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Building blocks —Asma Amanat



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When looking at the future of democratic governance in Pakistan, it is vital that we recognise the role civil society organisations played in our recent elections. Only by understanding the role of NGOs can we create the structures to ensure true democracy takes hold in Pakistan.

Before the February 18 vote, there was much reason to believe that the regime led by General (ret'd) Pervez Musharraf would attempt to rig the elections, as the government clearly did in the last elections held in 2002.

In an extraordinary admission, a senior high-ranking government official with ties to an agency confirmed to me that, in fact, a plan to rig the elections was in the works.

In this atmosphere, the independent NGO Terror Free Tomorrow, based in the United States, released the first in a series of public opinion polls 10 days before the elections.

Covered throughout the Pakistani and international media, the TFT and subsequent polls showed large victories by both the PPP and PMLN, and a stinging defeat for the King's Party, the PMLQ.

The government reacted harshly. Denounced by government spokesmen and official state television, even President Musharraf responded by claiming that the polling "has value in developed nations but not here in Pakistan".

President Musharraf and the government condemned the polling because it inhibited their ability to massively rig the election results.

Indeed, the same high-ranking government official who acknowledged to me that there was a plan by the government to rig the elections also admitted that "the international polling created an atmosphere where there was no choice but to have free and fair elections."

Confirming the government official's off-the-record comments to me,

no less a figure than Senator Mushahid Hussain, General Secretary of the PMLQ, went on the record to say:

“In terms of timing and content, the American polls served as a sort of the ‘power of public opinion’ to deter any state-sponsored manipulation. These were widely discussed and disseminated in the media, civil society and political parties, and were generally a fair and accurate reflection of the popular mood.”

As leading TV anchor and commentator Anjum Rashid said, “the pressure from international polls definitely prevented the government from massive rigging as they had planned on February 18.”

There can be little doubt that, as Farahnaz Ispahani concluded, the polling helped make “rigging of the elections somewhat difficult”.

But pre-election polling was not the only important work of civil society.

Pakistan’s Free and Fair Election Network’s (FAFEN) effort to deter fraud on Election Day was critical. The network’s strategy was for 16,000 observers to monitor a random sample of about 8,000 (out of 64,000) polling stations all day, collect detailed information about voting, counting, and compilation of results. Thousands of Pakistani women monitored female polling booths and stations using a tailored manual and reporting format, and wearing specially printed FAFEN headscarves (chadors). An additional 4,000 mobile observers visited as many as 30,000 polling stations, making the 2008 national and provincial assembly elections the most closely watched in Pakistani history.

As security analyst Nasim Zehra concluded, “What prevented major rigging on polling day were the democratic deterrents, which included the political workers, the energy of the voters, the keen media watch and the observers’ groups, including FAFEN.”

We must celebrate the NGOs and ordinary Pakistani citizens, and protect their courage for the future. These are the kind of groups and activities that are the essential building blocks to a democratic future.

For on February 18, the success of the democratic experiment truly came from the bottom up.

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