakistanis abroad to cast a vote subject to secrecy and security. The Bill also allowed the ECP to purchase electronic voting devices for general elections ("Parliament Passes Bills for Use of EVMs in Elections, Right of Vote to Overseas Pakistanis," 2021). The ECP raised 37 objections to the plan in a document submitted to the Senate standing committee on parliamentary affairs. However, the EPC constituted three committees on November 23, 2021, to calculate the cost of EVMs and alter the existing norms and regulations for their use (Virk, 2021).

When these developments were in progress, a political change took place in Pakistan. A no-confidence resolution was passed by the National assembly on April 9, 2022, against the PTI Prime Minister. The PML-N formed the next government, and within two months, another Bill was passed, the Election Amendment Bill 2022 (*Elections (Amendment) Act, 2022, 22 C.E.*), that reversed the election reforms to the year 2017. Although the ruling party was same in 2017 and 2022. The lack of consensus among the political leadership of Pakistan over electoral reforms has been an impediment to improving the electoral process.

Issues and Challenges

The following issues and challenges confront Pakistan's election process:

- They are held in a hostile environment rather than a conducive.
- Defeating political parties raise allegations of rigging and election manipulation.
- The electoral controversies weaken democracy rather than strengthen it.
- A democratic system entails political parties that build the groundwork for a robust legislature. Political parties in Pakistan were created when their leaders broke ranks with military dictators or by supporters of the military rulers.
- The role of the CEC remained controversial because of the manipulation of the electoral system by influential players to their advantage to rout their archrivals.
- The high illiteracy rate is also a major issue that gives precedent to personalities over principles.
- The rigid attitudes of political leaders pave the way for judiciary, bureaucracy, and military involvement in the election.
- About nine million patriotic overseas Pakistanis cannot vote in the election due to the lack of an online or postal ballot system.
- Pakistan's prevailing political and electoral system disengages the citizens in civic and political processes.
- The ECP declares and revises the limit of the election expenditures on candidates for National and provincial assemblies separately. As per records about all candidates cross the limit.

Recommendations

- A political impasse must be averted, and an agreement over election ethics, acceptance, and tolerance.
- The political leaders should continually collaborate to improve the election system of Pakistan unless it turns transparent.
- All political parties must resolve to protect the national interest, deepen democracy, and safeguard state sovereignty.
- Influencing the electoral process should be a criminal offence.
- Every political party's manifesto must include a 10% rise in literacy rate during a five-year tenure.
- Politicians, not the judiciary, bureaucracy, and military should resolve political disputes.
- The involvement of citizens in political processes should be made essential.
- The cost limit for contesting an election must be strictly adhered to.

- An agreement must be attained over the right to vote for overseas Pakistanis.
- EVM deployment should not be politicised.

Conclusion

The citizens of Pakistan elect their representatives in elections, and their elected representatives possess absolute power, but this power is not used to strengthen the state, its people and institutions. The Constitution's Part VIII addresses every facet of elections, but a trustworthy election process remained an unmet goal in Pakistan. The elected governments have made numerous reforms and enacted Acts by the Parliament to make elections free, fair, and transparent. All such efforts did not produce desirable results as political parties did not give preference to national interest over party interest. The Election Amendment Bill 2022 is a recent example of this practice. The electoral reforms made by various governments were adequate to make elections transparent. Nevertheless, the lack of consensus, coherence, delaying tactics and political impasse among political parties remained the main hurdles to overcoming electoral issues in Pakistan. The general election in 2023 will be held within the same process that did not satisfy politicians or citizens in the past. The election controversies of Pakistan will not be abated unless the political parties keep national interest at the top of their priorities. Setting aside political differences and developing consensus over electoral issues is imperative to save democracy.

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