

:Dr. Ali Hasanain, Associate Professor of Economics at LUMS; Dr. Altaf Ullah Khan, Dean of Humanities at FCC; Mr. Suleman Ghani, former Federal Secretary; and Dr. Saeed Shafqat, Professor and Founding Director CPPG, were invited to speak on “Elections 2024: Identifying Key Policy Issues” on December 6, 2024 in collaboration with the Consortium for Development Policy Research (CDPR).



Shafqat initiated the discussion by highlighting that the year 2024 was going to be an election year in South Asia as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are going to have their elections in the upcoming year. He said that it was important to understand why elections are pertinent and whether elections bring changes in policies and institutions as we foresee. He argued that elections play a key role as they inherently confer legitimacy upon governing bodies. However, in the context of Pakistan, there was hardly any change in the political landscape as it followed a recurring pattern of confrontational and highly personalized dynamics. Despite the strengthening of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) since 2017, there are concerns regarding its credibility especially in the pre-election phases. Moreover, it is crucial to understand that even today, Pakistan is in the milieu of “establishmentarian democracy”, a system where the military influences the democratic processes and procedures. Pakistan is going to have elections but these elections will be under a military hegemonic system. The so-called longest phase of democracy since 2008 has but a democratic face with the military playing a central role in constructing democracy and maintaining its hegemony.

On the importance of party manifestos in the electoral process, Shafqat stated that these hold significance in articulating the key ideology and priorities of each political party. Political parties need to think through their manifestos and develop them in light of key issues prevalent within the country. Firstly, the demographic dividend as demography has become a core national issue for Pakistan. It will either be a dividend or a disaster, interlinked with population management, urbanization, and skill development. Secondly, parties should define their stance on local governance. They must differentiate between provincial government, and whether they want a commissioner system or an elected government system. A commissioner system is one where a government-appointed commissioner oversees local governance affairs whereas in the elected government system, local governance is administered by elected representatives such as a mayor or a council member. Thirdly, they should define their position on terrorism. If one is making a case regarding terrorism, it must differentiate between counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. Counter terrorism refers to stopping terrorist attacks while counter-insurgency means combatting insurgency movements aiming to overthrow established government authority. Manifestos must inform party position on whether to involve the military or police in countering terrorism. Fourthly, parties should clarify their stance on the 18th Amendment as it is a key element in managing the intervention of military in politics. Parties need to critically outline the degree of provincial autonomy, both fiscal and administrative that they would adhere to.

Fifthly, the parties should talk about the status of minorities and vulnerable communities including ethnic, religious, and gender minorities. Lastly, Shafqat discussed the implications of elections on geopolitical linkages: foreign policy and the security dimension. Is there a possibility of security sector reforms or not? He argued that although we are going to have elections under a military hegemonic system with its in-built constraints, still there are plenty of opportunities as well, but only if political parties band together and develop a party system that is based on some degree of consensus and faith in democracy.

Continuing the discourse, Hasanain delved into Pakistan's economic trajectory post-Musharraf, remarking that since then we have shown no progress, the current economic situation is in dire straits, particularly in terms of burgeoning debt obligations. Pakistan has to return 90 billion dollars in the coming three years. Partly, the challenge is due to an acute shortage of foreign exchange reserves and the lack of skills in generating foreign currency earnings. Mostly, it has been due to artificial handling of the dollar by the previous governments. Hasanain argued that the approach of short-term subsidies and artificial management of the dollar has affected Pakistan's economy in the longer-run, and has led to the current economic state.



In countering this, Hasanain said that we need to develop a contextualized approach to the current economic crisis. Explaining different approaches, he said that on one side, the experts advocate for closing imports while waiting for everything to fall in place. While on the other side, they advocate for bringing in investments to overcome the default scenario. Instead, Hasanain proposed a three-fold solution. First, he suggested that to overcome the debt problem, Pakistan has to go for a structured default. There are two kinds of defaults: planned and unplanned. Pakistan needs to go for a planned and structured default which requires engagement with creditors to negotiate terms, thereby buying time to implement substantive reforms and restructuring institutions. While being burdensome, it can reap long-term benefits.

Furthermore, Hasanain proposed that Pakistan should

set the dollar price above the market equilibrium, for example, taking it to almost PKR 500. In doing so, it will seem difficult at first for the masses but it will help in stabilizing Pakistan's currency in the longer run. Quoting China's example, China kept Renminbi (RMB) undervalued against the US dollar. This step aided in limiting the flow of foreign currency within the market and allowed the country to keep foreign exchange reserves. Additionally, Pakistan should keep the dollar reserved rather than spending it in the market. The accumulation of foreign exchange reserves acts as a buffer against currency fluctuations, providing stability to the national currency. It can also be used for building the country's credibility with creditors.

In further addressing the debt burden, he proposed that there is a need for the development of a comprehensive strategy to revitalize exports, which have witnessed a significant decline in recent years. Pakistan's exports as percentage of GDP has decreased by half from 13% to 7% in the past 5 years. Exports have also suffered as the business community relies on import-based products. This has increased the import bill and has enhanced trade deficit. Lastly, commenting on the presence of a hybrid government, he argued that there is no benefit of this system as it creates uncertainty for business owners and investors. The hybrid system is a blend of authoritarian and democratic forces where rapid changes in policies and legislative frameworks disrupt the workings of businesses.

With a career spent in public management, Ghani argued that party manifestos must not be solely made for winning votes and elections but must include key policies, which are then debated and critically evaluated by the public, and revised by incorporating their feedback. Moreover, these policies should have clear implementation mechanisms backed by proper legislation and institutional strengthening, for lasting impact. He stressed the need for aligning policies with appropriate pathways and monitoring their effectiveness while also addressing cross-departmental issues. He further called for public service delivery reforms by setting defined performance standards and targets while strictly enforcing working timelines through

penalties for delays, and minimum service standards for federal, provincial, and local governments.

Ghani highlighted that manifestos must incorporate pathways for overcoming power issues within structures. As with government structures, power struggles arise between different branches i.e. legislative, executive and judicial or even among political parties vying for control. Thus, there must be a consensus on core values for safeguarding both constitutional and institutional integrity among all parties. He further argued for the crucial role of provinces in maintaining the federal structure of the state, which must be whole-heartedly respected. Similarly, local governments must also be empowered with resources and decision-making authority to improve efficiency. In closing, he emphasized the formation of an internationally competitive domestic market as a way to solve our economic issues.

As the last speaker, Khan highlighted the vital role of media during elections from mere reporting to creating a platform for generating public discourse that analyzes manifestos and evaluates candidates. Further, media performs two main functions during elections: one, interest aggregation through which it gathers and represents diverse interests, concerns, viewpoints, and preferences of the public; and two, interest projection which is an act of conveying public needs, wants, concerns, and demands to the politicians and the general public. However, the current highly polarized media landscape has instead produced polarized rather than informed audiences. On the contrary, responsible reporting would involve a comprehensive coverage of constituencies beyond regional and party biases, including their histories, problems, and current issues. The objective should be to go beyond a particular region such as Punjab which holds centrality in the parliamentary structure to providing a holistic profile of the entire country while being inclusive of marginal voices.

These initial comments by speakers, was followed by a vibrant question and answer session. Answering a question regarding the evolving media landscape, Khan stated that by media, he was referring to all

forms: print, electronic, and social media, as it's becoming increasingly difficult to restrict it to traditional boundaries. Each media platform presents its own set of challenges and dynamics. While social media has emerged as a potent force, it is often characterized by aggressive and emotionally charged content as it operates in a more decentralized and unregulated manner. Although we cannot ignore its influence, it's imperative to distinguish between misinformation and credible sources. Thus, despite the pressures to cater to popular sentiment on social media, mainstream media must uphold truth and integrity in its reporting, even if it means sacrificing popularity for accuracy. Mainstream journalism has the added responsibility to adhere to principles of fact-checking and authenticity.

Answering a question regarding the devolution of health and social service delivery responsibilities to the provinces after the 18th amendment and its challenges, Ghani accepted that this has indeed expanded the scope of the primary health sector. However, it also means that provinces bear greater accountability for ensuring effective service delivery at the grassroots level. He argued that community involvement was pivotal in this context as local governance structures can help in a more efficient healthcare system. Further, capacity building, resource allocation, and developing linkages with the private sector are crucial aspects to consider.

Lastly, responding to a question regarding leadership crises and the proliferation of vested interests that hinder progress, Ghani articulated two approaches to solve the leadership crisis: one, generate public demand for transparent and accountable leadership that prioritizes the common good over personal agendas; two, not confine leadership to a singular figure but decentralize it across various levels of society so as to nourish an inclusive, responsive, and committed leadership culture. He argued that all institutions play a vital role in shaping leadership dynamics, and in producing effective leadership allowing national level leadership to emerge organically from within the nation.