

NA-120: One result, many questions

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The much-anticipated election for the National Assembly Constituency NA-120 got over last week, with Begum Kulsoom, wife of Nawaz Sharif winning it. The PTI candidate, who was the real challenge to PML-N – Yasmin Rashid lost the election, though by a narrow margin. PPP came a distant sixth; its candidate gaining lesser votes than those parties that were formed only few weeks ago!

If one goes by the results, the PML-N has won, and PTI has lost. It is a simple math and a clear conclusion. But is it? Does the bye-election, pose more questions to the winner, and also to the losers? Does the result in Lahore show a new trend in Punjab politics that would create new electoral benchmarks for the forthcoming national and provincial elections in 2018?

Simple Math but Complicated Numbers

As mentioned above, the math is simple. PML-N won the NA-120 and PTI lost it. However, the numbers behind the above math should create a scare for both the winner and the primary loser.

Not many expected that the PML-N would lose the NA-120 seat, considered to be the party's fort. But consider the political backdrop for the PML-N; it was not an easy election for the party. Nawaz Sharif, who won the previous election from the same seat to become the Prime Minister, was subsequently disqualified by the Supreme Court, following a damaging case accusing him of corruption. The candidate – Nawaz's wife Kulsoom was hospitalized and was fighting cancer, hence could not take part in the campaigning at all.

Without their leader and the candidate, the PML-N campaign machinery was led by Mariam, Nawaz's daughter. So it was not an easy campaign for the PML-N. However, the constituency has been considered as their home ground. Though Kulsoom Nawaz won the election, the victory margin was less – when compared to the previous election. One would have expected, that the PML-N voters and the party sympathizers came in larger numbers to show solidarity to their deposed leader. Kulsoom could poll only 61,000 votes.

Yasmin Rashid, the PTI candidate had polled around 47,000 votes, just 14,000 lesser than Kulsoom

Nawaz. During 2013 elections, Yasmin lost to Nawaz Sharif with a margin of 40,000 votes. So, shouldn't the PTI celebrate the loss?

While Sharif and PML-N had a loss of face, and also a general impression that the Establishment has turned against the Sharifs, PTI and Imran had no excuses. The Supreme Court's decision to disqualify Nawaz Sharif should have been their biggest vindication. The PML-N is in a dis-array, with doubts of an internal split. Unlike the PML-N, the PTI had the entire leadership starting from Imran Khan in its disposal for the campaign.

Yet PTI lost the election. Though one could claim that the margin of defeat has reduced for the PTI, it cannot be an explanation. When compared to 2013 election, NA-120 witnessed a substantial decline in the total number of votes polled. Out of the total votes of around 3,20,000, only around 1,15,000 were polled – around 33 percent. In 2013, NA-120 polled around 52 percent. If the PML-N could win the constituency even with a decline in its own vote bank, this should worry the PTI.

The Missing Party: PPP

Of all the 44 candidates and the numerous parties they belong to, none would have felt worse than Faisal Mir, the PPP candidate. He could only secure around 2600 votes; even independents and parties formed few weeks earlier succeeded in securing more votes than Faisal Mir.

One should not fault Faisal Mir. The problem here is not with the candidate, but the with the party he belongs to. Given the party's presence in this part of Pakistan, one is not sure, whether any of the big names from PPP would even contemplate of contesting from Lahore. From the days of Zulfikar Ali Butto, the PPP's decline not only in Lahore, but in northern districts of Punjab has been spectacular. Even in the 2008 election, the PPP performed relatively better in Lahore; it was able to garner around twenty five percent of the votes polled then in the same constituency.

If this election is likely to be a yardstick, one could be certain that the PPP is unlikely to get revived in Punjab. PTI is taking over as the primary opposition to the PML-N in the most important province of Pakistan. This would mean something for the PTI in the next general elections.

The Religious and Radical Parties: No More Marginal?

Of the numbers, the most talked about is neither the PML-N, nor the PTI, despite these parties occupying the first two positions and polling around 108,000 votes. Two parties – Milli Muslim League (MML) and Labbaik Ya Rasulallah (LYR) have become the focus of post election discussion.

Two candidates of these two parties (though technically one contested as an independent, as the Election Commission is yet to recognize the MML) have secured eleven percentage of the total votes polled, and have come third and fourth, above the PPP!

The Milli Muslim League is the political face of Hafiz Saeed, JuD and the Lashkar-e-Toiba. The LYR is another coalition of radical groups that has been demanding the imposition of blasphemy laws and

openly supporting Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Punjab Governor - Salman Taseer. Sheikh Azhar Hussain Rizvi backed by LYR polled six percent of the votes, while Yaqoob Shaikh supported by the MML polled five percent.

Just eleven percent, so why should one be worried? Aren't they the marginal?

The fact that both the political parties are a recent formation and few months old should be cause of concern, especially when decades old national party such as the PPP cannot match these recent and radical groups. Even if it is eleven percent, look at the geography. This is Lahore, the heart of Pakistan, and not Bajour or Waziristan in the periphery. This is in Punjab, supposedly the bulwark province against radicalization.

Another warning point is – the above two are not just religious political parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami or JUI. These are political parties and still believe in democratic contest. MML and LYR are radical groups and have secured more votes than the religious parties. JI's Ziauddin Ansari could secure only 105 votes!

The larger danger for Punjab comes from the question – whether radical groups such as the MML and LRY will be an aberration, or a new trend? The PML-N could attract the right wing votes in Punjab until now. Is the extreme Right in Punjab deserting the PML-N, and find a voice of their own?

The question in this context is whether eleven percent or not. It is about the likely political space that the radical groups would occupy. Even if it is less than ten percent, it would still be dangerous.

The only less dangerous explanation for this eleven percent for radical groups in Lahore – could be that they have a strong presence. Run through their own sets of mosques, they have strong reach, however limited it could be. If the reality is otherwise, that would be a larger threat not only to Lahore and Punjab, but to entire Pakistan.

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