



**Center for Global & Strategic Studies  
Islamabad**

## **Elections 2018: Consequences of a Single Narrative**

*By Lieutenant General Haroon Aslam HI(M), (Retd)*

*Published on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2018*



“The essence of propaganda consists in winning people to an idea so sincerely, so vitally, that in the end they succumb to it utterly and can never escape from it,” said Joseph Goebbels, the famous Reich minister of Propaganda of Nazi Germany. This quote seems to be of quite relevance to the ongoing hullabaloo after the conduct of

general elections in Pakistan on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2018. The narrative that these elections have been hugely rigged as per a pre-conceived design has found traction and acceptability without people knowing the facts and figures. This has happened chiefly due to the fact that this single narrative does not have any counter to it. The pitfall is that people are deprived of knowing the whole truth that is eclipsed by the enormity of lies and deceit. Malaise.

Successive negative storylines related to the elections have continued to appear all along during election campaigning. The doomsday messengers, forces inimical to the wellbeing of the Pakistani nation and its arch enemies had hankered in vain for the interruption of the representative system in the country. All kinds of apprehensions of prolonging of the interim setup were being voiced creating uncertainties. That did not happen and the world witnessed healthy participation of people from all walks of life and from one corner of the country to the other. Thus, the narrative based on invented premise that undemocratic forces were trying to postpone elections got knocked out.

Concurrently, the prosecution and sentencing of the former Prime Minister, Mian Nawaz Sharif, his daughter and son-in-law gave an opportunity to the PML-N and its allies to hype up a narrative of pre-poll rigging. The stalwarts of the PML-N went overboard through their fiery speeches and utterances pointing finger at the judiciary and the so-called establishment. The TV talk shows and social media created a frenzy of pre-poll rigging mostly based on assumptions rather than facts. The narrative

snowballed as no counter-narrative was presented. Apart from intermittent discussions on talk shows dispelling the impression of pre-poll rigging, there was no serious rebuttal. The PML-N leaders and analysts are on record to predict a sympathy vote for the party if Nawaz and daughter are jailed. How is it related to pre-poll rigging if it gave the PML-N an advantage in the form of a sympathy vote? One wonders. This, notwithstanding, the theme of pre-poll rigging found good acceptability, both at home and abroad. A single narrative, without its counter, seemed to have worked and the reality was obscured.

Wednesday, 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2018 will be remembered as a day of incredible defiance of the people of Pakistan. They defied all the odds and downsides, including terrorist attacks, to keep them away from exercising their right to vote. However, as the results of various polling stations started to pour in and the voting trend developed, the narrative of pre-poll rigging was stepped up with large-scale rigging as its main subject. The political parties and personalities who took their victory for granted failed to reconcile to their defeat seeking refuge behind the accusations of widespread rigging. The PML-N in Punjab and the MQM-Pakistan in Sindh were dazzled by the election results. Interestingly enough, this time both contested these elections on a changed turf. The MQM-P went into elections without its traditional ability to coerce and intimidate voters through a parallel organisation based on sectors. In Punjab, the caretaker government shuffled the bureaucracy and police officials, preventing the 'local support' to the candidates, to which the PML-N was

so accustomed. In K-P, the PTI had a landslide victory knocking out most of its opponents and there has hardly been any worthwhile allegation of rigging. In Balochistan, the Balochistan Awami Party, a newly-raised political party mainly comprising younger generation of politicians, has won maximum number of seats followed by others. There are no significant reports of any organised rigging there.

The accusations and all the mudslinging against the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) notwithstanding, it laid out elaborate arrangements for the conduct of free and fair elections in the country. We tend to brush aside the fact that the ECP does not have its own organisation for conduct of elections. It relies on the employees of various government departments and judicial officials for this purpose. The entire process hinges on the competence, efficiency and integrity of all in the hierarchy. Thus the system is prone to irregularities and snags for which there is a legal course laid down. Elections 2018 were not much different from those held in the last two decades. Rather these were freer and fairer than those conducted in the past. In this context, the reports on general elections by observer groups from Commonwealth and the EU dispel any impression of organised rigging. Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) deployed a large number of observers on polling stations and its report also ruled out any widespread or systematically-planned rigging in polls, as being projected by few political parties.

The entire process of general elections in Pakistan is a large-scale undertaking involving huge finances and effort. It is a consecrated accomplishment by the ECP,

government, political parties, and above all, the people of Pakistan. The government functionaries, judicial officers and the law-enforcement agencies have done a great job in conduct of elections. Many innocent lives have been lost in acts of terrorism during the election campaign. Propaganda based on unsubstantiated single narrative cannot be allowed to undermine the conduct of elections in our country. Political sagacity and maturity is the need of the hour. The political rhetoric must cease and let the nation see a smooth transition of authority.

#### About the Author



*Lieutenant General Haroon Aslam HI(M), (Retd) has 40 years of commendable military career to his credit and also a rich and varied experience of command, staff and instructional assignments. In senior ranks he was engaged in counter terrorist operations in FATA, Swat and Baluchistan. He commanded Special Service Group (SSG) twice and earned Sitra-e-Basalat for his outstanding achievements while in command of various formations. In recognition of his outstanding services. He was awarded Hilal-e-Imtiaz (Military) and Sitara-i-Basalat.*

*Currently, he is the Member Advisory Board of Center for Global & Strategic Studies (CGSS), Islamabad.*